

CANDLES AND THORNS

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Candles and Thorns

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My project is a 50-80 page fantasy novella, dealing in themes of courage, changing institutions, and interpersonal relationships. It is the story of Vas Pennery, a young farm boy whose quiet lifestyle is threatened when a death cult takes root in the sleepy village of Riversend. Vas Pennery seeks to take action against a cult that is heavily inspired by death cults of Latin America and Santa Muerte, a saint in Mexican folk Catholicism who has a strained relationship with Rome. When Vas struggles to find a way to save the village from dark forces, his friends and other villagers antagonize him. The village of Riversend serves as the backdrop and ultimately the society that this cult and the church it takes over, disrupts.

While many modern fantasy novels and stories cover themes similar to my own, my creative artifact specifically utilizes the Butlerian, sensual creative writing technique. Additionally, my story blends high fantasy tropes and low fantasy realism with modern psychology and social science research. Major themes in my story include courage, the challenge society faces when institutions undergo a change during times of peace, and the interpersonal relationships and interactions of people suffering from depression, grief, and fear.

The main problem I seek to solve is how interpersonal relationships are affected by institutional and societal change, the nature of cults and the personalities drawn and repulsed by

them, how those personalities relate to institutions and society, and how and why people have the desire to take action but the fail to do so. I will address these problems with literary fiction writing methods in a fantasy genre which combines key elements of high and low fantasy into, perhaps, a new subgenre altogether. Behind this writing method will be anthropological, psychological, sociological, and historical research on humans and society.

DEDICATION

To the courageous, the creative, and the cognizant

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for their never wavering support and for preserving a grand tradition of creativity.

I would also like to thank my adviser, Dr. White, for his constant support and instruction.

And finally, thanks to the Texas A&M Undergraduate Research Program for giving creators the opportunity to show the academic world the importance of imagination.

KEY WORDS

C	Cults
Cour	Courage
M/F	Middle Fantasy
S/S	Sword and Sorcery
T	Thriller

SECTION I

RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

Motivation

Sources of Inspiration

J.R.R. Tolkien, the grandfather of the contemporary fantasy genre, was not beyond pushing the boundaries of the genre he standardized. In addition to his classic works on the adventures of the Baggins of Bag End, Tolkien attempted to write a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings* titled, *The New Shadow*. It was going to take place 100 years or so after the conclusion of *The Return of the King* and revolved around a youth cult causing havoc and worshipping evil. Unfortunately, Tolkien felt his sequel was too dark and the only known portions of the work are 13 pages of the first chapter which can be found in his published collection of notes (Tolkien, Carpenter, Tolkien).

Tolkien stated his work could have been a, “thriller’ about the plot and [the cult’s] discovery and overthrow — but it would have been just that. Not worth doing,” (Tolkien, Carpenter, Tolkien). But what if a fantasy thriller was worth doing? With this idea in the back of my mind for years, I decided to write a fantasy novella that is the synthesis of several genres.

The fantasy genre is divided into several categories, the two largest are high fantasy and low fantasy. The main difference between them is the amount of magical and mystical elements that are incorporated into the work. J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is the seminal work of high fantasy. Magic influences much of narrative and fantasy creatures like elves, dwarves, orcs, goblins, and wizards are featured heavily in the story. In contrast, George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a low fantasy epic, focusing largely -- but not solely -- on the lives of humans with little to no magical abilities. Martin’s work is often described as “fantasy realism,”

because he tries to write characters and their actions and consequences as being realistic (DuBois; “A Century of Fantasy”). This division helped to motivate me to write a work to bridge this gap in the fantasy genre.

My second source of inspiration comes from my home, the Rio Grande Valley and the Texas-Mexico border. The folklore of the Valley and my community’s tradition of storytelling -- and my family’s tradition of recounting real life events with flourish and elaboration -- instilled in me a love for weaving tales. In addition to the rugged landscape the Valley adds to my story, I have been greatly inspired by the Mexican catholic folk saint, Santa Muerte.

Finally, I was motivated to write a novella that addressed “heroic” themes due to the concept of the author as a leader. Author Monica Byrne, in her talk at the Halbert W. Hall Speakers Series on Science Fiction and Fantasy in 2018, made the claim that authors write blueprints for societal improvement and that in times of distress, people look to works of fiction for guidance. Bryne’s statements are supported by research as well. Researchers Loris Vezzali, Sofia Stathi, Dino Giovannini, Dora Capozza, and Elena Trifiletti found in three separate studies that *Harry Potter* made readers more empathetic towards stigmatized groups. A written story with no attempt to provide a kind of guidepost for others is, in the words of Tolkien, a work, “not worth doing.”

Motivation Revealed

All three sources of motivation and inspiration reveal themselves in my creative artifact. I seek to take the whimsical elements of high fantasy, merge them with realistic elements of low fantasy, utilize literary fiction writing techniques, draw from stories and scholarly research on Santa Muerte and folk traditions, and create meaningful interpersonal relationships to develop blueprints for society in my work.

Problem

What I Hope to Address

I primarily seek to address the question of why people who want to solve a conflict fail to take action to do so. This primary question is played out through several more elements I seek to address, such as institutional change and society, the nature of cults, their followers, detractors, leaders, their interaction with established institutions and societal order, and how interpersonal relationships operate and fail during times of difficulty.

Solving the Problem

In answering these questions, I plan on utilizing literary fiction writing methods to craft a synthesis between high and low fantasy. This creative novella will also include research on anthropology, psychology, sociology, and history.

I plan to utilize Robert Olen Butler's literary sensuality writing method to compose my work, enhancing my world's believability. Though this writing method, as outlined in *From Where you Dream*, is aimed at literary fiction, fantasy author Ursula Le Guin hails it in an essay titled *Plausibility in Fantasy*, as a chief method of increasing plausibility in a highly implausible environment. This is especially important when composing a fictional world with dwarves, death cults, and kobolds. I will also be utilizing Dr. Lowell Mick White's theoretical framework on writing novellas. Research will be conducted in accordance with these theoretical frameworks of writing. In order to describe my setting sensually and accurately, I must first understand it.

Additionally, I will reference seminal works in the fantasy genre to better understand the nature of fantasy fiction. This will include works such as, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, and the *Wheel of Time* series. Other works referenced will include, *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, by Shirley Jackson, and the *Kingkiller*

Chronicles, by Patrick Rothfus. *The Road*, will be referenced for its cinematic scene depictions, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, for its first person narrative, and, *The Kingkiller Chronicles*, for its prosaic writing.

Historical research will help provide the necessary background information needed to compose my setting, as well background information on cults, pantheons, and the reverence of Santa Muerte in Mexican and Mexican-American folk Catholic societies.

Anthropology and sociology combined will allow me to depict societal structures, cults interactions with society and people, and interpersonal constraints on taking action.

Anthropological studies on folklore and tradition will play a role in my crafting of a realistic cult that can change established institutions.

Psychology will allow me to create motivations for my characters as well as allow me to delve deep into the internal reasons why people, including my main character, struggle to take action in times of need. Through psychology I will identify common ways in which people fail to act and utilize them in forming my main character. Additionally, this field of study will allow me to create the motivations and check the personalities of supporting characters against established theories on human behavior.

SECTION II

LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

My literature review analyzes the first five or so pages of novels I believe best support the work I plan to write. The primary goal of reviewing the first five pages instead of the entire work is to see what the authors' used to draw the reader in, how they employed their style in the most efficient way to hook the reader. By understanding an author's writing at its most critical moment (the first five pages, where a reader must decide to invest further or put the book down), we can grasp the author's overall style and discover tools and methods I can utilize in my artifact. Further research and analyses will be conducted on the works as a whole.

The Eye of the World

The first few pages of Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World* (the first installment of his epic, *Wheel of Time* series) methodologically go from the large to small scale. Similarly, they go from the external to the internal. Robert Jordan also builds up suspense and intrigue throughout the first five pages, reaching a climax towards the end of these initial pages. Finally, the author also uses wind to tie the first five pages together.

The story opens (after a lengthy prologue which I will not review -- it is too mythological to aid in my research) with a poetic sequence about the "Wheel of Time," (a mystical force that dictates life and time's circular nature). Then the author then mentions the wind. He describes it moving through woods and mountains until it hits our main character, Rand, making him cold. Jordan uses the wind to reveal what the character is wearing and doing (he is taking a cart with his dad into a village, shielding himself from the wind with his coat and gripping his bow). By revealing he holds his bow with a knocked arrow, the author shows that Rand is anticipating danger.

This theme of anticipation is repeated and is subtly impressed upon the reader. Rand looks around and things are still. He thinks to himself about there being more bears and wolves this year in the woods. Nature, it seems, is turning against them. There is more description of Rand feeling uneasy when finally he turns around to see a black rider behind them, motionless on the road. He seems faceless to Rand.

Jordan then describes the physical sensations Rand feels (hair prickling, stomach churning) followed by his emotional sensations (fear). He stumbles and his dad picks him up but when they turn to look the rider is gone. Then Rand realizes why the rider scared him: the wind that was battering him and his dad earlier did not move the rider's clothes at all. It seemed to have gone right through the mysterious figure.

The first five pages paint a bleak picture. It is cold and suspenseful with the suspense cues being both big and small and are not always directly stated. They are buried in the description: silence, Rand with his bow drawn, he and his dad on a road so not much around them is visible to the mind's eye but the front and back. He is nervous. The winter was rough. The reader is put on edge so when Rand finally sees the rider and is scared, the reader is similarly afraid.

The wind ties us from that very first big picture down into the smaller, more personal view of our main characters. It is there at the beginning, moving through the woods and whipping at their clothes. Then, it comes back when the rider appears in order for Rand to figure out why he was so unnerving. The wind acts to reveal things to the reader.

Similarly, we see a movement in these pages from large to small. The wind goes from moving among the mountains and trees to Rand and his dad. Rand's fear goes from the external physical sensations to the internal emotional state.

The Name of the Wind

The introductory pages to the Patrick Rothfuss' *Name of the Wind* deal largely in contrast between the cozy and suspenseful. Rothfuss uses sensuality to enhance this. Finally, the opening pages seem to revolve largely around dialog and a story about demons. There is a lack of environmental description because of this. We do not see much of the world outside this lazy night at the inn, although we do hear about it.

The prologue opens with, "It was night again. The Waystone Inn lay in silence, and it was a silence of three parts." Each of the three silences are described. The first two are cozy, they are silences of the night surrounding the inn and of several men at the bar talking. However, the men are avoiding discussion of "troubling news." This is our first suspense clue. Rich descriptions of the silences are included, like, "If there had been a wind it would have sighed through the trees, set the inn's sign creaking on its hooks, and brushed the silence down the road like trailing autumn leaves." Then we are told of the third silence -- the silence of a man waiting to die. This silence permeates the objects in the inn ("It was in the weight of the black stone hearth that held the heat of a long dead fire.") then we see it through the innkeeper himself and that he is waiting to die. The reader is left wondering why exactly he is waiting to die.

