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Fantasy and Storytelling through the Hero's Journey

Chapter 1 Review:

This chapter outlines the artist's statement on his motivation behind the project. This presents a history of engagement with the fantasy medium with the artist and how the fantasy genre has inspired him throughout his childhood and into his adult life. The artist discusses his fascination with the genre and how fantasy provides a safe medium which allows for people to engage in difficult and testing experiences in a setting which they can learn empathy.

Chapter 2 Review:

This chapter details Joseph Campbell's Monomythic structure in the form of the Hero's Journey before engaging with how Christopher Vogler modified Campbell's original work into a 12-point structure for screenwriters and authors to follow. Upon laying the framework for the Hero's Journey, the first films of *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* are all tested against the structure Vogler presented. After establishing the Hero's Journey is followed in these movies, critical and academic analysis of the Hero's Journey is considered before concluding that changing the Hero's Journey structure by removing certain elements which some of academia deems offensive removes critical aspects of proper storytelling.

Chapter 3 Review:

This chapter outlines an original story that follows the first act of the Hero's Journey through practical form following the storytelling elements expected based on Campbell's and Vogler's structure.

Chapter 1: Artist Statement

I have grown up reading fantasy. My earliest memories are pretending to be someone else living in some fantastical world. There is an element of fantasy that is spectacular, mysterious, and calls to its reader to indulge. When engaging in any form of media that is a fantasy, the suspension of disbelief is granted by the consumer that few other genres can boast. The consumer is looking for an adventure and a compelling story that can captivate them for as long as the medium they have persists.

There is an unspoken romanticism to the fantasy genre that has existed since the origin of storytelling. It is as if humans are wired to engage in these sorts of stories that tell tales that we know cannot happen in our reality. Yet, despite the impossibility of the actions taking place and the full knowledge that none of what is being engaged with is real, the genre has lasted and is even thriving in these modern times.

I can recall watching shows like *Hercules* after school when I was young. I remember reading stories such as 2003's *Hawksong* by Amelia Atwater-Rhodes, where two different factions of shapeshifting humans were at war with one another, yet peace was found through love. I remember watching the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in High School, only to learn later that these movies were adaptations of books written in the 1950s. These stories are still being written and adapted to this day, with no obvious sign of their popularity dwindling.

While the genre of fantasy may not always be the most influential in our culture, there is a clear hunger for it that cannot be denied. The elements of fantasy have moved beyond what many might consider traditional forms of the medium by finding their way into video games. I grew up playing these sorts of games where I could become someone else and do things that were impossible for me to do in real life. I got to experience what it was like to be a hero.

I think that is the element of fantasy that grabs people the most. The tales of heroics and bravery done by others which we do not often see being reflected in the real world. The knowledge that good triumphs at the end of the day. The understanding is that despite how hard something gets for these characters we are reading about, they will come out on top of things by the conclusion. There will be a happy ending. These are strong messages that appeal to any audience regardless of age and culture and time.

This is the sort of story that I hope to write. I hope to capture the beauty and simple elegance of good winning over evil. I want to create a fiction where fantastic things happen, and suspension of disbelief is held openly, but by the end of the last page, I want the reader to feel that same sort of motivation that I do when taking part in a good story.

While some might consider fantasy little more than a knight going to slay a dragon in some children's book adventure, fantasy is capable of showing a much deeper understanding of the human condition. While modern interpretations of good and evil have been conveyed in a manner where the good guy is wearing a white hat, and the bad guy is wearing a black hat, and that is all the audience needs to know about the two, that is a shallow showing of the deep breadth that storytelling can have.

When I was younger, simple stories about a good guy and a bad guy coming to a head were the pinnacle of storytelling. Yet, as I matured and started to understand what stories were capable of, I found a new appreciation for the nuance that they can provide in characters. Stories were safe ideas that were predictable and took me on a journey where I knew the foregone conclusion.

Then I found books like Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. I learned the story of a group of soldiers in the Vietnam War. I got to see their lives taken from them, their dreams

shattered, and the regret that the survivors had to deal with. I got to see all of these things through the eyes of a narrator that was flawed and unreliable for the reader. I learned through O'Brien that any form of writing could have depth beyond just the words on a page. I learned that despite never having experienced anything like the Vietnam War, I could relate to a soldier that is afraid and alone. I could mourn someone that was text on a page because the author created someone real.

The struggle of the human condition is what propels stories through time and keeps them relevant and engaging to their audience. After O'Brien, I came across Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. There I found another narrator who was both a protagonist and antagonist of his own story. I found a flawed man in Victor Frankenstein that wanted to play God. The desire to create and make something is etched into the human psyche, we are able to understand why Frankenstein does what he does, but he goes too far and shows us what it means to create without caution.

As I learned that narrative could take these turns and direct characters in ways which is not so black and white as led to believe, I began to grow a fonder appreciation of this style of storytelling – of telling about a flawed hero because we are flawed as people. If someone is perfect in every way, then the story is both boring and likely unrelatable.

Though the question remains if fantasy is a good genre to present these flawed characters. Fantasy is about good overcoming evil in a fantastical world. Fantasy is not about the Vietnam War or Switzerland during the 18th century. And while *Frankenstein* is closer to the fantasy genre than *The Things They Carried*, science fiction is not always comparable.

Yet even in the fantasy genre we can find these flawed characters. Tolkien showed the human condition in the people of Middle Earth, where they all fought against the draw of power

from the Ring of Power. The struggle to resist temptation for something greater than oneself is a call hard to ignore. And while not every character in the *Lord of the Rings* managed to overcome their temptations, good did triumph over evil in the end.

The tradition of fantasy showing flawed characters goes beyond Tolkien. The story of *Beowulf*, for example, dates in written form to the 11th century, though the story itself is older than even that through word of mouth within the Saxon culture. We are treated with an ideal man that is mighty and nearly perfect in every way. He wins all his battles, he defeats horrible monsters such as Grendel with both his wit and his strength, and he saves people's lives to receive an inordinate amount of glory for himself. Yet despite these things that Beowulf is known for, he falters and shows doubt and fear in the end when it comes to fighting the black dragon.

Beowulf does remember his past, and his true nature as a hero and warrior. Beowulf recognizes that to be a good man is to find an honorable death in battle. He is reluctant to confront his death – because he knows that the dragon will kill him - but he confronts the dragon anyway and slays it shortly before breathing his last. Good triumphed over evil in this story, but good died in the process and left behind a legacy for others to emulate.

We see this tradition continued in stories such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written in the 14th century. This Arthurian Legend shows Arthur's Court being invaded by the quintessential Devil. This Green Knight makes a mockery of the knight's honor and bravery and seems to trick Sir Gawain into chopping off his head. To which the Green Knight takes up his head and Sir Gawain's quest begins.

For the uninitiated, this tale seems like it will be along the lines of *Beowulf* where we see this hero overcome every odd placed against him. For the most part, Sir Gawain is this heroic figure, not because he defeats evil with his wit and strength, but because he overcomes the fatal

flaw within himself to become a better man. While this story is dressed up in the trappings of adventure and fantasy, the true conflict comes from Sir Gawain trying to uphold what it means to be a knight.

Beowulf and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were written three centuries apart by three largely different cultures. These stories both fit within the fantasy genre comfortably and they both try to answer the same question: What is it like to be a good man? I believe this question is among the most important questions anyone can try to answer. I believe that fantasy holds the means to attempt to answer the question while being safe and entertaining.

This trend is alive and well in the current era, with authors such as Patrick Rothfuss writing the *Kingkiller Chronicles*: a trilogy released in 2007, 2011, and 2022 (presumably) detailing the adventures of series protagonist Kvothe. The trilogy carries with it the tropes and traditions that are expected within the genre, but it adds to the mix by introducing a narrator that is possibly an unreliable one, given that it is the series protagonist's first-hand account of events that happened to him.

Mixing the idea of an unreliable narrator into the fantasy genre is marrying the trends of asking what it means to be a good man along with the flawed and very human nature of Shelley's Victor Frankenstein. The reader is allowed to see the story unfold through the eyes of the protagonist, and not as an observer standing in the room as the story takes place. The story shifts from the impersonal to the personal, and that change creates a much more engaging story for the reader – assuming that the reader likes the character they are seeing the world through.

The story that I will write stands on the shoulders of these works and many more which were not listed in this brief introduction. I want to create a fantasy that is in homage to the lessons taught in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I want to create a flawed

character that we see in Victor Frankenstein. I want to represent the struggles of life found in a world that the reader is vastly unfamiliar with, in the same way that O'Brien wrote about the Vietnam War in *The Things They Carried*.

It is important that this tradition of storytelling is kept alive, and the proverbial iron is hot with how fantasy series are on a clear and upward trend in marketability given that Amazon purchased some of the rights to the Lord of the Rings to create a series off of it. The Marvel franchise is a multi-billion-dollar industry just through its movies alone in the last decade. There is a market for this genre that cannot and should not be ignored.

While the story themes and ideas are marketable, they are not the only reason I want to write this story. There is also a worrying trend in many adaptations to these stories. George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* series enjoyed enough critical success to be bought by HBO in order to adapt the series to screen. The series itself had its ups and downs, but a quick search of the reaction to the series finale shows an angry audience that hated it at worst and forgot about it at best.

It should come as no surprise that there are bad stories, or good stories with bad conclusions. The worrying trend is an apparent disconnect happening between what the producer and the consumer of the goods is expecting. If this trend is not corrected, the good faith of the consumers to get what it is they want may dry up and sour the market. While I have no whimsical fantasies of becoming so successful from my story that the likes of Amazon or HBO will purchase it – I am worried that the reputation of the fantasy genre is being harmed through these series. I believe that only real metric to counter this sort of harm is to produce something good. I want to add to the good of the genre with my work.

It is important to me to produce good works as a Christian because telling stories about good and faithful people doing good things is a reminder toward what all people have been commissioned by Christ to do. We are called to tend to all of creation in the garden and be good stewards, and I believe doing my part to help cultivate the culture is a good means to achieve this commission.

While my faith strongly influences my reason to write, I do not want to write a faith-based book. I want my audience to be broad and for anyone from any walk of life to be able to enjoy. Though the scope of my work will deal with more secular topics and issues, I will still represent characters that show a strong moral compass that emulates, even if by mistake or happenstance, what a Christian should be.

Though my protagonist will act like a Christian should, they will also act as any person would – they will share weaknesses and faults that many readers can understand and potentially relate to. There will be struggles and conflicts that reflect life in a universal sense so that a universal audience can appreciate the message of triumph which will come at the end.

Just as Scripture shows that there are rewards for being a good and faithful servant, there are also punishments or warnings for being an immoral person. This work will focus on the immorality that is within us all and attempt to show the loss that comes from being an immoral person, while simultaneously showing the rewards that come from being a moral person.

I will also show a reflection of reality in that doing the right thing is not always easy, and rarely is it the popular choice. Being upright means that there are consequences, there are struggles, and that there will be those looking to tear you down. My work will show that even though being a good person on paper is the ideal, executing it and living it is a far different sort of story.

I wish to tell a story that will embody the human experience in a fantastical way, to which my readers will be able to suspend their disbelief. I want to teach good morals. I want to create a breadth of emotion and wonderment. I want to tell a good story.

Chapter 2: Critical View of the Campbell's Monomythic Structure

Storytelling has been a part of the human tradition for as long as man could communicate with one another. Everyone has known someone to tell a story – everyone has told a story to someone else – stories range from something as seemingly mundane as retelling the events of someone's day to crafting a big-budget movie or television series that will reach a global audience. Storytelling is so ingrained within the human psyche that it is easy to take how many stories we hear for granted.

By the time we reach adulthood, we have heard, read, seen, or told so many stories that it would be an impossible task to compile everything. Each person has a wealth of experience in the field of storytelling such that we are each intrinsically able to tell what the differences between a "good" story and a "bad" story are. We each know, at some level, what we want to hear from a story and what we should expect from a story, depending on the genre. Multiple factors filter our understanding and temper our subconscious expectations.

Humans are storytelling machines. We have been since our conception. According to the Christian tradition, God spoke creation into existence. Within the first chapter of Genesis, the phrase "God said" is mentioned 11 times in the New International Version (NIV) in reference to creating things (Gen. 1:1-31). Beyond God creating by speaking, one of the first things we see man doing in the Genesis account is to name all the animals (Gen. 2:20). The Christian tradition begins with the power of spoken words.

Even if one does not adhere to Christian doctrine, Judeo-Christian values strongly influence Western Culture. It should be no surprise that the culture that springs from these influences holds to the traditional undercurrent of telling stories. Yet the desire to share stories goes beyond just Western thought. As author and scholar of global mythologies, Joseph

Campbell observed before his death in 1987, "Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind" (Campbell 1). In other words: storytelling is a human condition that is inescapable in our world. So long as there are humans, there are stories involved.

This revelation is no surprise. The number of stories and myths readily available from different cultures both in modern times and from antiquity proves Campbell's claims. The sorts of stories that reach prominence encompass the same themes and essentially the same characters. Campbell later notes that "the logic, the Heroes, and the deeds of myth survived into modern times" (Campbell 2). The reason Campbell makes these claims is due to the myth's ability to personify the troubles that mankind has and give them solutions (Campbell 14).

When we consider the word myth, most may look first toward the Greeks and their pantheon of gods, others perhaps to the Romans, and others perhaps to more ancient religious texts. It is important to note that every culture has its own origins and myths. Rome tells of Romulus and Remus being raised by wolves, Greece tells of how the world came to be from Chaos and bickering gods, and nearly every religious text has its version of a creation story.

While not many would take the authenticity and accuracy of these myths at face value, few would question their importance. Origins are what define us as a people. We know who we are because of where or what we came from. Beyond knowing who we are as individuals, cultural myths unite people that would otherwise have nothing in common with one another. The Romans knew they originated from survivors and conquerors. The Greeks knew that they were their own people and had it within themselves to overcome the gods.

Myths have not gone by the wayside. It can be popular for people to hear the word "myth" and have their minds race to the classic stories that were told long ago in ancient times. Nevertheless, myths are very much alive today; it is just that they are being told in different formats that an audience might be expecting.

Independent researcher Roberto Ranieri spent time investigating modern mythic stories. He argues that with the influx of technology: emails, cell phones, and social media, that storytelling could be understood as going away. Ranieri points out that with technology, we "no longer act like nest new-born baby birds looking up to the heavens" (Ranieri 24). We have power with technology, so it stands to reason that we no longer need myths, right?

Ranieri disagrees with the claim and posits that despite our new technology, we are just telling different sorts of stories. He argues that dystopian pictures where science and technology have gone too far are the "modern equivalent to Greek myths" (Ranieri 26). Ranieri further argues his point by claiming that different interpretations of characters, such as Icarus flying too close to the sun and having his wax wings melt, are the same sort of allegory that modern audiences interpret as people going too far and being unethical with technology. Ranieri concludes his comparison between ancient myth and modern myth as serving the same function – that is, "to inspire debate about the perils of human hubris, and the philosophical, moral and ethical concerns surrounding human progress" (Ranieri 27). In other words, their function remains unchanged, even if the mode or model of storytelling might appear different than what was written in the past.