The descriptions of the silences are followed by men telling stories. The men are telling old legends about a hero and demons. The story is interrupted by the innkeeper bringing bowls of stew that are subsequently "tucked away." The idea of tucking away a hot stew at a candlelit inn stands in contrast to the dark story being told. The stories continue and it is mentioned that the men all knew about dark things happening at a farm recently. The story telling continues until one of their friends bursts through the door, covered in blood and carrying what appears to be a small, dead demon that attacked him.

The *Name of the Wind's* opening pages deal largely in the contrast between the comforting nature of the inn and the reality of what is happening around it, though that is mainly alluded to until the door bursts open. After the opening about the silences, there is little descriptive elements. When they are used, it is to describe how or why someone did something, rather than objects or nature around them. This enables the dialog to be read smoothly. When Rothfuss does describe an object or environment in detail, it is richly sensual.

Men at Arms

Unlike the other works, the narrator in Terry Pratchett's *Men at Arms* does most of the talking. Descriptions are kept at a minimum and structure plays a key role in the opening scenes. Though the narrator speaks most often, characters also play a key role in exposition. It is important to note that this novel is a sequel. The opening sequence assumes the reader has at least a passing familiarity with the characters involved.

The story opens with Corporal Carrot of the Night Watch writing a letter home. In it he describes his promotion, the hiring of new members of the night watch, and what old members of the watch have been up to. Pratchett uses this moment to describe the character's personalities.

The page suddenly breaks and a new scene is depicted. It is a funeral. For the first time so far Pratchett uses more detailed descriptions of the scene: mist falling into the grave site where the body was being buried, women crying, and then "Edward d'Eath did not cry for three reasons." This character is elaborated on for several pages. He is an assassin and a nobleman's son. The narrator goes on to say that he looked at the palace in the distance and focused his anger. The narrator does not say why. It is revealed he is burying his father and that a dog is sitting by him.

More is told about the assassin. He studied at the assassins' guild and was looking for something. He then fell under the bad influence of books about ancient kings and queens of Ankh-Morpork (which were replaced by a patrician). Finally, Pratchett indicates there is a shift in the story with the use of vivid details that he seldom utilizes.

He writes, "...then something happened that had the same effect on Edward as finding a plesiosaur would in his goldfish pond would on a student of ancient reptiles." Then he describes Edward coming out of the dark library "in the company of departed glory", suffering from the blinding light only to see, "the face of the past strolling by, nodding amiably to people." He calls out to the "face of the past," to find out who it is. It is Carrot from the first few pages.

Pratchett's intro is light on description, however, when he wants to, he utilizes includes it to great effect. Pratchett also utilizes structure in these opening pages, making a jarring cut only to combine the sections unexpectedly on page six. The combination occurs after his best lines of description and prose. The prose entices, adding flavor and focus only to then hit the reader with the unexpected conjoining of the sections. The prose acts to build suspense that is partially resolved with the combination of sections.

The two sections also serve to contrast each other. Carrot and Edward are opposites. One is a guard -- the other is an assassin. The guard is writing home to his family while the assassin is studying history and comes under a bad influence. The reader is not sure what the plot of the story is yet but he or she knows it has something to do with these figures.

Finally, the characters are developed by the narrator. He tells more about the characters than he shows, however Pratchett's witty and comical writing makes the telling entertaining.

We have Always Lived in the Castle

This story, told in the first person, allows the main character's personality to come across with every paragraph. Structure is also important here -- Shirley Jackson uses a triad of descriptors to tell her story.

Jackson creates a kind of conversation between the reader and the narrator by uses the first person. When the main character "introduces" herself, her personality becomes apparent from the opening paragraph. Merricat Blackwood says that she would have liked to have been a werewolf, that she likes death cap mushrooms, and that her family is dead, except her sister and uncle all in the first few lines. Merricat later talks about how her family keeps their house orderly and describes an encounter at Stella's diner (revealing that she frequents the diner despite not wanting to, in order to avoid offending the owner).

She then goes on a trip to the library and grocery store and talks about her encounters with the locals. They stare and are afraid of the Blackwood family. The writer cuts to Merricat at the library where she is talking to the reader about books. This section starts with Merricat picking out books from the shelf, then describing the books she has at home along with the ones her sister reads. Then she says her Uncle Julian does not read but likes for her and her sister to. She reveals more about Julian's personality by recounting a portion of dialog between Julian and her sister where he asks about what she was reading. Finally, we flash back to Merricat leaving the library. This digression from picking out library books to Uncle Julian is performed smoothly in the novel.

Several pages later Merricat is on her way back from the library and passes the Rochester house that used to belong to her mom. The house is described earlier in the story and has junk in the yard. Merricat says she hates walking by the house because it should have belonged to her

sister and now the current residents, the Harlers, have ruined it with their junk. She goes on to say that the Harlers would fail to notice her because of all the junk making noise outside, then she paints a scene where she wonders if the inside of the house looks like the outside. Jackson uses another triad here of object (the house), reaction (Merricat's hatred), and elaboration (she wonders what the inside looks like).

Personality and structure are the key aspects of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The main character's personality is revealed in every paragraph because she is the narrator. We see her imagination and quirks like desire for order or dislike of various things and people.

Jackson takes an object (in this case, the books at the library), showing why Merricat was getting them when she already had books at home, then recounts a portion of dialog showing her other family members. Then we go to Merricat leaving the library. This takes place over three levels: present action, reason for the action, character development related in some way to the preceding reason, then back to present. Jackson repeats this methodology several times.

The enticing element or hook to this first section seems to be the personality of the main character and Merricat's struggle around the townsfolk. Though she does not have many direct encounters with the townspeople, their staring and her avoidance of them reveals that there are tensions between Merricat and the townsfolk.

The Road

The Road uses simplicity to great effect. Cormac McCarthy's style is direct in this novel. He will describe a setting utilizing objects that set the tone or present actions in a series in almost a straight line of actions taken by the characters. There is very little dialog but this adds to the development of the two characters in the story. The hook in this introduction appears to be the setting.

The first page describes the cold night vividly. The main character wakes up in the middle of the night and touches his son beside him. McCarthy describes their clothes as smelling and they have a plastic tarp around them. The second page depicts a strange, translucent animal drinking water nearby. Later on ash is falling and swirling around the road the main characters are on. The vivid and jarring descriptions show that this is no ordinary Earth. Something catastrophic appears to have happened, though it is not revealed what.

On page three, a string of action takes place that is common throughout the opening pages. The dad puts away their tarp blanket and gets food from the cart. He lays out another tarp like a tablecloth on the ground and he puts his pistol out in reach, implying there is danger around. He does not wake his son, but rather lays the food out and waits, looking at him. When his son wakes up and says hi, the dad says, "I'm right here," jumping into the role of caretaker when the child does not appear to be concerned or upset. This is representative of much of the two characters' interactions.

The characters start to move again, going down the road. They are pushing their cart and carrying backpacks. The author then describes what is in the backpacks then the cart, then they adjust the backpacks on their shoulders and look around. The author then describes what they see. Unlike other novels where the descriptions follow a linear path, or even compared to McCarthy's action sequences, descriptions bounce between objects (the cart then the backpacks, then the backpacks in detail then the cart in detail, then the backpacks are moved, then they look around).

McCarthy uses objects to build his post-apocalyptic world. The barren and ashen landscape tells much of the story. He uses sequences of actions that are seldom interrupted by descriptions. His sequences of descriptions do not follow a linear path like the action sequences,

rather, they bounce between objects. Finally, dialog is efficient -- the father's personality is shown by his concern for his son in what little dialog he has.

SECTION III

EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

I presented my thesis at the Texas A&M LAUNCH Undergraduate Research Symposium on February 27th. I presented my work with an oral presentation accompanied by short, four slide, PowerPoint. I chose to present orally rather than with a poster because this allowed me to read from my creative artifact. My audience was comprised of students, active listeners provided by the LUANCH program, and faculty advisers.

My presentation opened with the inspiration for my work, J.R.R. Tolkien's unfinished *The New Shadow*, and explained that I have always wanted to write a fantasy thriller hybrid. I went on to show the literary analysis I have performed and the difference between high and low fantasy and "sword and sorcery" and epic fantasy. Then I described the creative writing methodology I have developed and closed with a five-minute reading of the rough, opening pages of my creative artifact. This was followed by a question and answer session and evaluation. My presentation will be included at the bottom of this section.

My PowerPoint presentation was comprised of an opening and closing slide and two substantive slides in the middle. The opening and closing slides contained my work's title and an image of a Santa Muerte statue that has provided inspiration for my work. The two middle slides showed the four quadrants of fantasy subgenres and a summary of my creative writing research methodology.

I received very few questions during the question and answer session. The first was how much time is spent researching vs writing on my work. My response was that it seems to be about 75% research and 25% writing, but ideally, I would like it to be 50/50. The next questions

were largely based around my inspiration for writing a thesis, my future academic aspirations, and the nature of a creative artifact.

The evaluations were positive, however there seemed to be confusion about what a creative artifact was. My presentation should have elaborated on what an artifact is. The active listener providing my evaluation was intrigued by the nature of research for a creative piece and enjoyed learning about the ways in which a writer studies for his or her work.

My Remarks at the 2019 LAUNCH Undergraduate Research Symposium

J.R.R. Tolkien is undoubtedly the grandfather of modern fantasy. He created the well from which countless authors would pull from. But in addition to writing the two seminal works of modern fantasy, he drafted 13 pages of a thriller that could have created a vastly different fantasy landscape. His third story, *The New Shadow*, was scrapped because he thought this novel about the uncovering a youth cult that worshipped evil would be too dark, just simply a thriller, and not worth doing (Tolkien, Carpenter, Tolkien).

For years after learning about *The New Shadow*, I was intrigued by the idea of a fantasy-thriller hybrid and, with *Candles and Thorns*, I have finally written one. My creative artifact, an 80 some odd paged sword and sorcery, middle fantasy thriller takes place in the sleepy village of Riversend where young farm-boy Vas Pennery uncovers a plot that will shake his village and his life to the ground.

I took inspiration from several sources for this work, including the copious amounts of fantasy literature I've consumed, my own experiences in the Rio Grande Valley that I based my setting on, and the Latin American catholic folk saint of death, Santa Muerta.

One of the primary elements I have researched for this work has been the subdivisions of fantasy. Defining the divisions between subgenres helps me to understand how my work fits in

and how it stands out. To that end, I have identified four major subgenres of fantasy. I did this by researching what authors have said, comparing it to what has been written, and following contemporary discourse on the genre.

The first division is between high and low fantasy. High fantasy is most similar to the Lord of the Rings. Magic and mystical elements are used heavily and fill the pages of Tolkien's work. Low fantasy is often described as fantasy realism, with few mystical elements. The seminal work in this field is a Song of Ice and Fire where human characters have little magical properties (DuBois; "A Century of Fantasy"). My work fits between these two with high fantasy elements (like an archetypical ill-tempered dwarf or a cult) grounded by low fantasy realism (the dwarf's ill temper comes from depression and alcoholism and the cult is supported by contemporary research).