No matter where one goes in location or in time, there are always stories that encompass these elements at various scales. The power of these myths is not something to be ignored. Beyond just the connecting threads of origin and national or cultural commonality, these themes

within myths transcend beyond that into a structure that can and does connect all people to one another.

Joseph Campbell called connecting thread that every story has with one another the Monomyth. Within the Monomyth are all the ideas that go along with a story's central figure. In Campbell's words, these threads, regardless of being "presented in the vast, almost oceanic images of the Orient, in the vigorous narratives of the Greeks, or in the majestic legends of the Bible, the adventure of the Hero normally follows the set pattern: a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (Campbell 27-28). In other words, these common threads all tell the same sort of story that everyone wants to hear and has heard before: The Hero's Journey.

While most know of the Hero's Journey at an intrinsic level, knowing the steps of the Journey benefits its readers greatly. Campbell breaks down the Hero's Journey into three major acts each with six subheadings within them. The first act of this journey deals with the "Separation or Departure," the second act deals with the "Trials and Victories of the initiation," and the final act covers the "Return and Reintegration with society" (Campbell 28-29).

Campbell expands upon each act with the six subheadings, which provide a further travel itinerary for the Hero's Journey. Within Act I, the stages are the following: "Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Supernatural Aid, The Crossing of the First Threshold, and The Belly of the Whale" (Campbell 28). Each of these headings further propels the idea of a separation and eventual departure. The Hero is called to an adventure by some starting catalyst. They traditionally refuse the call before receiving a helping hand from someone or something unexpected. This aid helps the Hero overcome their immediate problem before they are finally

taken further in their adventure by some means of transportation – hence the allusion to Jonah and the Whale from the Bible.

Within Act II, the six subheadings are the following: "The Road of Trials, Meeting with the Goddess, Woman as the Temptress, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, and The Ultimate Boon" (Campbell 28-29). Act II focuses on the rising action and the climax of the story. The Hero faces multiple trials that they are expected to overcome before being accepted within this new world that they find themselves in. While this section mainly focuses on the trials that the Hero faces, such as being tempted in both a physical manner through the Road of Trials and a spiritual manner in the Woman as Temptress, there are also moments of peace and rest within them – namely from receiving their boon at the end as well as finding their resolution to become the Hero they have set out to become – albeit from a somewhat rocky start in Act I.

Act III is the conclusion of the story and serves as the traditional falling action to storytelling. Act III follows the same trend of six subheadings for the story's conclusion: "Refusal of the Return, The Magic Flight, Rescue from Without, The Crossing of the Return Threshold, Master of the Two Worlds, and Freedom to Live" (Campbell 29). The Hero overcomes and finds themselves comfortable in their new environment before and does not initially want to return to where they came from. Eventually they do return through the magic flight – which Campbell references as an "escape of Prometheus" (Campbell 29), which is referring to the Greek myth where Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to man. The "rescue from without" refers to a call from the world that the Hero left to lead them to return – or as Campbell puts it, "The world may have to come to get him. For the bliss of the deep abode is not lightly abandoned in favor of the self-scattering of the wakened state" (Campbell 178). Upon the Hero's return, he has mastered himself and is allowed the freedom to live as he pleases.

Now that the roadmap of the journey is laid out, it is important to know what sort of characters will be found along the way. Seven different archetypes fill this journey: Hero, Mentor, Threshold Guardian, Herald, Shadow, Trickster, and Shapeshifter. While there are seven archetypes, it does not necessarily mean that each archetype needs to be represented in seven different characters. It is entirely possible that a Trickster character could also fill the role of a Mentor, for example. The archetypes are in the story to propel the Hero further along his journey in specific ways. Not every archetype is necessarily required in each story that follows this structure, but their presence helps to facilitate the journey.

The Hero is the main character of the story; they are the protagonist that is a self-sacrificing individual and puts the needs of others above themselves. They are generally the most dynamic characters since they are flawed and undergo transformations throughout the story to become the best versions of themselves (University Libraries 2022).

The Mentor, as an archetype, traditionally trains or teaches the Hero and acts as a guardian. Their whole purpose is to motivate the Hero to overcome their fears of the upcoming journey and give them the tools that are required for the Hero to succeed (University Libraries 2022).

The Threshold Guardian is often the first real obstacle that the Hero faces. The guardian's purpose as a character is to serve as the bulwark to keep out the unworthy. The Hero must overcome them – or in some cases, become their allies – and test the Hero's commitment to the journey as a whole (University Libraries 2022).

The Herald serves as either a character or an item which announces things to come. They are often minor characters but work to be the reason the Hero is motivated into their action (University Libraries 2022).

The Shadow is not necessarily one individual character but is instead the overarching antagonistic force within the story. While the Shadow can be a character, they are not always so. The Shadow can range from a typical 'bad guy' to an encroaching plague that will wipe out life as the Hero knows it. The Shadow represents the conflict of the story with the Hero, and their primary purpose within the story is to show the Hero in the best possible light (University Libraries 2022).

The Trickster is usually one of the most complex characters within the story outside of the Hero. The Trickster is often a chaotic force that only wants things to change. They are similar to a court jester, where they often mock the Hero and point out all the wrongs with them. The Trickster character also serves as comic relief at times, but they are usually the influence that causes a beneficial change to the Hero throughout his journey (University Libraries 2022).

Lastly, the Shapeshifter is the near opposite of the Trickster archetype. They are unstable, usually the opposite sex of the Hero, and lead the Hero into darker paths. Their primary function is to help the Hero overcome obstacles by misleading the Hero when giving them reason to doubt the path they are on (University Libraries 2022).

Building on Campbell's work, Christopher Vogler, a Hollywood executive most known for his work with Disney with his screenwriter's guide *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* in 1989, detailed how to adapt Campbell's work into a more familiar structure with some omissions to the journey and one inclusion to the archetype.

In a memo that Vogler wrote, he praises Campbell and claims that "Campbell's contribution was to gather the ideas together, recognize them, articulate them, and name them. He exposed the pattern for the first time" (Vogler 3). Vogler later claims to take a few liberties

with Campbell's original outline to where a more modern audience can appreciate it and writers can keep to a simpler roadmap:

"The Hero is introduced in his ORDINARY WORLD where he receives the CALL TO ADVENTURE. He is RELUCTANT at first to CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD where he eventually encounters TESTS, ALLIES and ENEMIES. He reaches the INNERMOST CAVE where he endures the SUPREME ORDEAL. He SEIZES THE SWORD or the treasure and is pursued on the ROAD BACK to his world. He is RESSURECTED and transformed by his experience. He RETURNS to his ordinary world with a treasure, boon, or ELIXIR to benefit his world" (Vogler 7).

With Vogler's addendum to Campbell's work, he also included a new archetype called Allies – these fit the bill of the "sidekicks, buddies, girlfriends who advise the Hero through the transitions of life" (Jones 2017).

Vogler has worked with Disney producing many successes in their animation department such as *The Lion King* (1994), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), and *Hercules* (1997). His method has been proven successful for multiple movies that drew in universal praise from audiences of all ages. Vogler took the truth of Campbell's work and transformed it into a more modern and accessible format for nearly any writer to adapt to.

The more accessible a product is, the larger the audience it will draw. People are already drawn toward stories that are timeless, and with the Hero's Journey, writers are presented with a format to create a timeless story. The Hero's Journey is not some trend that existed; it is still a trend that continues to provide many of the culture's most modern successes.

Worlds such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the galaxy far, far away in *Star Wars*, and the wizarding world of *Harry Potter* are household stories that encompass a modern mythos. These

stories are the modern personification of Greek myths of Jason and the Argonauts or how Aeneas went through Hell to found Rome. While not everyone may have seen the movies or read the books, they know the stories to a degree. The Hero's Journey is very much alive and well in the current zeitgeist.

Fantasy used to be a subsection of literature classified as "weird fiction" because audiences were likely more interested in reflecting realism. Though as author and scholar Ken Gelder of the University of Melbourne states, "something happened to the fantasy genre in the mid-1950s that enabled it to make the shift from a marginal literary genre to a creative source for some of the largest entertainment media franchises in the world" (Gelder 16). That change is the publication of the *Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien.

Tolkien wrote what is arguably the basis of every modern-day fantasy that comes into being. His ideas continue to influence generations and will likely keep his readers' imaginations for a long time to come. Though where did Tolkien draw his ideas from within the *Lord of the Rings*?

Tom Shippey, a Tolkien scholar, wrote in his book *The Road to Middle-Earth* about Tolkien's influences both in the narrative sense as well as his own personal life. It should come as no surprise that the great author of Tolkien's caliber was influenced by great authors that came before him. Shippey writes at length about the influence Tolkien received from the original writer of *Beowulf* and how he managed to marry pagan tradition with the influence of Christianity without harming either of the works. Instead of having these two polarizing traditions fight with one another, they complimented one another (Shippey 20). Tolkien was aware of the benefit of taking mythic structures from other sources and drawing from the idea of

the Monomyth. It is one thing for Tolkien to follow the outlines of the Monomyth, but what of others that are held to a similar caliber as him?

George Lucas was cited for having been influenced by Campbell's work when writing *Star Wars* and actually became friends with and was mentored by Campbell later in his life (Deyneka 1). While Lucas might not be as widely regarded as Tolkien, there is no doubt that *Star Wars* has created a significant cultural impact on the world today. Ever since the movies came to the big screen in 1977, it has been a critical success that created multiple original movies that came out to theaters along with subscription shows still being produced today within the *Star Wars* universe, such as *The Mandalorian* and *Obi-Wan Kenobi*.

J.K. Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter* series, is similarly influenced by Campbell. Although Rowling was not directly influenced by Campbell, as Lucas may have been, she has dropped hints in several interviews about what sort of literature influenced her in creating the *Harry Potter* story. According to literary critics Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, Rowling's novels "appropriated *Star Wars*" (Mireia 1) which led to their critical success. While critics may argue that Rowling took influence from *Star Wars*, the same could be said of any other author. As mentioned previously, Tolkien was influenced by *Beowulf* before, and Lucas was influenced by Campbell – who wrote about the interconnection of all stories via the Monomyth.

While it is one thing to say that these three legendary authors have had influence by the Monomyth in some way, it is not too uncharacteristic of authors to be influenced by writers and stories that came before them. The question remains to see if each of these authors follows Campbell's outline for the Hero's Journey as well as represents the archetypes within them to fulfill the requirements of propelling the Hero along his journey. Do the likes of *Lord of the*

Rings, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter* follow the templates laid out by Campbell's research, or do they deviate significantly?

In order to test if the Hero's Journey is followed according to Vogler's template, we can observe the first three movies in their respective releases. We will compare all three of the first movies: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *A New Hope* (1977), and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001), and look at them through the lens of the Hero's Journey. While not expecting every movie to have the same pace or have the same delivery to one another, they should each at least fit comfortably within the framework provided. The Hero in each of these journeys will be Frodo Baggins, Luke Skywalker, and Harry Potter from the respective works.

The Ordinary World

Each film starts by showing the ordinary world for each of the series' protagonists. The world is not new; it is not something that the Hero has been thrust into – it is something they have been living in their whole lives. The Hero may be satisfied or dissatisfied with their ordinary world, provided it exists long enough to establish the foundations of normalcy in which the characters exist.

Frodo Baggins is found in the Shire, where everything is peaceful and restful. Everyone knows who Frodo is, Frodo knows everyone, and he is happy being a Hobbit. Frodo living like this is not initially equipped with what he needs on his journey.

Luke Skywalker is a moisture farmer on the desert planet Tatooine. Luke has been living on Tatooine his whole life and is dissatisfied with how he lives on a backwater planet. While Luke is gifted in the Force, his upbringing has given him different motivations in life, where he wants to join the Empire just to leave home.

Harry Potter is an unwanted child. His aunt and uncle force him to live in a cupboard; he is miserable, unhappy, and likely depressed. His world is dark and dreary, and he feels trapped within it. Because of his dreary outlook on life, Harry has little to no confidence in himself and what he is capable of.

Call to Adventure

The call to adventure is a simple thing. It does not need to be something spectacular; it can be as easy as someone making a request of the Hero. As long as the Hero is called in a very real and physical way to go on their adventure, they will meet the criteria for the call.

Frodo is given the One Ring by Bilbo Baggins and Gandalf the Grey tells Frodo to keep it secret and safe. After having been entrusted the ring to Frodo for a time, Gandalf returns and calls Frodo to leave the Shire. Frodo is frightened by this ring and wants nothing to do with it, as it represents something far greater than he has ever known.

Luke stumbles into his call to adventure by buying R2-D2 which has a message from Princess Leia asking for help. R2-D2 runs away to find Ben Kenobi – who the message is originally for. Kenobi saves Luke from Sand People and calls Luke to come with him off Tatooine. Whenever Luke is saved by Kenobi, he sees the Jedi for what he is, and this inspires Luke to eventually become a Jedi himself.

Harry's call to adventure is a magical one where owls constantly come by his home and drop off invitations to go to Hogwarts. Harry's adoptive guardians try to hide this message from him, but Harry does find out and desires to become a wizard.

Refusal of the Call

Refusing the call to adventure is the moment where there is doubt about the Hero involving their capacity to fulfilling the call. Traditionally, this is done by the Hero themselves

and shows self-doubt while representing the trepidation that anyone would feel if they were called on an adventure. Though it is not always the case where the Hero themselves refuses the call, which is the case with Harry Potter.

Frodo refuses his call to adventure because he believes that a Hobbit is not worthy of bearing such a great responsibility. Frodo is unique in this list because he refuses the call multiple times by trying to pass off the responsibility of the ring to Gandalf, Galadriel, and Aragorn, respectively (Script Lab 2022). Frodo's character strengthens as the journey continues, though, as this refusal out of fear becomes a strong ability to carry the One Ring and destroy it.

Luke refuses the call from Kenobi by saying he cannot leave his responsibilities to his aunt and uncle to go on his adventure. Luke offers to take Kenobi to a spaceport and intends to continue his life on Tatooine. Despite Luke's refusal, this shows his true character, as someone that does not ignore his responsibilities. Luke is willing to sacrifice adventure in favor of duty.

Harry never refuses his call; in fact, Harry wants to go to Hogwarts and leave his ordinary life behind. The refusal is seen with the Dursleys instead, where they go through great lengths to hide the invitations that come flooding in. It is not until Hagrid arrives at Harry's doorstep to take him to Hogwarts (Shmoop 2022). Harry is presented with obstacles that he cannot overcome on his own. This shows Harry as a humble figure who does not have all the answers immediately.

Meeting the Mentor

The meeting of the Mentor traditionally comes after the refusal of the call; however, it is not required to come at this point. When meeting their Mentor(s), the Hero may not consider them a Mentor until after crossing the threshold into their unknown world.

Frodo has met Gandalf before the beginning of this story. They are friendly toward each other, and while Frodo knows Gandalf to be a wise man, he does not acknowledge him as a Mentor-like figure until after he refuses the call to adventure. As the Journey progresses, Frodo comes to find Gandalf as a mentor and dear friend, that he openly weeps to see Gandalf fall when fighting the Balrog later.

Luke knew of Ben Kenobi before as an odd old hermit. Kenobi saved Luke from Sand People, but he was not considered a Mentor-like figure until Luke crossed his threshold and reconnected with Kenobi later. Luke's paradigm shift on Kenobi gives him the perspective to know to not judge everyone he meets at face value. This is likely how Luke can view Darth Vader at the end of the trilogy as having some good in him.

Harry has a few Mentors within the series, but the first one that he encounters is Hagrid. Hagrid arrives at the traditional time one would expect a Mentor to reveal themselves within the Hero's Journey. Hagrid is the traditional guide and Mentor to Harry by bringing Harry to the locations where he needs to be to continue with his journey. Through this mentorship, Harry becomes fast friends with Hagrid, and trusts him dearly to provide succor throughout the series.

Crossing the Threshold

Crossing the Threshold is the moment within the journey where the Hero leaves behind what they are familiar with and heads into the unknown. While myth may have the Hero leaving the mortal plane and entering the realm of the gods, not every threshold needs to be as magnificent as that.

For Frodo, crossing the threshold is simply him leaving the boundaries of the Shire. Frodo does not leave the world, he does not go into some unexplored region that people have never heard of before; and instead, he crosses his people's property line and, in a sense, enters an

unknown world. Frodo's afraid and not entirely trusting of everyone he meets along the way. It is this caution that begins to define Frodo when it comes to who he can trust or not within the Fellowship later.

Luke crosses his threshold after returning to his aunt and uncle's farm to find that they have been killed while he is away. Luke has no reason to stay behind on Tatooine anymore and thus returns to Kenobi to agree to the call of adventure that was put before him. Luke's crossing the threshold also shows him the evils of the Empire, and how he is doing the right thing by not joining them as he originally intended.

Harry crosses his threshold when he enters Diagon Alley with his Mentor. Harry is shown shops that sell various magic accoutrements to equip him for his journey. Harry gets his wand and pet owl – Hedwig. With these magical goods and a familiar to guide him, Harry begins to feel as if he belongs in this new world he stepped into, and that begins the process of him coming out of his shell.

Tests, Allies, and Enemies

The Tests, Allies, and Enemies show the Hero the rules of the new world they have entered, present them with allies to help them along the way, and enemies to impede their progress. This section of the journey serves as a foundation building for the story as well as provides the next step for the Hero to take.

For Frodo, he is tested with reaching Bree to meet up with Gandalf. On the way, Frodo encounters enemies in the form of the Ring Wraiths, which he barely escapes from. Frodo is finally met with a new ally with Aragorn. Aragorn proves himself to the Hero by assisting with further escape from the Ring Wraiths and leading him to his next destination of Rivendell to

form the Fellowship of the Ring. Being tested by the wraiths concentrates Frodo's fears into something tangible. His worries shift away from the unknown and into the known.

Luke, with the help of Kenobi, hires their new allies, Han Solo and Chewbacca, to transport them from Tatooine. Luke begins training with Kenobi to learn the ways of the Force and broaden his mind to the universe. While no enemies are directly established at this point, the Empire is the enemy that Luke needs to contend with due to his objective to save Princess Leia. Through this knowledge, Luke also begins to see the greater picture of good and evil – or Light and Dark – that is the motivation of powerful people within the galaxy.

After Harry is equipped with the tools he needs to be a proper wizard, he is dropped off at Hogwarts into the deep end. He is met with allies such as Ron and Hermione, he is met with enemies in the form of a rival in Malfoy, and he is introduced to the great evil of the world, Voldemort. Despite being thrown into what he is unfamiliar with, Harry shows and proves to himself that he is far more capable than what he first believed about himself at the beginning of the story.

The Approach

The Approach is whenever the Hero and his allies come up with a plan to take on the main conflict of the story. This is accompanied by various setbacks, trials, and tribulations that lead to a loss, but not total defeat of the Hero (Script Lab 2019).

Frodo and the Fellowship are trying to pass through Moria when the eyes of Sauron find them. The Fellowship is forced into the Mines of Moria which house a great many dangers. Through these dangers, Frodo and the Fellowship are pushed to the brink, fleeing as they fight. Frodo recognizes that even with all the power of the Fellowship, they cannot stand alone against the great evil after the One Ring.

Luke is on his way to Alderaan to warn Princess Leia's father of the plans for the Death Star when the Death Star arrives, blows up Alderaan, and then catches the Millennium Falcon in a tractor beam, drawing them into the nest of the Empire. Despite Luke's newfound allies and training with the Force, he is still caught in many traps along the way. Luke learns that even with his new strength, his enemy is stronger still.

Harry Potter is trying to solve the mystery of the Philosopher's Stone and needs to go through various trials – overcoming the Cerberus, playing a life-threatening game of Chess, and a chamber full of strangling plants. Harry uses his newfound reliance on his friends to see things through to the end. If he never understood he needed help from the beginning with Hagrid, then Harry might have never overcome these trials.

The Ordeal

The Ordeal is when things go from bad to worse in the Approach. The Hero's life is threatened significantly in the process, and loss is felt along the way.

The Fellowship gets the attention of the orcs in Moria as well as the Balrog that sleeps beneath. They need to fight while running from the overwhelming forces, and Gandalf ultimately (at least according to the Fellowship) sacrifices himself while defeating the Balrog to allow the Fellowship to escape. Frodo loses his friend and mentor. He is devastated, but thanks to his strength of character which had been building up to this point, Frodo manages to continue with the mission.

Luke and his companions split up in the Death Star, one group to save Princess Leia, and Kenobi goes off to turn off the tractor beam to allow them to escape. Luke's team makes a daring rescue when they see Kenobi dueling Darth Vader – Vader then kills Kenobi, and the crew manages to escape from the Death Star. Luke sees his mentor die and is crushed by the weight of

it. However, Luke remembers what he was taught, and that his true objective is fulfilling his duty, so he presses onward.

Harry has to face the incarnation of Voldemort alone, where he has both a physical and moral confrontation with him. Harry does eventually defeat this version of Voldemort with the magic McGuffin his mother left him before she died. Even at the very end of Harry's major struggle, he still sees that he is not powerful enough just yet to defeat Voldemort. Harry, the hero, remains humble despite being the victor, because he knows he would not have survived without assistance.

The Reward

The Reward plays out as the Hero retrieving some critical information or a physical item (sometimes both) that will assist them in defeating the main conflict of their journey. This reward comes from surviving the Ordeal.

After escaping from the mines of Moria, Frodo receives the knowledge of how to destroy the Ring of Power as well as gains the knowledge that he will be betrayed by one of the Fellowship. While the latter is not entirely a reward for Frodo, it does prepare him for what is to come. Frodo endures and manages to steel himself for his next leg of the journey.

Luke returns with Princess Leia with the plans for the Death Star. He gains the knowledge of the one fatal flaw for the weapon which can defeat the Empire. With this knowledge in hand, Luke decides to see his mission through to the end. He knows that the Empire's evil will not cease if he does not play his part in ending it.

Harry removes Voldemort from the physical world and keeps the Sorcerer's Stone safe. And while Harry knows that Voldemort is not gone forever, he knows that he has allies and

friends which will help him manage to thwart the great evil should it rear its nose-less face once more.

The Road Back

This part of the journey is where the end is in sight for the Hero, and they are very close, but there is one last obstacle facing them from the evil force that the Hero must overcome. It is at times the most dangerous challenge the Hero has faced yet.

Saruman creates orcs to hunt down and kill the Fellowship. The Fellowship is ambushed, and Frodo is also betrayed by Boromir. Boromir ultimately loses his life, and Frodo escapes from the ambush but is initially left alone. This is the first time Frodo is isolated without anyone around to support him, and despite the weight of everything on his shoulders, Frodo, who is “just a hobbit” according to himself, is prepared to walk by himself to destroy the One Ring if he has to.

Luke and crew are heading to the Rebellion base when TIE-fighters ambush them. They defend themselves but realize they are racing against time and the Empire is hot on their heels. Luke pushes through the pain of losing Kenobi and resolves to defend himself and those he is closest to. He opens fire on the Empire, the people that he originally wanted to join at the beginning of his journey.

Harry is conveniently unconscious on the road back. Though it can be assumed that not much happens since the evil of Voldemort has already been thwarted at this point. Despite not being awake for this moment, the fact that Harry is exhausted shows that even though he is a hero, Harry still has his limitations.

The Resurrection

The Resurrection is the climax of the story where the Hero is prepared for the final evil and uses everything they have learned to defeat it. While this is not always an ultimate defeat for the evil of the story – as each of these examples prove in later sequels – it is a solid enough defeat to where the Hero feels accomplished in their objective.

Frodo realizes that he must travel to Mordor alone and that he cannot trust the Fellowship to not be tempted by the One Ring. Frodo's resolve here is stronger than it has ever been before. It is resolve that Frodo felt he never had. Frodo was unwilling to leave the Shire and yet he stands ready and alone to face the threat head-on if he must.

Luke uses the Force to destroy the Death Star while his friends and allies protect him from Darth Vader. Luke proves himself to be resolved in his mission to stop not just the Empire, but the dark side of the Force as well. Luke came from being a lowly moisture farmer on Tatooine and becomes a champion for the light side of the Force with one powerful shot heard around the galaxy.

Harry takes a figurative resurrection moment when he awakens from his sleep after confronting the evil of Voldemort. He "returns from the dead," so to speak (Shmoop 2022). Harry wakes up surrounded by his allies and friends. He was the young boy that felt alone and isolated, but through his journey, he has gained more than he has ever had before in these personal connections he was desperate for.

The Return

The Return is where the Hero brings back their experiences to the regular world where they came from and are generally allowed to live their happily ever after – assuming that they are not trapped in a trilogy or series!

Frodo and Sam reunite just as Frodo is trying to leave on his own. While the two do not return to the Shire, they do return to their original adventuring roots with just the two of them. They are equipped with the knowledge needed to press on. This is a return to the humble beginnings Frodo started with when leaving the Shire. Just a few hobbits on the road, but they are more wizened than they could have ever imagined when the journey first began.

Luke and Han Solo return to the Rebel's base and are awarded for their triumphs. There is peace in the galaxy until the next movie. Luke has transformed from a nobody on a desert planet, and is now seen as a beacon of hope for a galaxy oppressed by the Galactic Empire.

Harry returns the world to the state that it should have been in – one without Voldemort's presence. Though armed with the knowledge of Voldemort's inevitable return, the Hero is prepared for more confrontation in the future. And while Harry needs to return to his adoptive guardians, he returns with the knowledge that he has true friends waiting for him back at Hogwarts next school year.

Criticisms of the Hero's Journey

Each of these stories fits neatly within the mold of the Hero's Journey, and while there is a variance to them in certain elements, they each are decidedly a part of Vogler's template that he laid out in his memo to Disney. There is no question that these three franchises are a part of the culture at large, traversing multiple movies, games, live stage performances, and even Halloween costumes.

Yet, despite the popularity of Campbell's work in recognizing the Hero's Journey, there are many critics of his claims. Among these criticisms are suggestions that the Hero's Journey supports authoritarianism, forces traditional gender norms, and does not represent minorities in a good light. Critics believe that due to these major issues, the Hero's Journey is something that

needs to be either completely forgotten or further adapted, as Vogler did with Campbell's original interpretation of the Monomyth.

The Hero is an authoritarian figure, according to Bond and Christensen and their critique of Campbell. They claim that Campbell's "Hero is ruggedly individual; it uses weaker people as instruments; and it has no room for collective action, for families, for bodies that fail to conform: the aged, the disabled, the sick" (para 20). The interpretation of Campbell's Hero being an authoritarian figure bleeds over into modern works of fiction, such as within the video game industry. Stephanie C Jennings of Michigan State University claims that the Hero's Journey "nourishes authoritarian sensibilities" by "highlighting the parallel authoritarian agencies of Heroic gameplay and harassment campaigns" (Jennings 320).

Not only does Jennings believe that the Hero's Journey leads toward authoritarian tendencies, but she also further argues that Heroes should not exist. Jennings agrees that storytelling is a teaching mechanism but claims that the concept of Heroism should not be taught because it puts into the minds of the consumers of the story that they must also become Heroic saviors of whatever situation they are in (Jennings 333).

While a generous assumption can be made that Jennings is only explaining an extreme example of individuals that may feel this way when engaging with the Monomyth, her approach ignores the self-sacrificing that is regularly seen within the Hero's Journey. Jennings appeals toward only one aspect of the Heroic figure and concludes that they must necessarily be an authoritarian figure. Just within the three stories mentioned, the Hero was self-sacrificial and took the assistance of his allies multiple times without it feeling contrived or forced into the theme of the Hero's Journey.

While not every critic argues that Campbell's monomythic structure is creating the next authoritarian figure, writers such as Paul Anthony Thomas claims that Campbell's work is "naïve" and that we as a culture have "moved past the universalism espoused" by Campbell (Thomas 1095). Critics such as Thomas do not outright dismiss the idea of the Hero's Journey; they feel that it needs to be updated to no longer offend queer and feminist writers that "argue that it [the monomyth] reproduces the heteronormative understandings of Heroic gender and sexuality" (Thomas 1095). In other words, the Hero's Journey is a fine structure but must be modernized to create something more inclusive for the modern audience.

Thomas also suggests that those who write the Hero's Journey are going to produce a "male action Hero who saves a stereotypical damsel-in-distress" (Thomas 1108). While some authors have recognized this assumed folly of the Monomyth and have written female leads, Thomas posits that these female characters are often "phallic women" or are characters that look like women on the outside, often act like men, and have the traits traditionally given to men: masculinity, physical strength, and lack of emotions (Thomas 1108). Instead of trying to write a traditionally male or traditionally female character to fit within the role of the Hero's Journey, Thomas says that the best way to is to move beyond gender norms and expectations by creating a Hero that is "neither a man nor conforms to the expectations of a heterosexist worldview" (Thomas 1112).

While Thomas appears to have good intentions for Campbell's work – his conclusion states that he is able to expand and adapt the Monomyth to his understanding of modern sensibilities (Thomas 1112) – his argument is flawed in some ways. Thomas does not go against the grain of the monomythic structure, only finding disagreements with the storytelling method produced. Thomas wrongly posits that writers need to circumvent the structure laid out by

Campbell in order to use the template properly in the modern setting. And though Thomas' intentions are well-meaning, he does not seem to be presenting writers in the best possible light by suggesting that if they follow the Hero's Journey that they are necessarily going to write themselves into an action Hero. Nor does Thomas seem to understand what the Monomyth is intended for – that is, to tell a story that is universal and appreciated by society.