The next division is based on the scope of the story. The two sub genres represented here are Epic Fantasy (which revolves around a grand, world saving quest) and sword and sorcery, which tends to be a short, personal narrative (DeNardo). My work more closely aligns with sword and sorcery.

- *The Lord of the Rings* fits in the epic, high fantasy section.
- *A Song of Ice and Fire* in the low fantasy epic.
- *Conan the Barbarian* in the low fantasy, sword and sorcery,
- and Disney's underappreciated classic, *Dave the Barbarian* in high fantasy sword and sorcery.
- My work, fits under middle fantasy, sword and sorcery

My work also takes on elements of literary fiction, utilizing the Robert Olen Butler method of writing literary fiction by focusing on the senses and grounding the work in tangible objects. Finally, my work is partially a thriller, with a conspiracy surrounding a cult that has to be solved.

Research plays an important role in my story because the niche of Middle Fantasy requires a high level of realism (DuBois; "A Century of Fantasy"). I have approached my

research based on breadth, rather than depth. Because the author has to write a self-contained world, they have to know at least a little bit about a lot. To that end, I developed a methodology of creative writing research based on three kinds of research over several steps.

This includes personal experience, deliberate research, and literary analysis. Personal experience or prior knowledge plays an important role early on in the process when constructing overarching portions of the text, like plot or setting. Deliberate research is performed after an outline is complete to fill in gaps and provide details on items that need grounding in realism. Finally, literary analysis plays an ongoing role in the writing process by allowing me to enhance my writing style with the tools and tricks used by authors before me.

When performing literary analysis, I look particularly closely at the first five pages of a work.

The primary goal of reviewing the first five pages is to see what the authors' used to draw the reader in or how they employed their style in the most efficient way to hook the reader. By understanding an author's writing at its most critical moment, I better can grasp the author's overall style and discover tools and methods I can utilize in my artifact.

This was followed by a reading from the first few pages of my artifact.

SECTION IV

REFLECTION

Writing a creative thesis as part of my undergraduate research has been an incredible experience. Research always promises to be something new and writing a full-length creative artifact was most certainly new for me. In writing this thesis, I standardized my personal methodology of research for creative writing, constructed a work that addresses two different audiences instead of just one, and expanded knowledge through my work. Presenting my work played a seminal role in the construction of my thesis as well, revealing insights that helped me to complete its development in the final weeks of the project.

Research

One of my chief discoveries has been a methodology for creative writing research. I employed this method throughout the writing of this thesis and intend to use it for future writing as well. I believe this thesis could be improved by having organized the bulk of the analytical portion of text around the structure of this methodology; however, the requirements for each section preclude this.

My three-part method of creative writing research focuses on breadth of research rather than depth, because a creative writer must know enough about many topics, rather than a lot about only a few. The three parts are prior knowledge, deliberate research, and literary analysis. Each section serves a different role in the writing process.

The Three-Part Method

Prior knowledge

The first step in creative writing is to determine what it is you want to write and to brainstorm characters, plot, and other big, crucial elements. The knowledge utilized here comes

from personal experience, like what books one has read, life events, and personal taste. This prior knowledge section of creative writing research thus focuses on developing large, overarching portions of the text.

Deliberate Research

Following the creation of the overarching elements, you must then fill in the gaps of your knowledge. Perhaps you want a female character to commit a murder – but you aren't sure how exactly a woman would go about killing someone. Does she use a blunt weapon or a sharp one? What kind of environment does she pick to commit the crime? Is it premeditated?

Plot and specific character points, like the above, are answered through deliberate research, as well as small, world-building details like how a cathedral is constructed. This portion of research takes place from the beginning of the writing process to the end and fills in the gaps in one's prior knowledge.

Literary Analysis

This final portion of creative writing research requires the author to be an active reader. I performed this type of analysis utilizing the first five pages of several works of fiction that I believed best reflected the story and style I wanted to write in. Literary analysis helps you to understand what writing and stylistic elements work better than others and when. It is also important for finding your own authorial voice. For example, Jordan's *Eye of the World* tells the reader that there is something bad about to happen in the opening pages by showing how the wildlife is behaving oddly. I learned from this and tried to tipoff the reader early on that there is something to be suspicious about so that I increase the sense of dread in my work.

Audiences

I constructed my work to address two audiences instead of one. This was not a major challenge but did make for an internal struggle. I address an academic audience in this, the analytical portion of my thesis, and a layman's audience in my creative work.

More considerations had to be taken in writing my creative piece than in the academic one. This portion of the text is straightforward and similar to others I have written for course work. However, the creative artifact had to be addressed to a general audience and that required that more elements be taken into consideration.

My audience is intended to be the casual fantasy genre consumer and young adults, though I would not classify my work as young adult fiction. The fantastical elements of my work (of which there are few, since my work is a sword and sorcery story, not a high fantasy one) are more readily consumed by readers of the fantasy genre. By addressing my work to readers familiar with these elements, it required less work on my part to convince the reader to buy into them. In an ideal environment with more time allotted, I would have preferred to address a more general audience and focus more on suspending their disbelief more strongly.

My work also addresses a young adult audience. This is because the main character himself is young but also because the social and moral elements of my story serve to guide future generations. It is my hope that the lessons drawn from this creative piece are able to be referenced during times of trial in the future.

Expanding Knowledge

My work, while not the discovery of a new breakthrough that can be utilized by scientists, does expand society's knowledge.

This creative artifact deals with civil society, change, betrayal, courage, taking action, trust, and the interaction of these elements. It serves as a guide for others going through the same circumstances (hopefully ones without a death cult, however).

Lessons from the Public Presentation

My public presentation served as a launching point into the final weeks of writing my thesis. While I did not learn anything that radically changed my writing, it did reveal the importance of showing the process of creative writing.

The active listener who heard my presentation said he was very interested in the subject of how authors find inspiration and create their works following my remarks. He had never considered creative writing to be something that entailed research and was intrigued. This helped inspire me to try to emphasize my approach to research when I finished the analytical portion of this thesis.

If I Did It Again

If I were to write my thesis again or to begin work on a second project, I would emphasize an incremental approach to writing and my three-point research methodology.

Writing a project of this magnitude requires endurance – not “inspiration.” In that way, I realize looking back that I have been most effective when I spent weeks doing just a little work every day, rather than a few scattered days of intense writing. Working a little each day allowed me to negate the overwhelming nature of the project and focus on getting the one or two pages in front of me. It also allows me to stay closer to my work and as time goes on, it allows me to enter a state of “flow” more easily.

Finally, I would have liked to have written my thesis in accordance with my three part methodology earlier on. I believe that understanding when and where to research would have been more effective than the scattershot approach I took early on.

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CREATIVE ARTIFACT

CANDLES AND THORNS

In the valley of Riversend, my family has grown wheat, barley, and melons for over 75 years. We wrestled this patch of brush and loamy earth from goblins and outlaws since the first of us came over from the west and now, this sow and her squealing, smelly, gluttonous little piglets think they're going to get the best of the Pennerys? I don't think so.

Hogs are a menace. They run around the field, trampling your melons or the first shoots of the season. They get into everything and eat until you've got nothing left. Thankfully the harvest is nearly done -- tomorrow should be the last day of picking thanks to the hands Father Denalt hired. I normally hated working with that old curmudgeon though. But after the last sweetmelon is picked, I'll be driving the carts up north to sell in the Capitol where my parents are already taking the first shipment.

From my perch in the oak tree, I can see any end of the field, and can make a half decent shot to the southern corners. The melons sprawl out in row after row below, stretching to the road south and our house and barn a little further north. It's an island of green and a smokey chimney in a sea of brown, patchy shrub brush, with almost as much prickling bristle as those hogs. Tonight the soft, northern breeze is blowing my scent away from my oaken hideout, through the melons, and down the winding road through the brush and into town a few miles south.

It took a while, but sitting out here alone in the humid moonlight was nice once my eyes stopped playing tricks on me and I got used to bandit shadows and shimmering goblin steel dewed leaves that moved and disappeared in the thicket.

Suddenly, a shadow seems to move the drying bush below. I sit up, grabbing my bow, nocking an arrow, and drawing the string until it bites into my fingers. Then that cursed sound of squealing. I force a deep breath, then another. Out from the shrubs by the road, a sow and twelve little ones come springing forth, oinking and casting up dirt into the low thorny branches. Something scared them out of the brush. But what? I follow her with the tip of my arrow -- my fingers twitching, burning to be let loose. She stops for just a second, turning and watching her piglets. With a breath I release the tension in the string. The arrow makes a ghostly shwomp and thud, but the hog moved, and the arrow plunges into the brown, taunt flank of the sow. Spinning and squealing, she takes her piglets down the dirt road, leaving a trail of dusty blood.

The brush the hogs came from rustles, the branches shifting up and down -- higher than any hog I've ever seen could reach. Something is pushing them out of the way and the deep shadow moves. My heart races. This is what the hogs were running from, whatever it is. I nock a fresh arrow and pull back the string. Pushing away the branches and stopping at the edge of the shrubs, the shadow waves at me. Just beyond a ray of moonlight, the figure stands straight and tall and the silver beam transmutes the shadow into a head of golden hair, flowing down the figure's shoulders in curls. It's Tessa, from the ranch on the other side of the river. She whistles sharp and clear, piercing the quiet. She waves again with both arms above her head.

I prop my bow and quiver against the tree and scramble down the small wooden planks nailed to the trunk beneath my perch. Bounding over furrows and zigging around melon vines, I work my way to Tessa and the edge of the brush.

"A little warning would be nice next time," I demand. "You look surprisingly similar to a bandit this time of night."

“Give you a warning? Since when I have ever done that!” She says, arching an eyebrow. “Besides, that hog sat still for a good ten seconds and you still missed. I’m sure I would have been fine.”

This was not the first time Tessa came around to bother me at my post. Usually she just climbs up into the perch and says something snide about the miller or my aim. Lately though she came around when she suspected something weird was going on in town with our priests, Allaan and Denalt, and thought we should check it out. The only thing weird I ever saw was her elaborate theory that a death cult had taken over the village or that Denalt made some kind of deal and was escorting out “the good ones.” That was her explanation for migration that was going on; the draught was too mundane for her liking.

“I can’t stay down here for long.” I whisper, “We’re picking melons tomorrow. Is the death cult acting up again?”

“Very funny,” She replies. “You won’t be laughing when I show you what I’ve found. Come on!” Tessa grabs my arm and pulls me into the thicket before I could object.

We scramble through the branches, thorns, and roots, snapping twigs and scaring off any hog within a quarter mile, probably sending them back into the melon field where I should be keeping watch. The evening breeze doesn’t follow us into the underbrush and with every few feet we travel, the night gets darker. I start breathing quick and shallow. Ducking under a branch with thorns thicker than the mail links of a chain jacket, I ask again, “What is going on? I don’t like it out here.”