By focusing on aspects such as sexuality and gender normativity, the whole point of the Monomyth is lost. One can easily agree with Thomas and other critical reviewers' desire to shape the monomythic structure as Vogler did with Campbell, but their approach is largely different. Vogler streamlined the work of Campbell into an easier-to-digest format for writers, while modern critics are trying to break away from concepts such as Heroism and what a Heroic figure is entirely. They are trying to fill the void left behind and are creating something similar to the Monomyth, but only in appearance.

Lastly, there is an increased focus on race and our interpretation of it through the lens of fantasy. This focus is likely due to the current idea of identarian thought when approaching literature. Identarianism indulges in the idea that one's race or ethnicity should be encouraged and be a major focus within modern media – especially storytelling. When viewing the world through a lens of what someone's skin color looks like, we run into an issue with viewing orcs as an oppressed race since they are traditionally marginalized and hated for being evil. There is a push-back on modern fantasy tropes of seeing orcs as an "other" to show the evils of racism (Young 88). There is a current trend in fiction writing across all forms of the media to create a sympathetic villain in order to support a mindset that not all orcs are evil.

Nuance is a good thing to have in fiction, as is playing with an audience's expectation of things. Where critics such as Young argue that the inclusion of other creatures such as orcs,

which are evil, is a sign of racism based solely on the fact that orcs are considered different, they appear to be missing the broader point that orcs often are evil and do horrible things because their very nature is evil. The issue comes when looking at orcs as a race and not as a proper trope, or in Campbell's archetypes: the Shadow.

Critics are furthering themselves from the traditional character archetypes based on the idea that we have moved beyond the need for tradition. While there is something to be said for adapting and creating engaging works that keep a reader's interest and captivate their mind, there is a danger in removing too many critical pieces of the Monomyth and creating something lacking.

While one does not need to follow the Hero's Journey to create a story – as it is only one template of many different sorts – one should be aware of what their audience is expecting when they consume any form of media that has traditionally been a part of the monomythic structure. It is not the sole responsibility of academic criticism that creates a franchise, but the audience's relationship with it.

Taking what has been presented through Campbell's work of compiling the Monomyth, and Vogler's efforts into producing a practical template to follow for writers, we have seen that which is traditional has been and continues to be successful. I do not see any reason to deviate from that path. Despite what most critics say of the Hero's Journey, their critiques and reviews all still follow along with the template. It would appear that their complaints stem not from the path that the Hero is on, but that their focus is on leaving tradition behind for something new.

When looking at works from successful writers such as Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling, they all appreciate their history and those writers that came before them. I believe the best way to

write an engaging story is by knowing what came before and building on top of that. Instead of focusing on reinventing the wheel, one should instead make a wheel that works efficiently.

The Hero's Journey is not a fad or a template that people have only recently started to follow. It is something more profound than a structure to follow, and greater than something its critics say we can morph and shape into our own designs. Campbell put the structure down on paper and Vogler crafted the academic mind of Campbell into a more practical resource for writers. While this structure is free to make minor shifts and changes to better suit the narrative, the core component – the hero themselves – is a figure which captures the hearts and minds of those reading about them.

The hero is the central figure to the Hero's Journey and changing them to try to fit a niche out of a desire to evolve the storytelling structure is a disservice to the proven work that came before. The Hero's Journey is timeless and proven to be a strong structure that needs no changes in order to produce a story which is a commercial and critical success in the modern day. To argue otherwise, is to argue against the structure of myth and human history that has been passed down from civilization to civilization, across cultural divides, and in defiance of time.

Chapter 3: The Weight of the Sword

The Weight of the Sword

Written By:

Chase Moore

Prologue

I've lived in Hamlet for as long as I can remember. I'm told I wasn't born here but that I was moved when my father decided that a change of pace and scenery was needed. He took my brother and me out of River Meet and took residence in Hamlet. Despite not being born here, Hamlet is my life, and I haven't known anything other.

When we first arrived in Hamlet it was supposed to be nothing more than a brief stop for travelers moving through the King's Wood. My father was a successful tavern owner in River Meet – or so I was told – and providing weary journeymen and waggoneers a safe place to rest their heads for an evening, rather than risking life and limb in the unconquered forest, was a sound business practice.

From what I was told, the original plan with Hamlet was to mark the halfway point between River Meet and Fort Fredrick in order to cut a clear path through the King's Wood. This would cut the trip between the two locations down to two days instead of two weeks. Naturally, this was something my father and many other entrepreneurs jumped at the opportunity for.

Where my father would handle the tavern, others would see to a general goods store, a trading post, and a brewery – for what could be better than a local spirit? Though in order to brew, crops would be needed, and where crops were needed, so were farmers. Thus, a small hamlet was formed in an opening in the King's Wood.

This project would take years to complete. Digging out roots from ancient trees, carving paths through the woods and maintaining them was exhausting work. It was also high paying work. In fact, after the first year, River Meet decided that paying for it was not in their best interests. Fort Fredrick gave some grumblings about how a path through the King's Wood would

be a tactical blunder if the region was ever invaded – though that was an excuse for them the fort to not pitch in with the labor force or costs.

While River Meet and Fort Fredrick washed their hands of the venture, my father, as well as the others who had already invested much did not want to see their investments go to waste. With what fortunes they had, they poured from their own wallets to see things completed. They believed that if they could at least bridge the gap between – or make a large enough dent into the woods – then the task would not seem impossible and rekindle interest in the project once more. However, a small collection of men does not have the wealth, or the backing, of a King and his vaults. As funds ran low, so did the labor force. Eventually, facts had to be acknowledged. The road was never going to be finished and this small hamlet was never going to get a proper name.

Those with the sense and the means to left back to River Meet. Those that remained did so for various reasons: stubbornness, stupidity, and being desperately broke. There are few that have the means in life to start over once in a new location. There are fewer still that can start over twice. Thus, the small hamlet became Hamlet and roots were put down. The people made the best of a terrible situation of their own design, and where one can fault them for their poor decisions in investments, their entrepreneurial spirit remained strong.

It was with the first batch of King's Wood Spirits that was made where Brewmaster Bartholomew gave hope to Hamlet's survival. The taste was good enough for the people of River Meet to enjoy, and the limited quantity of the stock – gave taverns a reason to sell at a premium. Hamlet made its way into an industry that was strong enough to ward off the wood from reclaiming the land where it stood.

This was not a thriving survival, but it was enough to maintain hope in the people remaining in the isolated King's Wood. It was a living where Hamlet could remain within polite society.

Chapter 1: The King's Rest Tavern

The King's Rest Tavern, the sign read. It was a proud sign that came from one of the many felled trees of the King's Wood and fashioned from a skilled carpenter from River Meet. The design was eloquent with the picture of a bed and a crown resting atop it. A testament to the lofty origins of Hamlet. Yet like so many things in Hamlet, The King's Rest Tavern was never called by its proper name. It was just John's.

My father tried to fight for The King's Rest Tavern, but the locals wouldn't have any of it. The name was, admittedly, a mouthful, and given that the primary customers were all locals that just came for meals, they never indulged in the "rest" portion of the King's Rest. Eventually John just gave up trying to get people to use the name and accepted the fact that he was the proud owner of John's – much to the chagrin of the sign hanging over the door proclaiming the intended name.

John's was one of the nicer buildings in Hamlet. Built first in the failed business venture, it had the most time to become polished and pretty like a proper tavern in the woods would want to present itself. Two stories tall with a root cellar underneath. John's was built from the surrounding trees of the King's Wood.

I think the original idea was to leave the building nestled comfortably within the trees to give it an almost natural appearance, like The King's Rest Tavern simply grew within the King's Wood. It was a nice idea, though the industrious people of Hamlet had to make room for their

stores, homes, and farmlands. Despite all the lofty ideals and goals of my father with his King's Rest to stand strong and tall like a mighty oak, John's stood like a tree that people forgot to cut down in the middle of an open field of farmland.

Inside of John's was also particularly outlandish compared to the surroundings. Stepping inside was like moving out of Hamlet and into something a well-to-do merchant would like to spend his evening in. The tavern was made with this sort of clientele in mind, after all.

Upon entering the main entrance, one could immediately get a full view of both the first and second floors. Six wooden tables were scattered around the room in a loose pattern that was supposed to resemble the points of a crown. Around each table were chairs carved to be imitations of thrones. Each table was in clear view of the hearth and small stage designed for performances from the in-house bard which we never hired.

Against the far wall from the door was the bar. Nearly long enough to carry from one side of the building to the other, it acted as a buffer to prevent people from walking into the kitchen just out of view. Along the length of the bar were twelve stools to sit at, and between each of those stools was space for one man to stand if he preferred it. Situated against the wall were three shelves which had the intention of being filled with various spirits and alcohols both popular in River Meet and Fort Fredrick. If only we had the stock to line up. What we could offer was neatly compacted on the middle shelf, leaving the walls bare and boring.

If you took a left from the entrance, you would find a set of stairs leading up to the second floor. There was a wooden partition along the right side of the stairs that went to the top and curved to act as a pseudo wall to prevent drunk patrons from tripping and falling down into the lobby.

Against the wall of the second floor were the rooms that John's had to offer. Six in total. Two at each end acted as suites with feathered beds, private baths, and a few other furnishings a traveler would find nice: a desk for writing, a couch to lounge upon, and a closet to store their clothes or belongings in. Three of the rooms were much more practical. Four beds in each room, each in their own corner. A footlocker was at the base of each of the beds to store valuables in.

The last room was the public bath troughs. Upon request for a bath, hot water would be provided and carried up the stairs and poured into each of the wooden baths. There were four baths in total, each with their own privacy screen between them. Soap was provided at no additional charge.

Behind the bar was our kitchen and most used room in all of John's. While not the largest, I felt like it was the most equipped. Pots and pans hung from hooks nailed into the wall over the prep station. We had a large enough fire pit to cook from three pots at the same time, and we even had bricks imported from River Meet to make an oven out of. Along the side wall of the kitchen was the back exit that we were expected to use. As John liked to say, "Ain't nobody trying to see a server walk in through the front door like they own the place." The issue was, we did own the place.

Within the corner of the room was a trap door which led down to our root cellar. The cellar itself was filled with various grains, flour, fruits, and even salted cuts of meats hanging from the ceiling. I never much liked the cellar from what I was little. If there was ever a place for a ghost to hide in all of Hamlet, this cellar would be the place for it.

The King's Rest Tavern was a place suited for royalty. It was just too bad that the only guests that visited were the sort that spit on the ground, didn't wash their hands, and were fine with patches sewn into their clothes. They were a hard-working people of good morals and a

strong work ethic the likes of which royalty would never know. The King's Rest Tavern never knew how good it had it being called simply, John's.

Chapter 2: Five Pies

I slept in today. The sun was already in the sky and all of Hamlet was already moving. It was the norm for everyone to be awake and out in the fields before the sun crested over the treetops. It was hard labor to make sure the King's Wood did not reclaim its territory. Harder still was it for the industrious people of Hamlet to make their livings as well.

There was always a little guilt, not having to work in the fields or maintain the town. I knew everyone had their part to play, and mine was waiting at John's for customers that would never come. It was exhausting work, waiting. Where those good laborers working the fields expended all of their energy, I had to hold all of mine in doing nothing outside of regular chores that hardly made me sweat.

"Morning," I announced myself after slipping in through the back of John's. The kitchen counter was already lined with the ingredients I was expected to cook with. My father's not-so-subtle way of showing his disapproval of my sleeping habits.

"Thinking three pot pies and two apple." My father called out to me from the main room over the sound of his sweeping, "Should be enough tonight's crowd."

"Five?" I wondered under my breath before calling out, "Chicken or pork pot?"

"Pork," came the terse reply.

Five was an unusual number of pies to make. Given the size of our pie pans, two were enough to feed those that chose to come over in the evening along with ourselves and we would still have enough left over for lunch the next day. To add to that, we were having two apple pies

as dessert. I was curious, but I knew better than to ask my father too many questions after he's deemed me being late for my chores.

Despite the additional pies I had to make, I set about on the task like I would any other. This was a routine for me, as I have been in charge of meal prep for the last two years. Rolling out the dough, chopping the vegetables and pork and resisting the temptation of taking a bite out of one of the crisp red apples was all done within the hour. Though as I was about to light the oven and cookfire, I noticed something was amiss.

"We don't have enough wood to keep the fires going." I announced as I poked my head around the door of the kitchen into the main floor.

"Told your brother to get some wood three days ago. Lazy bastard put it off 'til today." John sighed out his frustration without even looking up from the clean bar he was meticulously wiping down with a rag. "You done in there though? How about go making sure he didn't fall asleep in the shade."

"Done with everything except for lighting the fire," I answered.

"Yeah? Well go fetch your brother with that wood. Can't seem to do nothing about delays today anyway."

I left out the back door without a word. John was in one of his moods again, and it wasn't all my fault this time. Some time and distance from each other would be the only thing to ease John's mood and make sure that mine wasn't going to be further soured.

Despite his not-so-subtle worry about the pies not being finished in time for the evening crowd, we had a few hours to spare before they absolutely needed to be baking. Besides, if John got impatient waiting, he could use what remaining firewood we had to start baking the pies himself.

It was a short walk down the dirt path from John's to come across Hamlet's general goods store. While merchants rarely frequented Hamlet, Otto was keen on taking lists – and advance payments from the people of Hamlet – and making the trip to River Meet to pick up the basic supplies needed to keep the small population going.

The building itself was a ramshackle thing with a thatch roof that was caving in slightly on itself. Beside it was a stable which was big enough to house about five horses, but Otto only had the two he used to pull his wagon. The rest of the space was reserved for visitors to pay a premium rent for housing their steeds. We didn't have visitors in Hamlet.

Behind both the store and stable was Hamlet's smithy, which was also run by Otto, though he did have an apprentice to see to Hamlet's smithing needs when he was out of town. From farming tools to shoes for donkeys, Otto did everything that we couldn't do ourselves.

I stepped into the store and began to look around idly. Its shelves were empty, for the most part. A few bags of salt, barreled apples, and something resembling taffy.

“Hello, Rose!” Otto greeted me with his regular smile. Otto was a strong man that didn't like to wear sleeves. He was the sort of person that liked to show off the muscles he earned from his trade. He was also still a bachelor. “What can I do for you?”

“Morning, Otto. I'm looking for Caleb, you didn't see him come by this way, did you?” I asked with a smile.

“Yeah, I saw him headed out toward the tree line this morning carrying that dull axe of yours.” Otto pointed vaguely toward the East. The gesture was enough for me to know where my brother went. “You should bring it by for sharpening soon, and I'll see that axe chopping trees over in one stroke!”

“Bring it up with John, Otto!” I chided with a grin. “We’re having pork pot and apple pie tonight, by the way. Spread the word!”

I was out the door before I could be dragged into further conversation. I liked Otto well enough as a person, but he had a sort of personality that made me want to avoid extended conversations with him. I think he was just lonely, but who wasn’t in Hamlet?

As I made my way through Hamlet, I was greeted with waves and passing ‘How do you do’s?’ from the men working the fields. We all knew each other in Hamlet, and everyone was always looking for a reason to gossip about something. The brief conversations we had geared around where I was headed and what sort of dinner would be waiting for them at John’s if they decided to come by.