“Quiet!” Tessa hushes me. “You’ll see in a second!” she continues to plow forward without looking back.

We push on in the humid silence until Tessa brushes aside a thick branch in front of her and like a spring, it comes back and slaps me. I yelp, falling behind and rubbing my face, making sure my eyes were still firmly in their sockets.

“Over here!” Tessa calls out to me from under two tall brush trees, surrounded by a carpet of long, needle leaves. Just beyond her is a field of unkempt grass -- a clearing of swaying browns and short, stiff, purple nettles. The field rolls upwards on a slight slope to the stone wall of an old cemetery, surrounding the tilted and twisted headstones and the old chapel beyond them.

“Why are we at the old chapel in the middle of the night?” I whisper, crouching low beside her.

“Because someone’s been robbing graves. Look!” She says, pointing at three figures and a cart just over the stone wall.

The robed figures bend and lift, shoveling away in the dead of the night. The spades scraping on old rocks and hardened soil abandoned long ago.

“Let’s get closer.” Tessa whispers, crouching her way from the safety of our alcove, across the field, and to the edge of a cracked portion of wall. I follow -- reluctantly. We run quickly and crouched up the hill, stopping low by the wall.

“What are they doing?” I ask.

“Quiet, you’ll see.”

I peek my head over the stone wall, balancing on my heels and pressing my hands into the cold, grey rocks. The trespassers dig and dig, heaving clods of soil and grass over their shoulders behind them. After a short while there’s a hard thud. They scrape away dirt from what must be a casket. The hooded man in the cart watches idly while the others heave and curse to

lift out the corpse box. Setting it on the ground beside the cart, they unlatch the casket and flip off the lid. The two men on either end reach inside, grabbing the old bones -- their tattered clothes still forming a rough proximity to a tunic after all these years -- and drop the body into the cart. They throw the casket back in the hole and breathe hard, easing their haunches on the wooden wheels.

That's odd isn't it?" I whisper. "Don't grave robbers usually take gold from the casket and leave the body?"

"Not if you're a death cult," Tes replies, also easing down from the wall. "I think I figured out the name of the old Patron they follow: Surmire. Let's wait to get out of here when they start digging again." Her voice lower than before.

When the spades broke ground again, we began our crawl back into the thorny brush. Our walk back is slower, we retrace our steps the best we could in the black of the night. Though the night was quiet, the snapping of twigs and the grass crunching echoes.

"Now do you believe me?" Tes says in that tone of condescension she wielded well.

"That something weird is going on? Yes. That there's a death cult worshipping ancient goddesses and shipping away half the village? Not yet."

Suddenly there's a snap in the woods to our right. I jerk my head and reach for the bow that I realize is no longer at my side. A shadow seems to settle in the distance but then a hare darts through our feet. Tessa laughs.

"It's a wonder your parents don't own a whole army's worth of arrows with the amount of times you've tried to take a shot at the shadows."

We reach a small alcove under two tall brush trees, surrounded by a carpet of long, needle leaves. It's darker here. The moonlight is trapped in the upper branches of the trees,

sucked into the thick leaves and bramble. Tessa breathes hard and relaxes on her heels. We must have come further than I thought.

“Those grave robbers weren’t stealing jewels. They were stealing bodies,” I say, leaning back against one of brush trees to sit. The bark is hard and the cragged and cracked bark pushes into my back, resisting me. “Have you told Hamlin about any of this? He probably hears things, being in the Church and --”

“No.” She stops me. I can barely make out the stern look she’s giving me from the shadows, “We can’t tell anyone about this -- not even Hamlin. If they’re plotting to evict half the village, you can bet someone in the Church is in on it. Maybe even Hamlin.”

Just then a limb snaps somewhere in the woods around Tes and a sheen of light glistens from behind her. I jump up and reach again for a bow that wasn’t there. There’s a sudden rush of the sticky night air before I’m knocked to the ground in a tangle of limbs and cold steel. Tessa cries out but the sound is muffled in the struggle. There’s a cold shaft surrounded by a searing in my stomach. I gasp for air and feel the pooling of something stickier than sweat on my shirt. The weight and the sounds fade into the night. Did someone just murder me?

* * *

My mouth is dry.

There’s no dry mouths in the Afterworld, right? Unless, I’m in the other part of the Afterworld -- in which case there wouldn’t be this itchy, woolen blanket over my legs. So I must be alive!

The room slowly comes into focus. Yellow light beams from the window above me onto shelves that line the brown, brick walls. Each shelf is filled with jars of herbs and dried spices and tiny labels with faded black ink in a script I can hardly read. Beside the shelves are pots and

ferns spilling over the lip of their mason homes, dripping shades of green and red onto the floor. My cot sits in one corner of the glorified plant closet, the door across from me with a desk and chair beside it. Somehow, I made it to Hamlin's workroom in the chapel during the night.

The pain in my side from last night is dulled now, a throbbing numbness. A bundle of dry prickliness was on my chest, radiating a minty coolness. Taking a deep sniff at the swirling, herb and spice infused air, I recognize this bundle of herbs. It's the same ones Hamlin's grandmother used to make when one of us was careless with a blade. It can heal any gash in a matter of hours. Herbal healing was not typically in a man's realm in Riversend, but then again, this is Hamlin we're talking about.

The door crept open with a cautious knock. It's Gerg and his shaggy hair and hunched shoulders. "It's good to see you up! Are you doing alright?" Hamlin pulls up the small chair from his desk and sits.

"I'm alive, so good I guess?" I reply.

"Just barely. The knife missed a lot of the important stuff, otherwise these herbs wouldn't be doing much," Hamlin leans forward in his chair, lowering his voice. "I found you this morning in pretty bad shape after you weren't there for the harvest. I followed your trail and found you in a pool of red mud. What happened last night?"

"Tes and I were watching grave robbers at the old chapel when we were followed and attacked. Did you see what happened to Tes? Did you find her?"

Hamlin shifted in his chair, crossing his arms. "Vas, Tessa attacked you. There was no sign of another person and it was so dark that you must have been confused. The knife I found belonged to her dad; it has his initials in it."

“That’s absurd, Hamlin,” I sit up, flailing my limbs and pillow around until I could ease my back onto the cold bricks behind me. “I can’t believe you would even think such a thing.”

“She’s been acting odd lately, don’t you think?” Hamlin’s voice is soft, comforting even, despite the content. “All the talk about a cult and a conspiracy -- I think she may have been having some kind of breakdown and finally snapped when she saw the robbers. When we do find her, I’ll push for taking care of her here, in the parish.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this -- right now of all times. You weren’t even there.”

I lurch forward and ease onto my feet, learning I can move about just fine with this wound, and make for the door.

“Vas, where are you going? We don’t have to tell anyone about Tessa if you don’t want.”

“I’m going to find out if Tessa was right.”

Hamlin sighs. “I’ll come too. I don’t want to be responsible if you collapse on a stone floor somewhere. Here, you’ll need this for the pain in a few minutes.”

Hamlin stands up and grabs a small vial from the shelf beside him. He uncorks it and pours out a few fine, dried leaves onto the palm of his hand, “Lick my hand,” He says.

“Wouldn’t it have been better to dump that into my hand?”

“Yes, but I wasn’t thinking.”

I grab the vial and shake it into my own hand, licking the dry, flavorless leaves clean, “Come on. I’m going to see if the library has anything useful. Tes spent a lot of time there, so maybe we can find some of what she did.”

The library is not far from Hamlin’s medicine room -- our chapel is small for a village this size. We walk down the darkened halls, with candles on tall sticks serving mostly to cast long and ominous shadows off us than actually light the corridors. The library itself is the largest

in several regions and we would often have visitors come just to read one of the many works contained here.

Reaching the large, oak door at the end of the hall, I turn the handle and we enter into an amber lit and dank smelling room. Before us stands row after row of tall, wooden shelves, light streaming in from large candles along the wall, in little stone alcoves, and from the great window on the wall to our right, looking out over Riversend.

The rows are, ostensibly, organized by subject. A lifetime's reading of theology, history, and nature books. Religion being the most prominent. I walk over to the first row of religious studies. The large tomes locked away behind a curtain of chains, keeping their secrets locked in this room. I reach through the veil and trace the names on the spine with my finger, sending the chains rattling and clinking. In the shelf are texts about religions in the old country across the sea, the changes in ecclesiastical structures over time, and a short, failed, missionary attempt with the South Mountain Goblins.

"There's so much to sort through," I complain.

"Yeah, you're never going to find it that way," Hamlin said, rounding the next corner.

"What exactly did she say to you? Maybe I can help."

"Tessa mentioned something a while back about an old patron of death or something. It was like one that used to be revered but isn't anymore. Maybe like Surimo? Sermeer? I think it might have been pronounced Sur-meer-ay, but she only said it once and I'm not sure."

"Ah! That last one sounds right. Sumire's an old pagan god," Hamlin says, fidgeting with his thumb. "Anything about her is going to be back over here, in the restricted section."

We walk to the back of the library where Fathers Denalt and Allaan keeps a handful of books away from the travelers who visit. They're works they think are too frail, valuable, or

dangerous, in Father Allaan's case, to get into the wrong hands. From time to time though, Father Denalt lets me and Hamlin read them.

The light barely travels to this corner of the room, its darkness barely pierced by the candlelight. The long shelves are replaced here by cabinets with a lock on their doors.

"Oh shoot," Hamlin laments. "I don't have my keys with me. Maybe we should come back when Father Allaan is --"

I cut him off, "That's alright, I still have mine on me. Father Denalt lent them to me."

Hamlin stutters, "It's not the best idea for you to have those. I mean, what if someone were to take them?"

I ignore him and unlatch the door. Only a few books sit on this shelf. At my eye level is one titled *The Dead Patrons*. I untangle its chain and set the book on the reading shelf at the front of the cabinet. Its cracked, black cover has seen better days. Thumbing through the leathery vellum pages, I find what I'm looking for. The green and gold leafed frames, glimmering in the faint candlelight strike a stark contrast to the heading of the page "Surmire -- Mistress of Death."

I flip the page. On the left is an image in varying shades of black. A robed figure stands over a tomb. Its black hood framing a ghostly face with two, crimson eyes like pools of blood. It holds a great staff in one hand and a raven in the other. The coating of ink and paint is cracked and flakes are missing -- its quality reduced with age.

Skimming the pages, there are several lines about the early church, its relations to local pagans, and this goddess that seemed to appeal to both. One line, in particular, makes reference to the great lengths devotees would go to, to win favors from this patron or to summon her back to life after she was thought dead. The pages cut off before I find any details.

“That’s weird,” I said, taking my attention away from the book. “the last couple of pages are missing. They seemed important.”

“They must have been torn out before,” Hamlin says, his attention anywhere but on my eyes. “Before the Fathers got it. You’ve been up for a while Vas, I think maybe you need some rest.”

“Hamlin, that book is pristine; it looks like it only had one owner before it came here.”