I never once stuck around too long to get pulled into any lengthy conversation but at the same time I didn’t leave too early to be rude. There was an intricate social dance of a small hamlet that takes years to master. While I might have still been too young to wed, I will allow myself a little pride in saying I found the dance as natural as breathing.

Eventually I made my way to the edge of the woods on the Eastern side of Hamlet. There were attempts made a while back to carve through the King’s Wood to meet with Fort Fredrick. That, like many other things in Hamlet, led to failure, but from that failure stemmed the tradition of chopping in the fort’s direction whenever we needed.

Instead of making my way straight to where Caleb was, I decided to take one of my routine detours to gather some wild herbs that made their homes in the shade. I figured this would make time for my father to cool off, and in the off chance he didn’t start the pies too early, I’d be able to add a bit of extra flavor to them for dinner.

I also loved to walk in the woods. It made me feel at peace, and a bit closer connected to the nature I was surrounded by. For all the talk of the King's Wood and the dangers within such as how fairies that would steal away men to their magical domains to never be seen again, how orcs, goblins, and ogres made their homes out in the thickets, and that wicked witches lived in small huts where they made potions out of bad girl's and boy's bones I never once felt the motivation to stay away.

Even the more mundane sorts of dangers, such as the howling of wolves and barking of wild dogs that made up the chorus of the night always felt distant from me. Hamlet, despite its precarious place in the world, never felt in danger from these outside entities that lived in the King's Wood. On the contrary, I was admittedly thrilled by the thought of something happening to shake up the routine I found myself born into.

It would be exciting if a band of goblins tore out of the woods in the middle of the night and attacked. I could throw the heavy pots and pans from the second story windows of John's while the men stabbed and killed the tiny green invaders!

As I pictured the scene in my mind, my body reacted. I found rocks and sticks on the bed of the woods and began to throw them haphazardly at the tiny green men I saw in my mind's eye until they retreated into the distance.

I laughed and spun before dropping low to the ground in a crouch. My imagination shifted once more. After driving off the attack from Hamlet, I was volunteered to sneak into the woods and find their camp. I was the quietest in the whole town, after all, so it was a natural to be the one taking on this important task.

Pressing my back to a tree and peering around it slowly, I saw the camp of them. Barking and yipping in their black tongue. The goblins had no clue I was there and knew exactly where they were hiding. They thought they were safe but were only moments away from disaster.

While I was only on a mission of reconnaissance, I knew that an opportunity like this would never come again. I had to go against the orders and well wishes of Hamlet and take the goblins out where they stood, otherwise, Hamlet would never be safe again! Reaching into my apron – which I would have preferred to be a cloak, but imagination can only go so far – I pulled from the pouch my trump card: a sprig of mint.

Oh yes, I was not just gathering herbs for dinner, but for a magic trick I had learned from one of the Good Witches of the Woods. You see, goblins were deathly allergic to the smell of burning mint. All I had to do was get close enough to toss the bundle into the fire and the smoke would kill the tiny green monsters on the spot. Crouching as low as my legs would take me, I began the slow pace toward this imaginary fire before something caught my attention.

Thwack-thwack. The sound of someone chopping at wood with an axe. I had wandered closer to my brother than I thought during my ‘mission’ to stop the goblin threat. I frowned as reality dawned on me once more. The goblins and their campfire had all vanished.

Standing upright, I stuffed the mint back into my apron, smoothed out the front of my dress, and made sure my skirt was back in order. Taking a moment to fix my hair and retie my ponytail, I let the excitement that had welled up inside of me drift away and in its place came a flushed embarrassment. What if Caleb had seen me prancing around like a fool in the woods? What would I tell him? That I was fighting goblins with some mint to add a little bit of extra flavor for our dinner tonight?

I continued to chide myself as I walked upright and properly toward the sound of axe against wood. I was almost sixteen now. Weren't flights of fancy something for little girls? I had to face the reality of the situation. I wasn't some goblin slayer. I wasn't a hero in a story. I was just Rose, daughter of John from Hamlet. I was born into an inheritance of a tavern in the middle of the woods, and I had to bake five pies for dinner. Three pork pot, two apple.

Chapter 3: One Easy Swing

Caleb was busy at work cleaving into a felled tree and trying to make pieces small enough to carry back by hand. He had worked up a sweat and decided to divest himself of his shirt. I'm sure he had fantasies of his own about some wood nymph watching him from afar and falling in love.

"Caleb!" I called, trying not to startle him. Playing tricks on my brother when he had an axe in his hand didn't seem like the best choice.

"Rose? What're you doing out here?" Caleb asked without pausing in his work. "Pa come sent you to track me down?" He answered his own question as he swung the axe and embedded it in the side of the tree before turning to face me.

"You know how he gets," I answered with a sigh. "Always expecting miracles to happen from his beleaguered children. How're things?"

"Got the tree down." Caleb answered in short before taking a seat on the tree like it was a bench. It wasn't a mighty oak he decided to fell. I imagine the beech was only about two decades old given the size and girth of it.

"Took you all day to knock down that thing?" I questioned.

"Yeah? Might've got distracted." Caleb countered.

“By someone’s skirt, I bet.” I teased, but Caleb’s reaction showed I hit the mark. He folded his arms defensively across his chest before looking off to the side. I’m sure he was blushing as well, but his face might have been red from all the exertion it took to fell his tree.

“My poor brother! Too distracted by a girl trying to steal him away from me,” I leaned into my teasing by draping my forearm dramatically across my brow. “And instead, he leaves me alone with our angry father with no wood to light our home.”

“Oh, shut up, Rose!” Caleb protested as he stood up and wrenched his axe free from the tree. “Should put you on that damn stage we got inside one of these nights. Got enough actin’ in you for a whole troupe.” Without another word, he began to start cleaving into the tree once more to continue breaking it down.

I took this as a sign to let the conversation drop. Though I did begin to wonder which fine lady caught my brother’s eye. Pacing around and pretending to be some sort of inspector, I looked for clues or hints that could give my brother’s secret romance away.

Caleb’s shirt lay on the ground not too far from where he stood – and that was about all the things that seemed to stand out to me. Whoever this mystery girl was, she was either very good at cleaning up after herself, or they met somewhere else. Regardless of the answer, I did not think I was going to find anything else.

Deciding to halt my investigation for now, I moved to sit on the far end of the tree that Caleb was chopping. As much as I trusted him, I thought it better to be extra cautious of a swinging axe.

“How much longer is this going to take?” I asked with a hearty pat to the tree I was perched on.

“How long you going to keep interrupting me?” Caleb quipped back with another heavy swing into the tree.

“Just wondering if I’m going to have to tell pa he’s got no firewood for tonight.” I retorted before hopping up from my spot and moved a little closer to Caleb.

“Probably going to have to go the whole winter without fire at this rate.” Caleb huffed out as stopped and turned to face me once more.

Caleb, for his part, did look a bit winded from all the work. I could tell that he had been rushing to get his job done before I showed up. I do not think he wanted to show it, but he was tired. My brother almost seemed relieved that I was distracting him as it gave him the opportunity to rest his arms. It was during this latest break that Caleb was taking that I got an idea.

“Give me the axe.” I ordered.

“What? Why?” Caleb asked.

“We’ll share the load.” I bargained.

“Like hell we will! What’s pa going to say when he finds out you chopped off your arm swinging the axe around like a fool?” Caleb planted his axe in the side of the tree yet again.

I looked around my brother to see the sections he had cut through already. I figured if we broke them down on the chopping block, we’d have more than enough to last us through the night.

“Well instead of chopping through the tree, let me start breaking things down? Just one easy swing to get through that part, right?” My suggestion seemed to appease Caleb, or at least seem sensible enough for him to consider. Turning toward the stump of the tree, he gave a vague gesture toward it.

“Alright, how about you put a section up on the chopping block first?” Caleb seemed to be testing me. I did not know what sort of test he was giving, but something about the inflection in his voice seemed a little judgmental to me.

Despite his tone, I set to work eagerly. The closest section of wood next to the stump was the obvious choice, so I wrapped my arms around the piece and lifted. It was heavier than I thought. I strained a little to get it off the ground. Though with some maneuvering I managed to get the piece into place.

As soon as I stood upright, Caleb was beside me and was offering the axe toward me with the knob and haft angled my way for an easier grip.

“Careful now,” Caleb instructed as I took the tool in my hands. “Make sure the head meets straight down the center. Use a lot of muscle in the swing too. Blade’s a bit dull now.” And with his brief instruction given, Caleb released the axe into my control and took a step back to give me room.

I had seen Caleb swing this axe over a hundred times. I had in my mind exactly how to hold the tool, how to swing it, and what my footing should look like. In all honesty, I had been wanting to swing this axe for a long while now just to have the experience.

I imagined myself cleaving through trees like they were made of soft butter. I believed that my arms would never grow tired. Yet no matter how much I mentally prepared myself for what I wanted to do; I had never faced the reality of it before.

The axe was heavy. Not so heavy that I was struggling to hold it up. In comparison, the axe was not as heavy as the log I moved onto the chopping block, but just beyond the physical weight of it, I had the pressure to properly cleave into the log. I had to make this one swing count to prove to Caleb that I have what it takes to help him with his chores.

I had to readjust my grip closer to its head so I could keep it balanced. Raising it over my head was another clumsy readjustment of my grip and my footing to match so I would not stumble from my own weight shifting around. I could feel Caleb's eyes on me. He was watching and judging my every movement.

"Well?" Caleb's voice rattled me from my thoughts, "You gonna swing or just stare down at the thing?"

That's right. I was never going to get more ready for this than I was now, and I probably looked like a fool with how I was constantly shifting my footing. I just had to swing. Gritting my teeth and setting my jaw, I drew in a quick breath through my nose before bearing the axe down.

I will admit, I had my eyes closed so I did not see what happened exactly. I felt the contact against wood, and then the axe jumped from my hands. I screamed in a panic as I jumped and stumbled backward, tripping over my own feet and falling onto my butt.

Caleb's laughter soon followed. He was doubled over holding his gut as if trying to hold himself together. My face was red from embarrassment. As I managed to look away from my brother and to the aftermath of my explosive swing, I saw that the axe was embedded in the log, though instead of jutting out from the top, it was cleaved at an awkward angle near the side. I had missed the mark spectacularly.

"Should've seen your face! Have mercy!" Caleb managed to wheeze out through his peals of laughter. He then set into pantomiming my reaction in all the – what I hoped to be – exaggerated glory that it was.

"Come on! It wasn't that bad!" I protested my defense while getting back to my feet, "The axe was too dull, that's all!"

“Oh yeah, that’s what it was?” Caleb was wiping a tear from his eye while walking over to the axe and wrenching it free from the log. He soon set up the wood back onto the chopping block with ease before looking back to me, “Always a bad worker that blames their tools, you know.” And as if to prove his point, Caleb turned and raised the axe up to swing down and cleave the log in twain easily.

I was quiet the rest of the time Caleb chopped. I was told where the wheelbarrow my brother borrowed from farmer Seth was and began to place wood inside. By the time Caleb was done cutting, we had a sizeable amount of firewood that would last us for at least a few days. Caleb would likely make a few return trips when he found the time to finish off the tree and make sure we were stocked for a while longer.

I was frustrated with myself. The one opportunity to prove myself to at least my brother and I failed miserably. Our trip back to John’s was sparse of conversation, though the whole time I was thinking about what to say – how to plead – or maybe even come to some sort of deal with Caleb where he would not bring up the embarrassing turn of events for me.

“Here,” Caleb said handing off an armful of firewood to me, “Get this in the kitchen, I’ll put this in the shed and bring in enough for the hearth tonight.”

And, to my surprise, that was all he said. I was expecting more ribbing, a snide remark about if I could handle lighting a fire, or even a smarmy smirk. But Caleb did none of those things. It was almost like he was indifferent to what just happened not an hour ago. It was a small mercy I was thankful for.

I went inside, prepared the fire, and set about baking the pies for dinner. How easy it is to fall right back into routine, especially after you show yourself how hopeless you are without it.

Chapter 4: A Hawk, A Snake, and A Boar

The rest of the day was uneventful. As the evening began to creep along, I was told by my father to make sure the guest rooms were cleaned, as well as the baths despite us both knowing that no one had used them since I last cleaned them. John's has not had a visitor stay a night since the last month when we had a traveling merchant decide to see if Hamlet had any coin to spend on various goods – we did not.

My father was still testy from this morning, though, so I did what I was asked without a complaint. Fetching the cleaning supplies and making my way up the stairs, I began the meticulous process of sweeping floors that had no dust, making beds that we already made, and scrubbing out baths that had already been scrubbed. Part of me wondered if my father had went about cleaning these rooms when I was out earlier this morning. I could not even find a bit of dust in the rooms.

By the time I finished my faux cleaning and stepped out of the last suite, I heard the murmur of voices downstairs in the lobby. Had it really gotten so late that people were stopping by for dinner? Making my way to the edge of the balcony, I looked down to see who came to visit for our pies.

Otto was no surprise to me. He was the closest thing to a regular that we had at John's. Being one of the few bachelors in Hamlet, he had no one to cook for him except for us. Otto was at his regular spot against the bar striking up a conversation with my father.

“Y’know, John, we should head out to River Meet together on my next trip,” Otto was talking between mouthfuls of pot pie, “There’s this place out there you should see.”

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?” John questioned with the patience of a man serving food and drink to someone he found annoying at the best of times.

“It’s called Daisy’s, y’know, name after Daisy. I figure the two of you got a lot in common.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean, Otto?”

The conversation devolved from there and I began to look around for who else decided to pay us a visit. I saw farmer Seth’s family. His wife, Sally, had their youngest – a two-year-old boy named Freddy – bouncing in her lap. The oldest, Jacob, about the age of four now, was keeping to himself and making a manageable mess of his pot pie. The family was young and happy looking on the surface, though everyone who was anyone in Hamlet knew they were all miserable with their lot in life. Caleb was hovering near the table as well, offering Seth a fresh drink of Hamlet’s finest alcohol.

“Thanks again for letting me borrow the wheelbarrow this morning,” Caleb spoke, “Would’ve taken me forever to all that wood brought over.”

“Any time, Caleb. We know you’d do the same for us.” Seth graciously took the drink – which I assumed was on the house as a way of further thanks to the man’s generosity.

Sally offered a smile of her own to Caleb before trying to redirect the destructive force of Jacob away from stabbing the table with the fork he had been trusted with. I could only imagine the horror in my father’s expression upon the report of another bit of ‘personality’ being added to one of his cherished tables.

The last set of visitors surprised me. Bartholomew brought his wife and two daughters. Out of all the people in Hamlet, I did not know much about them. I knew Bartholomew’s wife was named Ingrid, and that both of their daughters were close to my age. Sarah was the youngest at fourteen and Mary the eldest at my brother’s age of seventeen. Bartholomew was the owner of

the brewery in Hamlet, but I knew little else on account that they were often the reclusive sort that enjoyed their own company over the people of Hamlet's.

Bartholomew looked like an old hawk if their feathers grayed with age. He had an angular face with sharp features, and the few times I saw him out and about, his eyes always seemed to be shifting one way or another. He noticed me up on my balcony. Most men never bother to look up, yet here he was, having an impromptu staring contest with me from below. I took it as a sign to stop spying on our guests and make myself useful.

I intended to serve Bartholomew and his family, but by the time I got down the stairs, Caleb had finished his conversation with Seth and moved over to help.

"...just curious." Caleb finished up a hushed conversation with Bartholomew before offering me a wink. Before I had the chance to figure out what that wink was for, Bartholomew spoke in a hushed voice to my brother.

"It's forgivable. Our dear Mary had a curious streak, let's hope Sarah doesn't take after her sister." Then, louder to me, "Good evening, Rose. John keeping you locked away upstairs now? I was wondering where the flower of Hamlet had run off to." Bartholomew offered me a smile. It melted years off his face and was disarming and infectious enough to make me flush and smile in return.

"Couldn't keep me locked up forever, though!" I answered with a chirp before looking around at the empty table the family was seated at.

"Let me get you all some pie. Fresh baked by Rose here," Caleb said before turning to heading off toward the kitchen and leave me to fend for myself.

"How're things with you, Rose?" Ingrid asked in that polite way one does to fill the air with noise.

“Not too bad. Pa’s keeping me busy with the cooking and cleaning around here.” I answered.

“And what’s John doing while you do all the work?” Bartholomew asked.

“Guarding the best drinks in Hamlet, of course.” I nodded toward the bar where my father was half paying attention to the conversation he was having with Otto. From where he stood, and how the few bottles were positioned, John did resemble someone defending a small treasure hoard.

“From a bottomless pit. If it weren’t for Otto, I’m not sure if my husband would sell enough to keep us in business.” Ingrid spoke in a conspiratorial whisper to the table with a smile.

“I’m not sure if we’d have a reason to keep ours open if not for him.” I sighed out just as Caleb was returning from the kitchen with the cuts of pie all balanced precariously along his arm.

With my brother returned with food, I made a few more pleasantries before making my way toward the kitchen to grab some pie for myself. I was dreading the amount we had left, since we made extras of everything for no good reason. If the meat were about to spoil, maybe I could understand why the excess, but a stew would store better than a pie in my opinion.

“Hey, Rose!” Otto called out as I was passing by the bar.

“Hello Otto. Glad you decided to come by.” I lied. While Otto was friendly enough, he made me uncomfortable in a slimy sort of way.

“Of course! Not like I could get any home cookin’ anywhere else you know?” Otto wore a wide grin while leaning a little closer toward me, “I mean, I guess I could try to bring a cook home with me.”

My father's hand fell onto the bar between Otto and myself as he loomed over the surface to stare down at the village smithy.

“And just what is *that* supposed to mean?” John asked in a deep, imposing voice.

“Well – you see – I was just trying to –” Otto was trying to collect himself as he stared up at my father with wide, shocked eyes.

I used this opportunity to extricate myself from the conversation and make my way into the kitchen. Part of me wished that father would drag Otto out of the building by the scruff of his neck and then pummel him into an inch of his life before leaving him on the street. I knew this was not going to happen, if Otto was beaten and flayed for being himself, then we would be down our only reliably regular customer. That did not stop me from entertaining the idea, though.

I was flustered when I got into the kitchen and made little note of anything else. I grabbed a portion of the pie and stepped out the back door. I never took the time to notice that we only had half of a pie left. I never wondered what happened to the extras I was told to make this morning.

Chapter 5: Stranger

It was one day until the time Otto set off toward River Meet on his monthly supply runs. Caleb volunteered himself to go with Otto along with two other men to make sure all the money was properly spent.

The trip would take one day for them to arrive, two to three days in the city, and one day ride back. This was assuming that there were no complications on the road or in River Meet, of

course. All-in-all, we could expect them back in Hamlet with the supplies requested in a little under a week.

For me, this meant that the book I asked Caleb to try to find for me was a little under a week away. I had learned to read from our father when I was a young girl and given the amount of spare time I had in the day, I took to reading like fire takes to dry wood. I read everything that I could get my hands on, and soon there was no literature in Hamlet that I have not read at least three times over.

This is not meant to sound as if I had a wealth of education at my disposal, there were not many things to read in Hamlet. Paper was expensive, so what little we did have was for important things: lists of supplies needed, cooking recipes, and vain attempts at writing for financial support to bridge the distance between Hamlet and Fort Fredrick.

There were a few books that the more affluent people of Hamlet brought with them from River Meet. My father's collection was small, but it had many different genres, though my personal favorite were the adventure journals that people wrote.

These journals were complete works of fiction but written in such a manner that sounded like the author really went on these adventures. Sometimes real places and names were used to add to the pseudo authenticity of the work, and for the uninitiated, they could easily be fooled into thinking what they were reading actually happened – admittedly, I may have thought these were not works of fiction for the first few times enjoying them.

The other collection of books that Hamlet hid lied within Bartholomew's home. Though seeing that we were not on terms where I could browse his library at my leisure, I only knew about the collection, and not what exactly he had. So, I was left to what little allowances I had to get books of my own, hence my asking Caleb to go retrieve one for me.

I loved fantasy literature. It allowed me to escape from Hamlet, at least in my mind. I knew that I would grow old and die here, so it was nice to have that small vacation. Even if I was trapped here, I could still rely on the portals to different worlds found on these pages.

“You sure you don’t want something more uh—” Caleb trailed off as he fished for the right word.

“Girly?” I asked.

“Well, I was gonna say romantic, but yeah, girly works too.” Caleb shrugged, not exactly trying to dance around the subject after I broached the topic.

We were walking out toward the woods where Caleb felled his tree to finish the job of collecting firewood. I went with him to make sure he was going to get the right sort of book for me – as well as find an excuse to get out of the house one more time.

“Why would I want some romance book?” I questioned with a sneer. This was not the first time we had this conversation about books, and it never led to where Caleb wanted it to.

“I don’t know, maybe because you’re a girl? Folks’ll think it’s strange if they catch you reading some adventure story.” Caleb sighed as we came upon the clearing where the tree was.

“I don’t see what my having to be a girl has to do with this! Besides, the people around here know me, they don’t care what I’m reading.” I groused after moving Seth’s wheelbarrow close to the chopping block.

“Yeah, they sure do, sis. And they’re all wondering the same thing.” Caleb spoke as he lined himself up with the axe to start sectioning off portions of the tree again.

“And what’s that?” I asked with an increasing frustration for this conversation.

“The hell’s that woman doing reading a book written for boys for?” He answered before swinging his axe down into the tree. “You’re getting older Rose, and people’ll start expecting you to act a certain way.”

“Let them expect, then. I don’t care!” I shouted before storming off in a very reasonable and not-at-all immature way.

I did care. Who would not want to be liked by everyone they knew? But at the same time, I wondered if anyone in Hamlet would care about what sort of stories I liked to read in my spare time? Over half of the people here could not even read, so what did it matter? Shouldn’t I be able to make myself happy?

Caleb did not run after me. Instead, I heard the steady chopping of an axe against wood growing more and more distant behind me. Eventually, I came to a stop with a huff. Planting my back to a tree and sliding down it until my rump met the forest floor, I had a good pout and began to replay the conversation over in my head.

At first, I started coming up with things I should have said that would have silenced my brother and made me win the argument. Though I eventually grew tired of beating a caricature of my brother into submission through verbal spats. I was still angry, though I could not quite place the reason why. Was I mad at my brother, Hamlet, or my situation in life? That was a question I could not find the answer for.

Instead of getting lost in some philosophic quandary about my life, I did the only reasonable thing in my mind. I got up and started wandering further into the woods. I wanted to clear my mind, and the best way I knew to do that was by losing myself to nature for a while.

I walked without aim or direction, and eventually the sound of Caleb's chopping grew quieter and softer until I was out of earshot. I found myself in a natural glade and spent a few moments looking up at the sun shining down at me.

It was warm and comfortable, and I understood then why cats liked to bask in the light. I smiled and settled down to sit while leaning back and resting my weight on my hands. A slow sigh left me as I slid and flopped down onto my back. There was nothing wrong with an afternoon nap in the sun. I dreamed.

War horns sounded in the tree line all around the glade. I jumped to my feet and grabbed my trusted sword, Orcbane. I had first noticed signs of these monsters around Hamlet a few nights ago and decided to lure them into a trap to protect my home. Of course, a fair maiden such as I was the perfect bait for these brutes. Thanks to my clever planning and the sub-human intellect of my quarry, the orcs fell right into my trap.

Torches lit up the night and illuminated the gray skinned monsters. They had the bodies of men with the heads of pigs. Dressed in nothing but tatters and rags, these hideous creatures only thoughts were of destruction. They were a blight upon the world and by my count, twenty had stumbled their way too close to my home.

There was enough moonlight in the glade for me to see clearly, and as two orcs charged me at the same time, I readied Orcbane and prepared to fight. It was over in an instant. One clean slash for each orc was all it took for them to be felled. Their lifeless bodies littered the ground where I stood.

"Is this the best you can muster?" I called out while pointing down at the two dead orcs. "Surely there's a real warrior amongst your lot that can challenge me?" I taunted with a grin

while turning slowly to meet with each and every single one of those black, beady eyes watching me from the tree line.

My gaze was like a wave, with every pass over an orc, they took a step back. The only language these monsters spoke was power, and mine was making them second guess their lives up until this point. I was certain that the orcs were about to retreat before I heard a thundering crash echoing through the woods.

“I will be your challenge and your death!” A large, lumbering orc measuring about twenty feet tall burst from the tree line. He must have been their leader. “Tremble, girl! I am Tormack and will enjoy grinding you into the dirt under my foot!”

“And I will enjoy ridding the world of your stench, foul creature!” I rebuffed with a flourish of my blade. “I am Rose, and this,” I held up my sword and turned for all to see its silver sheen reflecting in the moonlight, “Is Orcbane. He was forged to see you all vanquished!”

The orcs all trembled at the mention of my name, but not Tormack. He was too dense to be afraid, and instead he roared and charged me while my back was turned like the coward he was. In his hand was a great club, the size of a tree, and he aimed to smash it down upon me with a primal fury.

I was too quick, though, and managed to dive and roll out to the side, avoiding all harm that would have come my way. Acting quickly on my feet, I ran and leapt up onto the club, running up it like one would cross a bridge. Climbing higher I passed by the club and onto Tormack’s arm. Higher and higher I went until I stood atop the brute’s shoulders.

I raised Orcbane high into the air over my head before plunging it straight down into Tormack’s skull, rending flesh and bone with ease. Tormack howled in pain before stumbling

and falling heavily to the ground. As he fell, I pulled Orcbane free and jumped into a spin before landing safely on the ground with perfect poise.

“Who else wants to taste my blade?” I challenged the remaining orcs, only for them to turn tail and flee into the woods.

It was the chill that woke me. I had slept for a long time, as the sun was beginning to wane along the canopy of the forest. Shaking myself from the foggy mind which comes from dreaming about orcs and being a mighty warrior, I focused on things that were more real and important to my present situation.

I knew that if the sun was setting, I had about an hour left of daylight. I also knew that if I kept my back to the setting sun I would be heading in the general direction of Hamlet. I do not think I wandered too far from the area where Caleb was working, so I figured making my way back to him was the right course of action.

I was hoping to hear the sound of wood being chopped as I drew closer, though I was not so lucky as that. The tree was mostly gone, where my brother, the axe, and Seth’s wheelbarrow were nowhere to be found. Caleb had likely finished his work a while ago, and upon seeing that I did not return to him, he probably figured that I went back home without him. Still, a part of me was angry at him for not coming to find me.

The option of heading home with Caleb was gone, so I had to go along on my own. Luckily the path we took was a clear one lined with a short stretch of chopped trees which lead back to Hamlet. This path was the beginning of the road which was supposed to lead to Fort Fredrick. This graveyard of stumps and roots was just another failing of progress Hamlet tried to make for herself. Yet, whenever people needed wood for fire or otherwise, this was the first place to go. Perhaps some part of Hamlet thought the path would eventually be cleared.

I walked alone, and for once I felt uncomfortable in the woods. While there still was daylight and a path for me to follow, I still worried. What if I did not make it back to Hamlet before the sun was fully down? What if I accidentally strayed off the path and got lost in the woods? Would people come looking for me? Thankfully, I did not have to dwell with these thoughts for too long.

I broke through the tree line right as the sun's light had left the sky. There was firelight dancing in the distance which marked the location of the buildings and for me, a clear path forward. I walked with much more confidence now that the familiar was in view. It was interesting how quickly worries set upon you in an unfamiliar place, but the moment you are returned to the familiar, it was like those fears never existed in the first place.

The timing wasn't too terrible either. I was expected to be home by sundown, and in the most technical terms, I was home – at Hamlet. If there were any complications about being a little late, I could easily blame Caleb for abandoning his dear sister in the woods. I feel like my brother still deserved a bit of a reckoning for how he made me feel earlier.

As I walked down the lonely road that cut through Hamlet, I saw something unfamiliar. There was a man on horseback walking down the path toward me. There was a lantern on the saddle of the horse which gave me a decent view of the rider.

The horse itself was black like the night sky, though around his hooves I saw little white rings of hair that looked like he was wearing either mittens or socks. The gait was a proud one, the horse was young – or at least younger than the horses Otto kept stabled. And even though he was a younger looking horse, he seemed trained and regal. With his head held high, the steed walked down the dirt path as if he owned everything around him. I had never felt such authority

from a person, no less an animal before. It was awe inspiring, and I found my feet were planted like stones in the path as the horse and rider drew near.

The rider, though illuminated by his lantern, was harder to make out. He was shrouded in a cloak of a deep green cloth. It appeared heavy enough to keep rain and the chill from soaking through – not that it had rained or was yet cold enough to leave the bite of frost on the ground in the mornings. He cut a slim profile despite the weight of his cloak, though the way he was riding his horse left him slouched over somewhat as if he was nearly asleep.

The only signs of wakefulness I saw in the rider was the shift of his hooded head toward me and the low ‘Whoa’ one gives when compelling a steed to come to a stop. When he was within what he likely expected a proper distance to speak, the rider sat up straight and pulled back his hood.

He had a face that was alien to me, a complete stranger that wore an expression of someone that had ridden on a long trip. It was the expression that Otto and the volunteers from Hamlet had after returning from their trips to River Meet. The rider’s hair was black to match his steed’s, and it reached down to his shoulders in long, straight strands.

“Hail, girl,” The rider greeted with an idle nod of his head. “Am I correct in assuming that this is the place called Hamlet?”

I gave a dumb nod of my head to the stranger’s question. He seemed satisfied enough with the response and with a practiced ease, dismounted his steed. Taking the reins in a single-handed grip, the man looked around the poorly lit street before addressing me once more.