“No, look at this,” Hamlin says. He points to the image’s face. “Its nose is missing. That’s not from age. It’s an old superstition that if you cut off a patron’s nose it can’t breathe so it can’t come back to life. It’s why all the ancient statues are missing noses or ears.”

“Someone with access to this shelf took those pages and I’m going to find out why,” I put the book back on the shelf, locking the old red cabinet and head to the door.

“Wait, where are you going?” Hamlin calls out, falling behind my pace.

“To find Father Denalt!”

Father Denalt’s work chambers were in the tower, stretching high above the village. The spiraling stairwell that leads there is to the right of the library’s old, oaken door. I take the steps two at a time until, panting with a cramp in my stomach reminds me I should take it slow. The stairs dark, like the rest of the church, lit only by a few torches. Father Allaan thought it was better to conserve wax and oil this way. From above the cloud of shadows, Father Denalt’s voice lofts down to me and Hamlin. It sounds like he’s talking to Father Allaan. I stop to listen.

“Allaan. This is outrageous!” Father Denalt slams something on a hardwood surface. “I told you to give me time.”

“I did give you time and you’ve squandered it,” Father Allaan’s voice has always been cool, but right now it was piercing. “Do you not think about the amount of time our goddess has waited? We must make ready for her return -- I will let nothing else delay my sacred duty.”

Denalt mumbles something and a door slams shut. Once the noise quiets down I hear my heart pounding. Hamlin’s face is pale and I hear footsteps on the top of the stairwell. I motion for Hamlin to turn around but he stands there like a slouching log -- immobile. Brushing past him and grabbing his arm, I drag us down to the lower floor. There’s a cellar here we can hide in, since the open hall will give us no cover.

At the bottom of the stairs I lean against the wall, twisting my head around to spot Father Denalt in the dim light. If he has something to do with all this, I’d rather he not see us. Hamlin stands by the cellar door. Torch light barely drips into the chamber beyond. I can’t be sure, but between the flickering light and shadow there appears to be red wax -- maybe candles -- stacked up around a statue like a grotto.

Whispering, I say, “Open the door please, if Father Denalt glances down here we’re --”

“It’s locked,” Hamlin cuts me off

“Here, let me try,” I reach for the door but Hamlin steps in the way, spreading his arms just slightly. He looks afraid.

Father Denalt’s steps pick back up again. They echo down the silent stairwell and fade out into the corridor.

“What’s wrong with you?!” I exclaim, quietly through my teeth.

“Sorry,” He says, casting his glance towards the shadow covered floor. “I just think you should talk to Father Allaan is all.

“Did you not hear a word he and Father Denalt just said? They’re planning something!”

“Vas, you -- you’re being irrational,” He stammers. “Father Allaan can help you understand. He’ll also help you see what’s wrong with Tessa. He says she’s not well.”

After a few, infuriating moments of silence and angry heat swelling around me, I realize I’m staring blindly at Hamlin. “This whole thing is Father Allaan’s fault?” I sputter with rage and spittle. “He’s barely been here two years but he’s concluded that our best friend is ‘unwell’? You can tell Father Allaan that you’re the one who’s unwell because unlike you, Tessa would do whatever it took to rescue either one of us.”

I bristle up the stairs and through the musky old corridors into the fading afternoon outside. Melted fat from kitchen stoves and livestock waste from future meals mingle in the air. The village chatters on down below the chapel hill, like there isn’t a conspiracy threatening everyone we’ve ever loved. Or had a very close friendship with. Love is -- a strong word. I set off down the stone path that tracks from the chapel into town. The once green knoll around me is now a browned clod of dirt.

The image of Hamlin blocking the door and saying Tessa should be treated like a leper keeps flicking into my mind. I strain to think of something else -- to cool myself down from the anger building in me, but the thoughts of my friend being a traitor to me and Tessa keep coming back. Hamlin, the door, Fathers Allaan and Denalt -- wait. What about the door? Why didn’t he want me to open it? Maybe he’s got something to do with whatever’s going on?

Just then a caw pierces my ears and a black, feathery force of wind lashes at my face. Gliding before me is a great, dark raven. It cuts straight through the waning light and above a crowd at the edge of the village that I didn’t notice before. The raven perches in the tree line, just at the village edge.

The crowd is small, no more than ten or fifteen, but they look agitated. They're gathered around a cart next to the old prison tree where we tie up criminals until the Rangers can move them to the city. I hurry down the hill, between buildings, and stand in the back of the crowd.

From behind the crowd, I can hardly see over the shoulders of everyone pressed together, but in the little windows between everyone's arms, I spot Captain Pierman, standing with his arms crossed, reclining against the tree while two others argue with the cart driver.

"Well who could have done it then?" Beeleman, the town smith bellows, gesticulating with his arms for good measure.

"Does it really matter what happened?" Scrawny old Johar replies through his missing teeth. "He was one of Denalt's. 'Probly had it comin'. Why don't you go dump him in the woods someplace? Spare us the trouble of digging a grave for a nonbeliever."

"What in the Realm of the Three Kings is that supposed to mean, Johar?" The cart driver replies, his tanned face wrinkled with confusion.

"Well, if you're one of them, maybe it's best I didn't tell you," Johar spits on the gravel at his feet.

Leaving my spot around the wall, I walk up to the two men and ask what happened.

"It sounded like you found him in the woods somewhere?" I try to act like I didn't overhear everything crazy that was just said.

Smith Beeleman shakes his head, saying, "They found the old miller in the woods. He was stabbed to death."

"He was lured out there by a woman I reckon," The cart driver says, remounting his wagon. "They tend to do that. Catch a man on his heels before they kill."

“I was attacked last night too,” I speak up, “Me and Tessa -- we found a bunch of grave robbers and we were attacked and now she’s missing. What if this is part of something bigger?”

Johar shakes his head, “Boy, you were attacked by a girl. Hamlin told us all about it. Shame what happens to our memory after things like that. I’m telling you certain women in this town can’t be trusted.”

Agitated, I speak louder, “She would never do that! She said there was a --” It occurs to me that maybe I shouldn’t tell them about the cult. Tes did say to keep my mouth shut about it. But I do it anyway. “A cult and some kind of plot.”

All the men are silent -- except Johar. He snickers, “And just what kind of evidence do you have for that?”

I don’t. I have nothing. The only evidence is whatever Tessa found. And until I can find her, no one is going to believe me.

There’s more silence. And blank, avoidant stares at the ground. Finally, Pierman starts asking more questions to the cart driver about getting rid of the body. I’ve been dismissed. Taking my leave, I head back down the twilight path to the farm, hoping maybe I can get some rest and the chance to think.

Once you leave the town the road becomes hard, compact, brown and yellow dirt, with little rocks imbedded in it. The heavy carriages of smithery and wagons of sheep, goats, and other goods etched deep ruts in the rain seasons that stretched for miles. You follow those between the tree line and around the bend a little ways to get back to my family’s farm. When you round the bend you’re close enough to the river that you can skip one of those imbedded rocks on it, if you can pry it out of the dirt. A little further and across the bridge and that’s where Tessa lives and will still live once all is said and done -- I hope.

The road cuts back and leaves a wide berth of brush. In there, along the river, is the abandoned chapel and the place where this miserable day began. Hoof prints dotted the road here, the spots darkened with blood from the sow I shot. Unless some of that is my blood from when Hamlin drug me out of there. That stupid, bonehead Hamlin. He was always more timid, even more so than me. But what happened today wasn't timidity. I'd never seen him act like that. Like -- like he was hiding something. The lunk got enamored by a two-bit priest from the Capital and now he's willing to turn his back on a lifetime of friendship. Wait. If it was that easy for Hamlin to turn, then what about the rest of the village? Who knows how many more are out there, gobbling up the poison Father Allaan must be spitting out!

I continue this way for a while. The sun setting and night dropping around me. The nighthawks release their summer cawing and swoop around the tops of the thicket. Only an hour or so of light remains by the time I get back to my post. I climb up into my oaken hideout and find my sturdy bow and quiver still there. Surveying the field, it looks like Denalt's men have already cleared most of it. The oblong, deep green gourds have been plucked from their low lying vines all around me. The sap along the snapped parts of the vines lofts a fruity sweetness into the air. It's the smell of melon season.

Looking around, I see the thicket wall standing there, swaying in the breeze, some of the brushy patches are pressed down, wadded and trampled where Tessa and I ran into the bush. The place on my side is still numb, but I can sense it. In the rush from the graveyard until now, I forgot how strange it was that the robbers were taking whole bodies. Perhaps I should check it out again. Tessa would want it that way.

With what remained of the twilight I sneak back through the woods, this time equipped with my weapon. The trail, surprisingly, is easy enough to follow because the light pushing in from cracks in the canopy show the bent and broken branches before me.

The brush starts to thin and shorten and I know I'm close. I stop behind two thorn trees. Their thick boughs twisting everywhere way and their jagged bark makes it annoying to rest on but I do anyway. Peering across a perfectly horizontal arm is the small field and the stone graveyard wall and chapel beyond it. No one is here, but I run low across the field anyway, just in case.

Placing my arms on the wall and hoisting myself over, I land in a mound of shoveled and loose soil and grass, missing the gaping hole where a casket once lay. Brushing myself off, I look around. Crooked headstones poke through the sea of overgrown grass -- the tall stalks swaying in the evening breeze. Around several grave sites are mounds of dirt and empty caskets -- the bodies taken for some dark use I don't want to image. Towards the back is an undisturbed section of the cemetery, its graves still intact.

The headstones around me covered in green and yellow moss. The damp river air feeding all manner of lichens. I walk to one headstone that leans almost on its side, having been overturned from age and by shoveling. It has old names and dates from generations ago that marked who once laid here. Etched into the top corner is a symbol black like pitch. It's a shepherd's cane and with a bar running through the middle. The lines are smaller than the other markings and more rough, like it was done after the stone was made and placed here.

I look around. Every upturned grave has a cane and bar. Well this isn't good. Whoever was digging up these bodies knew which ones to harvest. The untouched section still had a few

graves marked. The robbers would be back and with my luck lately that would probably be tonight.

The last remnants of light were dying fast, the sky a mixture of purple and orange now. The shadows that surrounded the chapel and the tombstones have spread and consumed them. Night will already be thick in the underbrush but I go in anyway.

By the time I come out at the farm, everything is dark beyond the woods. My house is nestled in the middle of a low lying darkness surrounding the field and a dim light glows from the windows -- which is odd, because no one has been home all day to light anything. The light moves and two figures step through the door, holding lanterns. Though their bodies are lit up by the lanterns, I can't make out any details. One is slightly taller than the other and slouching. Hamlin. I doubt this is a friendly house call.

Their voices carry over the field but I can't distinguish anything. They step off the porch and head for the shed. They step inside, leaving the door cracked with a view of the porch. They're waiting for me to get back. Are they trying to finish the job from last night?

There's only one place in this town where I'm going to get any answers -- and hopefully some rest -- and that's Denalt's. I beat my way back through the brush, this time sticking close to the road. The crickets chirping, coming from nowhere in particular, deepen the night's silence. Their songs are only interrupted by the squawking of the nighthawks. I step lightly in case Hamlin and whoever else has set watch, but the leaves and branches beneath me shatter anyway. It begins to rain, probably not enough to break this draught, but enough for the warm drops of water to soak me to the bone and dampen the sound of my steps.

It began to pour more and more when I finally reach Denalt's house. The ill-tempered old dwarf lives at the foot of Chapel Hill in town. I sludge through the mud to his door and pound on the big brass knocker. I wait.

Nothing.

I pound some more and finally hear a gruff "Just a minute!" from somewhere inside. Cracking open the door is Denalt, his dangling and braided beard blocking what little light comes from the dim hallway. It did not stop the smells of stewed meats and metal, however.

"What do you want, boy?" He sighs.

"I'm in trouble. We all are," I answer, with a lump in my throat, "I wanted to see if you could help me. And if I could stay here tonight." It didn't occur to me until now that he might not even let me stay here. If he doesn't, I have no other plans and no way to get somewhere dry.

He glares for a second and sighs, "Alright. Come in. I have a room upstairs you can use." Ushering me in and closing the door, he leads me through the dark to the stairs. For a gruff old dwarf, Denalt has decent sense of home decor. Scattered around the room, paintings hang on the walls and I can just make out their contents. Hidden in the shadows are ancient dwarven halls and mountain peaks of white.

At the top of the stairs is an open living area with a grand fireplace lighting the room from its spot on the wall to the right. Large, comfortable chairs covered in soft furs sit in front of it on exotic looking rugs and the walls are lined with shelves. To the left is a table and the kitchen. Sweet mead and greasy sausage fill the room with the smell of a dwarven tavern.

Denalt rummages around in a trunk behind the chairs for blankets and has me dry my things by the fireplace. For someone just smaller than me, his furniture is large. I sink into a cushioned chair by the fire big enough to tuck my legs into.

“If you want tea you'll have to fix it yourself but there's a keg of mead in the kitchen,” He says, plopping into the chair opposite from me. “I was just getting ready for bed when you started knocking. Who'd you upset so bad?”

“I'm still not sure who, exactly,” I explain. “But I think they're worshippers of Surmire. They kidnapped Tessa and I think Hamlin is one of them.”

Denalt lets out a grunting sign and rubs his grim face. “You're really in a hot one now aren't you? You're good as dead if you don't leave town.”

Dead? I don't want to be dead. In fact, I kind of want to be the opposite of dead. My heart races at the thought of them taking Tessa. Is -- is she...

Denalt takes a sip from his mug, an alcoholic foam lingers on his beard, “I'll get you on a caravan to the city and you can rejoin your folks. I may join you too.”

“But who are they?” I exclaim. Should I tell him I know he's connected to it? Probably not -- but I do anyway, “And how are you connected to it? I overheard you talking to Father Allaan about not having enough time. Everyone in this town seems to know something I don't.”

Denalt sighs, “Well first of all, I'm not part of this cult if that's what you're implying. I thought it would be for your own good -- that I could explain everything when you were ready. Clearly I was wrong. Tell me know you know.”

I never really thought Denalt was part of this -- cult -- but it was a relief to hear it from him. Over the next hour, I recount everything. The grave robbers, the attack, Hamlin acting weird, the missing pages, Father Allaan, the strange markings, the knife, Hamlin waiting to ambush me -- all of it.

I found my voice quaking, alien when I recounted the parts about my friends. How could Hamlin do this to me and Tessa after all these years of friendship? My face starts to get hot from

more than just the fireplace. Denalt notices and fetches a filled mug from the kitchen, setting it on the table beside me before sitting back down.

“Vas, what I’m about to tell you is something that I have never spoken to anyone in all the years I’ve been in Riversend,” The leathery skin around Denalt’s green eyes softens. “Father Allaan is a follower of Surmire and he’s converted about half the village. Well, converted or won over their trust enough that they’ll swallow whatever he says. I knew he wasn’t a straight teacher of the Craftsman when he first came here, but I didn’t realize how far afield he was until it was too late. Surmire makes promises to her followers but there is always a demand, usually that’s blood.

By the time I found out Allaan was trying to bring about Surmire’s return, it was too late to stop it. I thought about killing him, but by then he already had deputies in place. All I could do is get people out before the bloodshed started and to do that I had to confront Allan and make him promise he would delay until the village was -- his. That’s why I moved your parents out already.”

“Did they know about this?” I ask. “Why couldn’t you fight it? Or push back? Talk to the Clergy at the Capital?!” The anger, disappointment, and hunger mix together to create a swirling void in my stomach.

Denalt crosses his arms over his dangling beard and shakes his head, “I did but they sent him down here. They support him. Allaan is one of dozens trying to bring back the heretical patrons. This goes all the way to the top.”

Setting his mug down on the arm table next to his chair, he climbs out of the chair, “We’re leaving first thing in the morning. Allaan and his followers have already started their blood sacrifices. This is our one chance at getting to safety.”

My stomach sinks again, tingling all the way up to my healing wound, “What about Tessa? I’m not leaving until she’s safe!”

“Yes, yes you can. If the cult got her it was only a matter of hours before --” Denalt shifts in his boots and darts his eyes to the fire. “At least you have the chance to get away. Wouldn’t she want that?”

“But...”

“What good have you done so far? For her or for anyone else? You found the cult out, discovered its leadership, and realized they’re going to murder half the village. Fantastic. But there’s no more good you can do.”

The swirling void stretches all the way up my stomach into my heart. Things go white before me and the room tilts back and forth to the beating of rage in my blood, “I can’t believe this! I came here for help and all you want to do is call it quits? What’s the difference between you and Allaan then? How is it different to be the one burning the village or be the one who lets it happen?!”

“Vas, did you ever stop to wonder how a dwarf ended up preaching in a rats’ nest of a town in the middle nowhere?” Denalt’s voice is cold and steady, an anger like a steel rod. “Years ago, when I was the chief smith for my clan, one of my brothers, Konalt, fell in with a heretical patron’s cult. My other brother and I found out and we thought we could rescue him. We searched the mountainside in the snow, around the goat farms, behind rocks, we looked for caves and hideouts. We found some tracks that led us to a small entrance and discovered a grand cavern. In the back were mangled bodies, contorted and flayed and branded with the cross and bar. Standing over a set of candles with a goblet of blood was my brother. I knew in that instance he was gone forever. But not our dad, no. The guard’s hadn’t seen us yet and I told him we

should get out but he called out anyway. He echoed through the cavern and my brother turned. So did the guards. My brother and our father ran towards each other and in their embrace my brother sliced him open with a knife.

When our father's limp body slid to the floor, his arms still wrapped around my brother, Konalt crackled. He laughed, Vas. I got out before he saw me, but from then on I knew that there is nothing I could ever do to get through to these people or stop them once they start." Denalt turns his face from the fire, his eyes glistening, glaring into my own, "Don't you *ever* tell me I'm one of them!"

"I -- I'm so sorry. I didn't know," It's all I can stutter out.

"Don't worry about it," Denalt grunts and waves a hand in dismissal. "There's pillows and more blankets in the trunk if you need them. Plan on leaving tomorrow at dawn."

The floor creaks under Denalt's weighty steps. After he leaves the room all the noise that's left is the crackling of the fire. I get up to find one of the pillows he was talking about. Next to the entrance to the kitchen is an old wooden trunk beside a table covered in half completed tinker projects. Gears that shimmer with grease in the amber firelight and metal wires sprung out. I reach for the chest and make out an engraving on the lid, "*To Denalt and Konalt.*"

I grab a couple of pillows and curl up in one of his big chairs. I imagine Denalt younger, his beard shorter, cowering in a cave surrounded by death. Suddenly the images change. It's me in the cave and Hamlin holding a bloodied knife over-- I snap out of it. Maybe Denalt's right. Maybe there is nothing else I can do.

I doze off in a warm bundle of blankets by the fire that night, dreaming about dark things and how I wish I could stop them.

* * *

The next day Denalt's rummaging around in the kitchen wakes me up. I can hear him, digging through plates and crackling bacon, cursing when grease splatters on him. It was hard to see at night, but by day I have a better view of his room. Several tables covered in metal scraps, old dishes left out, broken parts of clocks and other strange devices half tinkered upon are scattered around the room on every surface -- including the floor. It'll be a wonder if I get out of here without more wounds.

He pulls a chair out and sits down at the table behind me, munching on his bacon and sausage, not a word to say.

Getting up and walking into the kitchen, I find it's not much better than the rest of the house. Old plates and mugs piled up around the wash bin, several pans lie around the small wooden stove. In the midst of them is the most recent dish. I select a plate from what appears to be a clean pile, load it up with meats, and sit down.

"How did you end up down here anyway, after the incident," I say, moving an old plate to the floor for more room.

Denalt sighs mid bite, "I fled the mountains for safety." he mumbles, his mouth full of sausage, "The only thing that promised free travel and safety was the ministry, so I joined that. That's also when the haze started."

"The haze?"

"The feeling like I'm walking around in a haze of fog. It started along with the flashbacks to that day," Denalt takes another swig from his mug, tipping it back until it was empty. Standing up from the table, he goes into his room and comes out, producing several bags of goods.

Without a word, he takes them downstairs.

I finish my meal and follow, grabbing my arrow and quiver. Denalt had a busier morning than I thought -- a mule and a cart are tethered to a post by the front steps. Tangled in ropes, Denalt secures the bags and a wooden chest behind the headboard. The mule is oblivious to the bouncing and in the cart behind him, his head deep in a patch of bright, yellow flowers. His bobbing crisp, black mane bobs about while he eats his after breakfast snack.

“This is the last wagon outta here, boy,” Denalt says, leaning over the low wall of the cart.

“Denalt, can’t we just try to look for her?” I say, my voice shaking. I can’t believe he wants to leave my best friend for dead while we make for some kind of grand new life in the city.

“Do you know where the cult is? How many there are? What the guards are like?” He rattles off the questions. “The girl is long gone. I know how this cult works, she would have been sacrificed with other offerings the night they came looking for her.”

My mind races through all the possibilities of where she could be or what we could do, but he’s right. I have no clue what I’m doing. I can feel the hot blood coursing through my face - - the realization that my friend is gone.

Denalt hops out of the cart and clasps my shoulder, “What you want to do for your friend is noble, Vas. But right now, that will get you killed. I wish we could save Tessa, but she’s gone. You’re the only one left to save now and even the chance to do that is slipping away.”

I nod and we climb into the cart. With a click of tongue and of the reigns, the cart starts rumbling down the old stone path. He takes us around the Church Bridge behind Chapel Hill. Fewer villagers go that way and we’re less likely to be stopped, he says.

Clouds gather overhead, stopping the sun from ruining my perfectly foul mood. All around us in the trees and the brush, birds chirp and sing anyway. I cast my gaze into the brushy abyss alongside the road. A raven watches us when we pass by his carrion meal in a ditch beside the road. I much prefer him to the robins and swallows.