“Is there something that passes for a tavern here? Maybe a place to stable my horse as well? I’ve been on the road all day from River Meet, you see.” He motioned to himself with his free hand before gasping. “Oh! Where are my manners? I’m—”

Chapter 6: Ser Thomas, Representative of Baron Gimsby of River Meet to Hamlet

Ser. Not to be mistaken with the title of Sir I give my father or elders when I am being well mannered. This man introduced himself as a Ser. A knight. Someone of a higher and nobler position than anyone in Hamlet.

I bowed my head immediately, giving Ser Thomas the reverence that I thought he was deserving of. What followed was an awkward silence that grew between the two of us. Ser Thomas' horse purred, which prompted the man to further fill that void.

“And what should I call you?” the knight prompted.

“Rose! I'm – I'm Rose.” I stammered out, thinking it awkward that I did not have a title to give in response to the man. That small fact only made the rift I felt between us grow larger.

“Nice to meet you, Rose,” Thomas spoke with the thin patience of someone kept standing in a street at night. “And, about that stable and lodgings for myself?”

“Right! Follow me, please!” I flushed and hurriedly set off down the road.

Otto's store had the only stable in Hamlet, and Otto was nowhere near to be found. His apprentice, Barry, was also missing, so the both of them either went home for the evening, or Otto managed to convince Barry to head to John's with him.

Upon concluding my search of the store, I came outside to see that Ser Thomas had already chosen a stable for his horse and had taken the liberty to undress his steed from saddle, bit, and various other luggage.

“Well, old boy, seems like we're in the shit now, aren't we?” The knight was speaking to his horse while dragging a brush along the midnight-colored flanks. “Try to endure it and I'll do my best too. Just. A. Few. Days.” The horse seemed to understand his master and leaned his head in to nuzzle against the man's shoulder. The affection earned a pat to the steed's snout.

“What’s his name?” I asked with a point to the horse. My presence seemed to startle Ser Thomas from his hushed conversation. He turned sharply on his heel and placed a hand over his breast.

“Heavens, Rose! You’re as quiet as a field mouse, aren’t you?” Thomas sighed out as he shook his head as if to clear it. Then, turning his attention to his steed, the knight patted at the horse’s flank fondly. “This is Marquis. He’s been with me since I was a young man, one of the finest companions a man could hope for.”

Marquis heard his name and turned to nuzzle once more against Thomas. The two had clearly been through much together in my opinion. Given that Thomas was a knight, I could only imagine what sorts of harrowing journeys he could share! My mind raced with possibilities, and I wondered how to even broach the topic with him.

“Marquis is a pretty horse,” I complimented the steed before looking to the knight. “Otto’s not here, I think he’s probably at John’s.”

“Here’s hoping he won’t mind an additional horse in his stable. I’ll pay him for the services in the morning.” Thomas clapped his gloved hands together once after that, “Now! A warm meal and a firm bed. Care to point in the right direction?”

“I can do you better. I was heading that way myself.” I smiled and gave a little curtsy as I thought was necessary.

Thomas gave me an odd look at the bow before clearing his throat and motioning with his hand for me to lead on. I figured he was surprised that someone as ‘in the shit’ as myself knew how to properly treat guests from an upper class.

The walk was not a long one. In fact, Ser Thomas had to pass by John's on his way into Hamlet. I figured he must have missed the obvious building on his way in, but I also figured that was odd. What sort of man worth his salt would miss the warmly lit interior of our tavern?

The light from the tavern's hearth was warm but dim as it glowed with a flickering dance across the windows. Shadows of movement were seen within. From what I could tell before opening the front door, we had our regular crowd inside.

"The King's Rest Tavern," Ser Thomas read the sign hanging over the front door with a bit of humor in his voice.

The name caught me off-guard for a moment. The King's Rest Tavern had gone by John's for so long that I nearly forgot there was a sign that still hung to denounce the local populace's name. Though what gave me pause was the way Ser Thomas read the name. Did he think the name itself was a joke?

I gave the thought no further space in my head as I pulled open the door and stepped to the side to present the opening to the knight. From within there was the sound of low conversations going, but as Thomas walked across the threshold, all conversation stopped. I followed in shortly after and noticed that every head in the room was turned and looking in our direction. More specifically, every eye was on Thomas.

"Evening, friend," My father called from behind the bar, "Come in and make yourself comfortable."

I could hear each step Thomas took across the floor toward the bar. People's heads were turning and watching, and after he passed by a few tables, the occupants spent little time standing up and heading toward the exit. A few exchanged some pleasantries with me on their way out, but most seemed more interested in getting out of the building as soon as they were able.

“It would seem that my comfort is everyone else’s discomfort.” Thomas spoke to John as he addressed the proverbial horse in the middle of the room. With a flourish of his cloak behind him, the knight sat with a half turn toward the room to see who still remained within.

I took the opportunity to do the same. Aside from Otto at the bar – who had since started acting like a statue – there was Caleb and Barry sat together at a table nearest the hearth. The two of them were exchanging glances and a few murmured words. I closed the door after realizing I had been holding it open the whole time and quietly started to make my way toward the kitchen.

“Don’t pay them much mind. Come morning you’ll be the talk of Hamlet.” John reassured Thomas with a practiced bartender’s smile.

“Not the good sort of talk.” Thomas countered flatly.

“No. Not good at all. But your coin’s still good here, friend. So, what’re you after? Food, drink? Hot bath?” John was already moving to set a glass atop the bar before Thomas even had a chance to respond.

I slipped into the kitchen, glad enough for the distraction Ser Thomas was providing for everyone right now. He was unwittingly my excuse as to why I showed up so late and for the price of escorting the man around for a little while, I feel like it was a fair exchange for us both. Just as I was about to stir the pot of stew and fetch a few piece morsels for myself I was interrupted.

“Rose! Get some water for a hot bath.” My father’s voice called out from behind the bar.

“Got it!” I called back before letting out a sigh. It would seem that I was not quite done catering to our guest to see to my own needs. I exchanged the soup ladle I had grabbed for a large bucket and walked out the back door to start pumping water.

It would take me some time to get enough water for the bath, heat it up, and then make my way up the stairs with it to start filling the tub. Adding to the fact we only had two buckets large enough to make sense for filling a bath, it took about four trips with both to actually fill the bath. I feel like, despite not having to fill any of the baths we had for a long time, half an hour to get one ready on short notice was a good speed.

Ser Thomas seemed cordial enough in his patience, and whenever I walked out into the main room carrying the buckets of water, the man seemed to be engaging in small talk with my father. I only caught small bits and pieces.

“Three days? Not that much to do here in Hamlet.” John said idly.

“No? No matter, I’ll get a good feel for everything by then at least.” Thomas answered.

“We’ll be a bit short a few folk come tomorrow though, supply run out to River Meet.”

John replied.

The brief snippet of a conversation I caught had me curious. Ser Thomas was curious enough on his own. We did not have many visitors, and the sort that did come by were out of sorts farmers looking for work, or merchants that tried to peddle some of their goods. We did not have people with titles visit us.

I struggled against my curious nature to linger and find out more. With the threat of my water getting cold, I was forced to keep on the move. While I would have liked to have gotten everything first-hand from the man himself, I would have to settle for rumors like the rest of Hamlet.

By the time the bath was ready, Otto and Barry had left. Caleb was delegated to sweeping and cleaning up the lobby and kitchen.

“Anyway, we’re hoping to get the path cleared up closer to Fredrick so some trade and travelers can start coming through.” John was pitching the dream everyone in Hamlet told themselves would happen.

“And you’ve been at this out of your own doggedness since the other parties gave up their support?” Thomas was politely curious to say the least. He was engaged, leaning forward, maintaining eye contact with my father throughout the whole of this brief exchange.

“Bath’s ready.” I interrupted gently.

“Oh? So soon? Apologies, John, we’ll continue this later.” Thomas offered a polite nod before getting to his feet.

“Middle room upstairs is where you’ll find ‘em. Holler if it gets too cold, we’ll be sure to add some more heat for you if it does.” John waved Thomas off before looking at me, “And you stick around in case he needs anything, alright?”

As Thomas made his way upstairs, my father leaned forward against the bar to stare down at me with some concern in his eyes.

“You’re alright?” he asked in a whisper, “Didn’t threaten you? Seemed good?”

John was referring to our guest. I turned my head to look and made sure Thomas was not trying to listen in on our hushed conversation.

“He’s been a proper gentleman to me, Pa.” I responded.

My answer earned a relieved sigh from my father as he stood back up to his full height. He nodded and gave me a pat on the shoulder before reaching underneath the bar and grabbing at a cloth. As John began to wipe down the bar, I noticed his smile. It was a wide smile which I had only seen on my father’s face when he had a secret that he wanted to share.

“What is it?” I asked with a hushed voice, “What’s got you smiling like that?”

My father looked around the room to make sure that no one was still inside – I thought it was a useless gesture, since he had a clear view of the floor from where he was without the need for stagecraft. He reached his hand underneath the bar and grabbed something small enough to fit into his closed hand which he placed atop the bar.

“The Good Ser Thomas paid us in advance for his room, bath, and food,” John explained as he slowly unfurled his hand to the sound of coin tapping against the bar.

I leaned in, curious to see how much was given. If it was enough to make my father act like he was, I could only imagine the amount. The potential of what lay beneath my father’s palm and his near boyish glee had me anticipating the reveal more and more. Just as I was almost unable to take the anticipation any longer, my father’s hand lifted and revealed a singular coin that caused my jaw to drop.

“There it is,” John’s grin widened at my reaction, “Gold. You see that, Rose? A real gold coin.” He was trying not to shout his own excitement at how much he had been paid. In truth, I was surprised he managed it. The price given was on a level of absurdity that my fantasy stories did not even try to reach for.

When it came to coins, copper was what we saw the most of being left on our tables. A drink and meal came to two copper – substitute that drink for some of Bartholomew’s Brew and you add another copper. What you could not pay for in coins, you bartered. That was the way of Hamlet and what I figured to be other communities that were as poor as we were.

Silver was for the common people and merchants. For every hundred copper coins, you effectively had one silver piece to your name. My book that Caleb was going to buy for me would be anywhere between two or three silver pieces – and it took me months to save that amount from the allowances I had been given. What I heard from Otto and the others that visited

River Meet, that they were often kept on the outside of the gates due to the amount of silver it took to spend a night inside the city.

Gold was something I had never seen before. I knew it existed, but to see it sitting there on our bar catching some of the dim light from the hearth felt unreal. Gold was the currency of the nobility and kings. It was what moved heroes to slay dragons. It was the reward for saving a princess. The amount it represented was beyond any realistic understanding I had. For every hundred silver pieces, you could get one gold piece, and I could not even fathom how long it would take for someone like me to save up and earn enough for a gold coin. Yet despite the near mythical properties a coin such as this had in my mind, it was right there on the bar staring me in the face.

“You’re sure it’s real?” I asked curiously.

My attention shifted from the coin to my father. I had heard of swindlers before. Men that offered empty promises and talked of schemes that would always lead to your purse being turned inside out. Ser Thomas was still a stranger, so there was no telling if he was not this sort of man.

“Real as could be.” John answered while slipping the coin off the bar and into his pocket with a purposeful pat. “So, we’re going to treat our guest kindly like I taught you. Give him everything he needs and wants while he’s here in Hamlet. Understood?”

I nodded in understanding. We did not have guests often, and those few we did had paid at most a few silver coins for their evenings. I was nervous about this gold coin Ser Thomas had paid with. If he was willing to part with a gold piece so easily, what else did he carry that had more valuable?

“Caleb!” John called out as my brother walked by.

“Yeah, Pa?” Caleb asked.

“Make sure our guest gets this,” John said as he produced a brass key from underneath the bar. “Tell ‘em it’s for his room, and that we’re locking up the doors for tonight. Has the place to himself but if he needs anything, let him know where we’re at.” John pushed the key toward Caleb before patting me on the shoulder.

Caleb and I watched our father walk to the kitchen and out the back door. We stood there in an awkward silence. John never left early. We usually had to convince him to lock up the tavern and leave for the night, but the one night we had a guest, and he was out the door in a heartbeat. A weight sat uncomfortably in my chest and my stomach rolled over on itself.

“Strange,” Caleb spoke up with a healthy shrug to pass off his comment. If he felt the same way I did, my brother was not showing it. But the fact he commented on it gave me the suspicion that we were thinking the same thing.

As Caleb went to relay John’s message to Ser Thomas, I latched the main door closed and went into the kitchen to make sure everything was in its place. There was something off about the rack where we hung our pots, but just as I was trying to piece together what the issue was, I heard Caleb behind me.

“You know, I was thinking you got grabbed by a witch and thrown into a pot.” Caleb spoke and teasingly poked me in the shoulder, “But then I remembered that witches only gobbled up good sisters, so I didn’t have to worry none.”

I spun on my heel and glared at Caleb. My finger poked and prodded into his chest as I was trying to find the right words to say. Though as it turned out, my brother’s unique showing of care for my well-being was an effective means of making me forget how to speak momentarily due to the sheer audacity he had. I couldn’t believe him! My own brother abandoned me in the woods and that was his response.

Caleb seemed amused. It was like my reaction was exactly what he was hoping for. He planted his hand on top of my head and ruffled my hair before walking out the back of the kitchen. I stammered and huffed and by the time I found my words again it was too late. Caleb had gone out the door and on the way home.

I let out a frustrated sigh before following after him. I locked the kitchen door and hurried down the path which led to our home. It was a short walk, less than a minute if I hurried – which I was since I wanted to give Caleb a piece of my mind. Perhaps a longer walk would have given me a chance to cool my head, but I did not have that luxury.

“I could’ve been dead, you know!” I called out to Caleb as I caught up to him.

“Could’ve, that’s true. But you’re not.” Caleb answered with a sigh as he turned to face me.

We were just outside of our house, and if I kept my voice raised, I knew our father would hear us. I still did not know if Caleb told John that we went our separate ways after a spat and I wandered off further into the woods.

“Did you even look for me?” I asked.

“Called out a bit, but when you didn’t answer or come running, I just figured you went home.” Caleb frowned as he gave his answer. It was almost like he was expecting me to have just been hiding from him out of sight behind a tree while he worked the whole time. “Asked a few people tonight if they saw you if that makes you feel any better.”

It didn’t make me feel better. In fact, it made me feel worse for asking.

“If you were missing, I’d have done more than just ask people if you were around.” I protested in a rush. “I would’ve stayed looking for you until I found you!”

“And how would you go about doing that, Rose?” Caleb countered.

There was some anger sparking in my brother's eyes. It was not much, but I saw it in a flash. In that brief moment, I saw that continuing down this avenue was not the wisest course of action. I should have let the matter drop. I should have done a host of things differently, but I was my brother's sister, and I simply could not keep my mouth closed.

"By following you and figuring out which way you went!" I didn't bother keeping my voice down now. "Maybe I wouldn't let my family walk off on their own and then leave them to figure out how to get home when the sun's going down?"