Denalt and I are wordless. I'm afraid if I talk, the pressure building up inside will release itself and I'll be a hot mess of blubbering tears. All that's kept me together for so long is the idea that maybe she was still alive -- that I could get her back. With that gone, nothing is left to obscure the fact that my best friend is dead.

Rolling down the road this way for a while, we reach a narrow bend, flanked to the right by a drop off and on all sides by flesh ripping brush. Denalt pulls on the reigns and the mule's steady pace drops to a cautious walk. We go around the bend, kicking rocks over the ledge and sliding in the mud. Just when we reach the other side, an overturned cart blocks the way.

Denalt halts the mule. It dances in place in the muddy road, neighing. He turns his head slowly from one side of the cart to the other and reaches for a wooden shaft behind the seat. The silence more still than any I had never heard before causes my skin to prickle and I feel like I should be grabbing my bow. Gripping the leather wrapped handle, I grope at my quiver for an arrow.

Like lightning a glister flies from atop the cart and two black figures land, into the mud in front of us with a gurgling slosh. Their chests throbbing under black robes with heavy breathes. In each man's hand is a great scimitar, their blades crooked and silver like a crescent moon.

With a shout, the one on the left lunges forward, hoisting the glimmering blade above its head. Before I can nock an arrow, Denalt swings the shaft into his hand and flies off the bench

and sending the cart shaking in his wake. They collide beside the mule, wallowing in the mud for a second before Denalt stands, holding what I thought was just a shaft of wood at the man's now blood covered throat. The iron wrought spear tip of the rod drips in thick crimson.

Now alone, the second man searches Denalt, then me, twisting his head slowly back and forth, his weapon held in front of him, giving distance.

My arrow nocked, I pull the string tight between my arms. I picture a target on the man's chest, focus on the bullseye over his heart and release. The feathers shoot through my fingers, power through the air, and with a disappointing thud, waggle at me from the cart behind our highwayman.

The man turns his sights on me and in that momentary blindspot, Denalt charges at him, smashing his sword out of the way, swinging the tip of the spear and coming up with the butt of it under his chin, knocking him prone.

"Well, if it isn't Jonathan the tanner's son," Denalt says calmly, his spear held tight against the attacker's face. "Does your father know you're out here? Or did you kill him too?"

Jonathan summons a foul spit at Denalt.

"Sit up!" Denalt commands, smacking the man with his with his spear. "What are you doing out here?"

"Paving the way for our goddess's return, that's what," He says, sitting and hiding behind his knees. He looks at me, blood drips from his smile. "Tessa says to say 'hello' -- it's a shame she won't get to see you again before she dies. I know how terrible this whole ordeal has been for you," He says in a mocking pitch, his smile turned into an exaggerated frown.

My breath catches. She -- she's alive? "Where is she? Tell me where she is!" I shout, standing on the bench of the cart.

“I don’t owe answers to any unbeliever,” He replies and wipes the blood from his chin with the back of his muddied hand. “You’ll have to kill me first.”

“I don’t think you’re going to get anything else from him, kid,” Denalt says. “Get the ropes from back of the cart. I want to take him with us,” Denalt pulls his spear away from the hunkered assailant and props its butt in the mud beside himself.

I hop over the headboard into the bed of the cart. The old, mildewy wood is slippery in the damp weather. Unlatching the tool box, I flip the lid and grab rope from between some old bits and halters. We bind up the highwayman and stuff an old cloth in his mouth to keep any other guards from hearing him. We dump him in the back of the cart.

Thoughts of Denalt in the cave with his dad and brother appear in my head, with Tessa struggling to break free -- I have to do something.

“If she’s still alive then,” I pause then force the rest of my thoughts out. “Then I need to stay.”

Denalt pounds his head against the cart, letting out a guttural sigh, “Okay. Alright,” He says, “Seems like the only way to keep the least amount of folks dead is to go with you. So I’m coming.”

He climbs onto the wheel and into the cart. There’s a muffled oomf that comes from the bed when he lands. Denalt opens the wooden box and pulls out a length of cord. Throwing it to me he says, “Here, tie my hands up with this, but do it loosely.”

Before I can ask why he hops back out and fusses with the corpse of the dead attacker. He loosens the robes and shakes out the blood soaked mud and dirt.

Shoving the robes into my arms, he says, “You’re going to pretend to be our little friend here and me as your prisoner. I’d wager they’re down by the river. The old Faulkenberry's place is there -- just across from the old chapel. Same place you and Tes first got caught.”

“It’s probably why they had a guard up here then.” I reply, heart racing while I don my hand-me-down set of cultist robes.

We trudge through the mud and the underbrush. Though I should be leading Denalt, the old dwarf moves so fast I have to nearly run to keep up.

“I know I didn’t say it earlier but -- thank you,” I whisper, looking at my long bearded prisoner.

“Yeah well,” He snorts, “It was going to be hard explaining to your parents that I let you die out here, so I figure I may as well throw my life away while we’re at it.”

“That would be pretty difficult, especially since that’d leave them short handed.”

“Don’t overstate your worth, kid. You still can’t hit a hog -- or a cultist -- with that bow of yours. Can’t count how many arrows I’ve seen lying around out in those fields,” A smile seems to creep under his mane.

There’s a rustle in the thick, thorned and leafy brush beside us. I spin around and a small, red speck shoots from one tree to the next. Denalt crouches low, taking cover behind a short fern and mumbles, “Should’ve brought my spear...”

Grabbing my bow and an arrow, I aim from brush tree to brush tree, trying to spot the red thing between brown and dying branches.

“You’re not one of them. You don’t smell like them and their nasty incense. You know, you can smell evil sometimes,” Something hisses and croaks from above us, “Who are you?”

“I -- I’m Vas Pennery, from the village. My dad is the melon farmer. This is Father Denalt. Who -- or what -- are you?” I reply, mustering every drop of manful bravado I have, hoping it can’t smell fear too.

“My name is Philandro, House Kobald to the Falkenbury family,” The hisser says from somewhere a little lower in the trees. “Although, I have since been displaced from the cultists in our once pristine basement. What are you doing out here, Vas Melon Farmer’s son?”

“We’re trying to stop them,” I say, peaking into thorny branches trying to address our high climbing kobold acquaintance. “They captured my friend and we’re going to get her back.”

“Well you’ll need to do something different,” The kobold drops down from high in a brush tree, landing behind us. I spin around. Philandro bows deeply, his long and scaly snout nearly reaching his arm placed neatly on the front of his waistcoat. The demidrake wears what must be the smallest servant’s uniform ever seen in Riversend.

“If you’re going to get her back you’re going to need some serious help. For one, you didn’t aim in the right place once and I do think I’m hard to miss,” He laughs, stretching out his crimson red arms. “Come with me. I know exactly where they are and where they are not. I will show you the back way in.”

After more walking and sludging through mud and water, puddled around warped and twisted roots, we spot the river. Looking through closely cropped frames of swaying branches and down below us, the river gurgles and sloshes towards town. To our right, the manor overlooks the river from a steep drop. Carved out of the earthen wall below it is a cave mouth, about ten feet tall by my reckoning, and wooden docks that run just out from the cavern into the river and back up the embankment. Small and flat cargo boat bob beside the dock, pulling taunt against their ropes and recoiling up against the moss stained wood.

Just on the other side of the river, nestled in a thick bed of brown and swaying cattails is another dock. I can just barely see, but up the bank and behind a small, green covered knoll of sandy loam, is the old chapel. Its once white walls now browned with age and misuse.

“What all have they been doing?” I whisper, crouching low in the mud.

“Something dark,” He says, “They started their headquarters at the chapel and slowly worked their way into our caves without my masters or me noticing. When we did they chased my masters out and captured me until I escaped today. I suspect they are into more than human sacrifices.”

I hope rescuing Tessa doesn't take us long enough to find out what other dark things they're planning.

Denalt clears his throat. “So, just how exactly are we doing this? We still don't know where Tessa is.”

“I do know where your friend is not,” Philandro replies. “When I escaped I slipped through the cavern and out this way. I did not see any prisoners; only crates of supplies.”

“Do you think you'd notice if we borrowed a boat?” I ask, thinking out loud, “Did you see any guards posted this way, Philandro? Phi--”

Before I could finish, the kobold runs towards the dock, dashing through stands of green water reeds and under violet prickly pear bristle bushes. Denalt and I follow behind, unable to catch him or our breath by the time we get to the docks.

Stopping just behind a tall stand of reeds on the edge of the docks, we look again for guards. All that's there are barrels and covered crates and flat pontoons sloshing in foaming ripples along the sides. The three of us step onto the docks together. Denalt peeks under a tightly pulled tarp on a crate.

“They’re preparing for something,” He whispers low and serious. “There’s black steel in here and lots of it. We’re messing with more than a rogue branch of the church here.” He pulls out a wicked blade and lofts it around in the air, slashing at nothing. He checks the blade with his finger and slides it behind his belt. “Might need this later.”

The kobold scours the edges of the dock, scuttling from one boat to the next on all fours. Finally, at the end of the dock he finds one suited for passengers and unties the small boat with four rows of benches. Its wooden seats wet from splashing water and poor paddling. He calls us over and we board. Stepping into the pooling water and holding onto the post, I get in, followed by Denalt. He steps into the boat, forcing all of his weight down and sending the boat away from the dock. One leg on the dock and one in the boat, he’s caught between falling in or lunges for the boat. With his delicate dwarven might he tumbles into the boat, driving it hard against its tethering. The rope fights back and slings us towards the pier. The kobold reaches out and grabbing onto a wooden post, he stills the boat.

“Watch it will you!” He hisses at Denalt. “We’re trying to get out of here without being noticed, thank you.”

Now upright, Denalt unties us from the dock. Summoning a long paddle from under his bench, Philandro shoves us off and glides us to the other side of the river. The silent dock grows smaller while we sit silently between a gray sky and grayer river, listening to the steady sloshing and dripping of the ore.

The wet air sits heavy on us while float up to the small, single pier dock on the other side. The kobold hops out and ties a wet and moss covered rope to the post while me and Denalt climb out.

“We can sneak up on them if we go around this way,” The kobold whispers, leading us into the brush on the left side of the dock and away from the chapel. “This way they won’t see us coming.”

“Only if they’re in there, right?” I add.

“Oh, they’re in there. I just don’t know how many.”

Great.

Sneaking through the brush once again, we couch low, pushing thorn-ridden branches and dying sticks out of our faces. We reach a spot just shy of the old wagon path that used to lead worshippers right up to the chapel doors. Standing at the mouth of the path and surveying the clearing around the chapel with his back turned to us is a guard. He’s skinny but his clothing no different than any other villager, a brown tunic and faded pants, except for his drawn bow and sinister convictions.

Denalt taps me on the shoulder and, making a silent gesture towards my bow, points back at the guard. Suddenly he looks our direction. He doesn’t see us crouching low in the underbrush, but I recognize him -- it’s scrawny old Johar. A chill falls over me. It never occurred to me that rescuing Tessa would involve killing someone I knew.

“Can’t we just make a distraction and slip around him?” I whisper.

“No. He’ll still hear us from the commotion inside. Take him down.”

“I -- I can’t kill Johar, Denalt.” I protest. “Maybe we should bind him up or something.”

“Never mind! Just give me that then,” Denalt gripes through his teeth and wrests my bow from my back before I can hand it to him. In a flash, he knocks an arrow, aims for the man’s head, and with a shoosh, Johar drops. Feathers and blood protrude from his baldhead in the soft grass.

Denalt shoves the bow back to me, pressing it into my chest, saying, “If you’re serious about this, you’re going to have to be willing to draw blood.”

It feels alien now, my bow. I rub the hard, dry leather around the handle, trying to get acquainted with a tool that just killed someone I knew in cold blood.

Waving us forward, Denalt leads Philandro and me out of the brush. The dwarf and the kobold charge forward, dashing across the field -- their small legs pumping hard over the field of green and purpling grass. I follow behind, searching over my shoulder for the guards that must be barreling down on us out of the woods. But the ghosts of my imagination are nowhere to be seen. We dash for the front of the chapel and press against the rotting wall in case another guard is near. The sunlight falls from straight overhead and bounces off the hollowing wood, feeding the thick creeping vines whose roots must be the last things holding this building together.

The chapel doors hang off the hinges, dangling loosely in the daylight. Denalt peaks through a crack in the doors. He gives the all clear and we slip through, barely making a sound. The foyer is dark and deathly quiet. A single shaft of sunlight falls from the ceiling -- spores and dust swirl round and round in it, falling onto the warped floorboards at our feet. The air is thick and slimy -- the walls splotted with greens and blues from water and molds. A set of double doors still stands firm in front of us. Just beyond them is the sanctuary and with it -- Tessa.

Denalt cracks the door to the sanctuary just slightly and peers through.

“There’s only three of them, including Allaan,” He whispers, shaking his head. “There’s a couple people tied up on the floor by the altar -- one of them must be Tes. Philandro, as much as I would like to do the honors, I’m leaving Allaan to you. There’s a big one standing guard that I’ll tackle. Vas, you get the altar boy. That should be within your skill level. I hope.”

Denalt counts down from three with his fingers, dropping one at a time until he makes a fist and smashes through the door with his shoulder. We charge, my heart racing in my throat and my fists white around the leather grip of my bow. Rows of decrepit bench pews line the sanctuary, headed off by an elevated altar. Light streams from shattered windows and holes in the ceiling, battling for the room with the shadows. Amber light spills from the altar. A great arrangement of red wax candles surround a raised platform of stone, waiting for the first offering to Sumire. On either side of it, acolytes in black robes fan incense burners -- the thick gray fog drips down like a waterfall, covering the floor.

Allaan and the guard stand to the right of the altar alongside the bound sacrifices. They turn to see us barreling through the doors half stumbling. "How lovely. Visitors," says Allaan, reaching into the folds of his white robes to reveal a blackened dagger.

Mid charge, I hear my heart raging in my ears. Then my head becomes clear and time slows while I watch Denalt and Philandro charge ahead. They plow forwards down the long aisle between the pews shouting in a raging furor. Denalt raises his new scimitar high above him and crashes into a parry from the guard. His momentum drives the guard back onto his heels and more hits ring out. The clanging of steel fills the room.

Charging towards the pews, Allaan thrashes at the crimson demidrake. But Philandro jumps onto his back, biting and slashing at the priest. Allaan spins around, shrieking with his robes turning red in streaks.

Before I realize it, an arrow is knocked and I'm aiming at a third cultist by the left incense burner. My fingers release, almost on their own volition, and an arrow flies over the rotting pews, sailing square into incense burner behind him. It topples over with a clank and

sparks and smoke fly onto the altar and the floor. Flame begins to spread. I've got to get better at this.

The acolyte looks at me for a moment and turns and runs for the open window past the tied up villagers waiting to be sacrificed. Running towards the window, a pair of bound legs kicks up and trips him, sending him face first into a pew.

With the others still engaged, I spring through the aisle towards bodies. The bound bodies struggle under their ropes and sackcloth masks. The young cultist clutches his nose on the floor, rolling back and forth in a pool of his own blood. I turn my attention back to the bodies. One of them must be Tessa. I reach for the mask covering the first captive and pull it off. Falling out of the sackcloth is a wave blonde hair. It's Tessa!

Using an arrow head for a knife, I cut the ropes around her arms and legs easily. She sits up and strips the gag frown around her head.

I grab her arm and help her up, asking, "Are you alri--" Before I could finish Tessa grabs the arrow from my hand and lunges forward. She jams it hard between the cultist's ribs, driving it deep into his lungs. The acolyte screams in pain and stumbles back onto the altar, dropping the knife he was holding and ready to use on me and coating the once sacred slab with blood.

"Quit staring and help me get the others out of here!" Commands Tessa, waving smoke away from her face. Smoke? I look around, finally free from the haze of battle. Smoke is filling the sanctuary and fire from the incense burner licks the wall behind us.

Tessa and I kneel and begin to cut away the ropes and masks from the last two captives. Under the masks are two of Somehow Allaan struggled free of the kobold. His robes now shredded and draping around him in thick strips soaked in blood. The two circle around each other by the altar, breathing hard and keeping their eyes locked in a hateful gaze.

“You’re all fools if you think you can end this,” Allaan shouts and grins through the blood staining his face. “Surmire’s return only begins at Riversend. Already I can feel her presence. Soon her faithful will be blessed -- those past and present! Go ahead and take the captives. A sacrifice has already been made!” He gestures to the altar. Blood pools and drips from the cultist Tes killed with my arrow.

Allaan’s gesture drops his defenses and Philandro pounces, clawing wildly. The fire works up the walls now, caressing them in a golden flame and spreading their heat to the rotting framework of the building.

“Vas, let’s get out of here. The others can handle it!” Tessa and I grab the feet and arms of one of the first boy. We carry him through the pews and out the door, setting him on the cool grass on the opposite side from the docks.

We run back inside, coughing and sputtering at the wall of black smoke now enveloping us, emanating from the sanctuary. Searching blindly through the swirling darkness, we reach the other sacrificial offering and lug him out the same way.

For the first time I took notice of the two boys with Tessa. They’re farmer Johnson’s kids, his twin boys, no older than thirteen. The first one we drug out tends to his brother, helping him up while he coughs and sputters from the smoke. He catches his breath in the dying light, calming his choking and wheezing

Tessa crosses her arms and asks the boys, “How exactly did you two end up with me in there?” Her tone more stern than I would have thought to use on two young boys to be used as human sacrifices.

The boys look at each other, then youngest looks down at his feet, shifting uncomfortably. “Just in the wrong place at the wrong time I guess,” His brother says, staring off into the woods without meeting Tessa’s piercing blue eyes.

The doors behind us swing open and out pours a coughing Denalt clutching the red kobold in his arms. Behind them the building cracks and glass begins to pop and crumble, and flames reach out, licking the air searching for a taste of us.

“What are you idiots standing here for?” Denalt shouts. “Get going back to the boat before the rest of these creeps arrive! Hurry!”

We follow his orders. Tessa and I help up the boys who stagger for a minute but join us in running towards the dock. Shouting comes from the road behind us -- cultists must have seen the fire and started this way. There’s no telling how little time we have to get out of here.

Ploughing down the hill and around a stand of reeds the dock comes into view -- and with it is Hamlin, standing in the middle of a boat with three others around him. In their hands are lit torches that reflect grimly on black robes for the ceremony. Hamlin’s can’t hide his slouch, however.

“Oh Vas,” He sighs, “You really should have talked to Father Allaan like I said. I gave you a chance but you didn’t take it -- I gave you several chances after I caught you and Tessa in the graveyard that night. But now your lives end here.”

Shouting comes from somewhere behind us. We have to get out of here -- now. I draw my bow and nock and arrow. If there was ever a time I needed to land a perfect hit, it’s now. If I can hit just one of them and send a torch back into the boat that should give us enough time to escape.

A cultist reaches out to still the boat. A second one places his foot onto the dock, steadying himself against the waves. His torch is over the boat in his outstretched arm.

I pull the string back and breathe in. I picture a target, just over his chest. Seeing the bullseye in my mind I exhale and send the arrow flying. It launches through the air, a shaft of red fletchings spiraling through the air. There's a faint thud and a shout. Losing balance the torch wielding cultist falls on Hamlin and fire springs up from their dangling robes.

In the panic, Denalt charges forward and we follow, jumping into our own boat. He cuts the rope and shoves us off while I grab the paddle and steer us into the open water. Shouts come from atop the hill and several tiny, angry silhouettes stand in front of the blazing chapel. Several black and fiery cultists jump out from Hamlin's boat, splashing about and groping for the shore. We're finally free.

Denalt has me take us down stream until we pass behind an outcropping and find a low bank shaded by a stand of several massive thorn trees. The sand bank is clear under the eaves except for a thick coating of needle leaves. We pull the boat up onto the shore.

"Nice shot back there" Denalt says, abrupt and gruff while he helps the kobold to stand. It's the first words he's spoken since we left the chapel.

"Thanks, Vas." Tessa says, stepping out of the boat, clutching onto my shoulder for balance, "I mean, for everything," Her blue eyes seem to twinkle in the single moment I catch them before she turns away.

"Uh, you're welcome," Is call I can think to say. I really need to come up with a better reply when saving people if I'm going to be doing this often. "Riversend isn't safe anymore, Tes. Denalt and I are going to follow my parents to the city."

“Huh. If only someone would have warned you about that earlier -- oh wait. I did!” She says, stroking her chin pretending to be thoughtful, “I’m coming with you then.”

“The cart’s back this way,” Shouts Denalt, standing at the edge of the brush with the others. They’re all watching.

We plough back through the thicket, again. Ducking under thorn bushes and slogging through mud until we reach Denalt’s cart. It hasn’t been touched except for a black raven perched on the side. It’s red eyes focused intensely on our cargo. Denalt turns to the Johnson boys, “You two need to get back to your parents and get out of here. Don’t bother to pack anything either. Leave as soon as you get back.”

After untying the mule, Tessa, Denalt, and I climb into the wooden bench at the front of the cart. Philandro jumps into the back and trips over the bound cultist, who lets out a muffled shout and something vaguely reminiscent about claws. The raven squawks and with a few flaps of its pitch colored wings, it perches in a tree up the road and eyes us.

“You really do keep a little bit of everything in this cart don’t you, Denalt?” Tessa laughs.

Denalt mumbles and grabs his reins. With a click of his tongue and a slap of the reigns we set off for the City. Tessa curls up in the spot between us, using my shoulder as a pillow for the bumpiest nap I’ve ever seen anyone take.

On the side of the road a sow and her piglets roots at the stump of an old tree. On her hip is an arrow wound from a few nights ago. She looks at me when we pass. It’s a knowing look. One that says I’ll need to work on my aim.