"Well, ain't that rich. Glad my sister's so damn perfect and selfless to get everything done the right way! Damnit, Rose – I looked! I did!" Caleb shouted back in an explosive burst before settling himself down with a deep sigh before adding in a softer tone. "But I couldn't find you. So, I thought you went on without me."

"The both of ya shut up. Gonna wake the dead if you keep shouting up!" John's voice boomed from the entrance of our home before either of us could get in another word.

My words caught in my throat as my father entered the argument. My anger shifted to shame and embarrassment that I let my emotions get the better of me. The fury in my chest quickly rose up to a knot in my throat that I struggled to swallow down, and when I did, it became a stone in my stomach. I was on the verge of tears as I tried to confront and make sense of the feeling of abandonment I had been struggling with ever since I woke up from my mid-afternoon nap.

"Sorry, Pa." Caleb answered before turning away from me and walking toward our house.

"Sorry, Pa." I mirrored quietly before walking with my head downcast toward our small home nestled in the large wood.

Chapter 7: For Good Measure

Caleb was gone before first light broke. He left with Otto and two others on a wagon to River Meet. Part of me was glad for the distance away from my brother, but another part of me was sad that I never got the chance to apologize for yelling at him last night.

He would be gone for a week, and that would be a week longer to let our last conversation to be a fight after our last fight. It seemed like we had been fighting in some way or another for the last few days – ever since I tried to do his job in chopping firewood. I wondered if he was mad at me trying to take his job from him or maybe he thought I was challenging him instead?

Now that my own anger was not clouding my own vision, I tried to see things from his perspective, but I could only go so far as to imagine what was happening in my own brother's mind. Instead of trying to make sense of my familial issues, I focused on picking up the slack that my brother was leaving behind on his trip. In addition to taking my fair share of his chores, we also had a guest to tend to.

Ser Thomas had not come down from his room yet when I arrived at John's in the morning. I figured that he was tired from his journey last night, a full day worth of travel is not something people could shrug off. Still, part of me thought that a knight would have been a bit more used to long trips. Every time I read about them, after all, they rode their horses for days on end and never showed signs of being tired.

I was in the kitchen preparing breakfast for John, myself, and Ser Thomas should he wake up. I set a pan next to the kitchen fire and tossed a cut of salted butter into it. As I waited for that to melt, I climbed down into the root cellar to collect some eggs and links of sausage. The eggs we got from bartering with Quincy, one of the few people in Hamlet that had the

foresight to raise chickens. The sausage was the cured sort from River Meet. My father said that he used to serve this sort of sausage to his guests before he moved us away to Hamlet. I figured that he would have wanted his guest to have the sausage here as well.

I climbed out of the cellar with my bounty and hooked my foot around the side of the trapdoor and swung it close. The butter had melted at this point, so I went ahead and dropped the sausage whole into the pan as a familiar crackling sizzle began to fill the room. I then cracked the five eggs – my father always had two, and I figured Ser Thomas would want two as well – and let their insides fall with a satisfying splat into the pan.

I ripped a few larger pieces of bread from our last evening's loaf and tossed them down directly against the bricks of the hearth before moving to grab a wooden spoon to begin scraping and scrambling the eggs inside the pot. A quick turn was all the eggs took before I went to get some heavy cloth rags to pick the pan up from the heat and carefully place on our counter.

This was a routine for me, and I was moving without thinking. I knew where everything in this kitchen was, given how long I had spent time in here preparing midday and evening meals for Hamlet. Though when I reached for the wooden plates we used, I found that the stack was a little shorter than it used to be.

“Missing?” I wondered aloud before my mind wandered back to what was bothering me last night.

Looking up along the wall, I began to take stock of our pots and pans. Three pans were missing from the rack. One I was using, the other two were not in the kitchen. It had only been a few days since I used all five of our pans before – three pot and two apple pies - and now we were missing three plates. I was wracking my mind about what could have happened to them.

Did my father let someone borrow them without telling me? And now that I was thinking about it, we were missing two pies entirely.

“The smell of food cooking was all the motivation I needed to get downstairs.” Thomas startled me from my thoughts.

I turned to look back at him, and I saw him leaning over the bar slightly to peer into the kitchen. He looked different from last night. He was not wearing his cloak, so I got a decent view of his profile. Thomas was not the large, musclebound man I was expecting him to be. He was lithe and almost delicate looking. It seemed like if a strong enough wind came through the room, Thomas might have struggled to keep his footing.

“Good morning,” I greeted him on reflex, “It’ll be just a little bit. Got to make sure the bread’s warm enough.”

Thomas nodded his satisfaction at knowing he would not be kept from breakfast much longer. He left his perch from the bar and moved out of sight before I heard him and my father carry on with a quiet conversation – from the sounds of it, it was just the small pleasantries people shared with one another while waiting for a meal.

I would have to ask my father about the missing plates and pans later. It was possible that he loaned them out without my noticing – the last few days have been a bit of a blur of action for me, after all. Between almost chopping my leg off while trying to prove to my bother I could use an axe and almost getting lost in the woods at night, a few missing items in the kitchen were the least of my worries.

I plated John and Thomas’ portions and carried them, along with the appropriate cutlery out to them. My father did not turn to acknowledge me – it was something I had grown used to,

as whenever he had his public face on, he was only interested in the guests. Thomas, on the other hand, turned in his seat and looked at me directly when I set his plate down in front of him.

“Do you usually cook on your own?” Thomas asked.

The question caught me off guard. I was not unused to being spoken to while serving food, but the way Thomas started the conversation was different from what I was expecting. Normally, whenever a guest talked to me, it was a pleasant ‘Thank you, Rose’ followed by some small talk. We then parted ways and I went back into the kitchen or to another table. That was the way of things.

“I do.” I answered.

“Self-taught?” Thomas asked.

“I taught her.” John answered the question for me.

“I see,” Thomas said before turning to look up at my father.

The two of them locked eyes for a moment and I felt tension rising in the space between them. I wondered if my father was thinking that Ser Thomas was another man like Otto. Was he trying to defend me?

“Let me know if you need more, I can cook it up in no time.” I broke the silence of the room before turning and making my way back into the kitchen.

As I set up my own plate to eat, I listened to the conversation that eventually built-up steam once more out in the lobby. It was small talk at first, a rehashing of stories I have heard before about Hamlet from my father and how River Meet is still thriving and doing well from Thomas. I continued to eat with a bit of disinterest in the conversation – that was until I heard my name.

“Rose is a well-heeled young lady, from what I’ve seen. What of her brother – Caleb, was it?” Thomas asked through a mouthful of egg and sausage.

“Caleb, aye.” My father confirmed briefly, “He’s getting along well, both of them are. The boy’s going to end up outpacing me soon. Managed to cut and quarter a tree up by himself the other day.” There was a hint of pride in John’s voice when he talked about Caleb. It was odd, since I only saw him refer to my brother as “lazy” and a “slacker” in private.

“It’s as children do, Master John, they overcome their parents and take the reins from them eventually.” Thomas concluded.

“You have children?” John asked after a brief pause. “Seem a mite young to be worrying about getting replaced by them at least.”

“Ah – no. It’s something my father told me before his untimely passing. I’ve been kept a little too busy to properly court a Lady.” Thomas confessed sheepishly.

“Sorry for your loss. I remember losing my father, wasn’t easy.” John responded solemnly.

That was an understatement. My grandfather died two years ago, and when news reached Hamlet about his passing, my father was devastated. My father lacked the will to get out of bed for two weeks. I helped the best way I knew how, but I never felt so helpless before when I was spoon feeding my father when he refused to eat for himself.

“No, it’s not been easy,” Thomas confessed, “But keeping myself busy has helped. Idle hands make for a devil’s playground.”

“And you said it was work that brought you here? From the Good Baron himself?” John asked.

I sneered at the given title. While I had no clue who the baron was personally, no one in Hamlet liked Baron Gimsby, and that was enough to settle my opinion on him. It was his seal on the letter that told Hamlet that he was halting the funds for the path to Fort Fredrick, so when anyone here referred to the ‘Good’ Baron, we all knew we meant the opposite.

“Yes, Baron Gimsby tasked me with getting a headcount of the people here. So that’s what I intend to do for him.” Thomas answered freely.

“Could’ve sent a message to do that.” John paused to do a mental count, “Twenty-two – well, twenty-three on the way. That’s all we got here in Hamlet.”

“Oh? Congratulations are in order! I was wondering where your wife was in this picture – is she far along?” Thomas asked.

“She’s – it’s someone else’s. Seth’s wife Sally is expecting.” John tried to clear the confusion.

There was a pause in the air that left me holding my breath. John always seemed to lock himself up whenever my mother was mentioned. I was worried that the curious nature of Thomas might have unwittingly spoiled the mood. I was debating if I should head out and break the silence once more by picking up plates. Thomas spoke up before I made my move.

“My mistake. Well, I shouldn’t keep you from what you need to do, and I need to get prepared for the day myself.” Thomas rapped his knuckles against the bar before standing up. He left for the stairs, and I waited until his footsteps reached the top step before exiting the kitchen.

“He asks a lot of questions,” I said while gathering up the plates.

“Think he’ll be asking a lot more before he leaves.” John grunted out before turning his attention down to me, “Got a job for you today. With Caleb out in the city, I’ll need to pick up his chores. Can’t keep an eye on Ser Thomas myself so...”

So, he needs me to do it for him. I felt a mix of worry and excitement over the task. I was worried since I had a good idea of Ser Thomas' personality now. Knowing who he worked for did not help improve my opinion of him much, either.

Though I was also excited because despite who the man worked for, Thomas was still a knight, and that fascinated me to no end. I had read so much about them before, but I never met a real one, and watching the man was going to give me invaluable information between fact and fiction of a knight. There was just one problem.

“How am I supposed to do that, Pa?” I asked.

“By asking I reckon.” John answered.

He took the plates from my hands and walked into the kitchen. A few moments later I heard him walk out the back door to leave me alone. I frowned. Asking a knight if he needed a chaperone around Hamlet seemed a little pretentious. I would have to choose my words carefully to become the knight's escort. And if I failed in that regard, I would need to adopt some less-than-scrupulous means to tail Hamlet's guest.

I waited for what felt like a half hour for Ser Thomas to come down the stairs. I occupied myself by attempting to come up with a few choice words that would convince the knight to allow me to accompany him. I then spent time convincing myself to not use any of those words since they were torn right from a storybook I had read once.

My internal debate was accompanied by an external pacing to find the most 'appropriate' spot to be waiting for the man. I figured that behind the bar was too masculine an approach and leaning against it made me look lazy. Sweeping the floor after it had been swept by my father earlier would make it seem like I was inefficient.

By the time I heard Thomas' boots on the upper floor, I was standing behind a chair at one of our tables and holding onto the back of it like I was going to pull it out. I tried to move, to find something more natural looking to do but nothing was coming to me. So, like a dog caught chewing up a pair of slippers, I stood firmly in place and watched as the knight descended.

I had wondered what took the man so long. I was half expecting him to come down dressed in a full dress of shimmering metal armor as knights were commonly depicted as in the stories that I have read. I thought it odd that when I first saw him, Ser Thomas was shrouded in a cloak and moved lightly on his feet.

I figured he dressed down for Marquis, his horse, to not overburden him on the ride from River Meet. For breakfast, Thomas was wearing little more than shirt and slacks – but again, it would be odd to see a man eating in full armor. Surely now would be the time for Thomas to be dressed as a knight should. Yet as he came more into view, Thomas was not armored – at least not in the traditional sense I was expecting.

Thomas' boots were soft-looking dark leather that looked nearly as black as his hair. They rode up just below his knees with a fold over their top. His pants were also dyed a dark color and looked to have been sewn with a fine thread. Dark gloves which seemed to match the make and style of boots crept up along the knight's forearms before the pristine white of his shirt sleeves carried up the rest of his arm. Wrapped snug around his chest was a semi-stiff looking leather vest that was dark in the same make of the other bits of leather he wore.

Around Thomas' waist there was a belt strapped tightly around his slim figure. The belt was tied normally in the front with a buckle and strap but at the sides there were metal rings which held the front and back of the belt together. From these rings was tied a hanging piece of leather which rested against the thigh.

I knew this belt as a scabbard belt. It was made to comfortably carry a sword at someone's sides so they could keep their hands free. These belts were designed to work for men that were either right or left-handed, hence the ring at either side to hold the scabbard. The sword would rest at the opposite flank of the wielder's dominant hand to provide an easier draw when the need arose.

What was unique about Thomas was that he had one sword at each side of his hip. The sword at his right thigh was what I considered the normal length of a sword – about three feet in length. It was the type that I expected a knight to carry, which was good for both thrusting and slashing, as I had been well informed in my adventure stories. The sword at Thomas' left thigh was different, though. It appeared to be a little over a foot in length. I could not help but wonder what it was for.

“Everything alright, Rose?” Thomas asked.

“F-fine! Everything's fine!” I responded quickly.

I had been staring – worse, I had been gawking at his appearance. The realization drew a blush to my face and caused me to look anywhere but at the man speaking to me. To make matters worse, I was still clutching onto the back of a chair like I was going to do something with it.

Thomas stepped off the landing of the stairs and moved into the lobby proper. His stance was poised and matched the outfit that he wore to the letter. I could not help but notice the differences between us once more. Ser Thomas was a man with title and wealth with a wardrobe to match. He was the sort of man that could pay a gold coin for a few nights stay in a place that had the audacity to call itself the King's Rest Tavern.

Meanwhile, I was dressed in a homespun mud colored dress that fell just past my knees that I have been wearing for the last four days. My shoes were patched over and still had holes in them, and my stockings were dirty and ragged. My idea of a bath was a once-a-week ordeal and in the interim I splashed water on my face and hands and called myself clean.

I was not unique in Hamlet; this was just the state of being for everyone living here. We were dirty, hard-working folk who did their best to get by. The difference between us and someone like Ser Thomas was staggering and insurmountable. I saw that now that we were standing across from each other in a well-lit room. It was easier to pretend otherwise while we were in the dark last night that I could have been on an even ground with the man.

I felt like I was the size of a bug. Worse than that, I felt like a bug that was at any minute going to be swatted away for simply being in the area. I understood why so many people left early last night when Ser Thomas came into the room. I had the same compulsion come over me now, and I was struggling to not follow through with it.

Thomas, for his part, seemed to have no inclination whatsoever about how I was feeling. He was instead surveying the room from where he stood. Despite the ratty appearance I had in comparison to him, Thomas stood as comfortable as he was breathing. It was almost as if he himself did not see the differences between us – either that, or he was simply used to it.

“Where has your father gone off to? I was hoping to pick his mind over something.” Thomas questioned as his attention drifted back to me.

“Chores.” I sputtered, “My brother’s out so he’s got to pick up some of the work.”

“Wouldn’t want to bother him while he’s doing those, would we?” Thomas spoke the question with a sigh. “Did he leave you here to watch over me, then?”

The question put me on the back foot when I was already struggling to keep my proverbial footing already. Not only did Thomas already guess what I was instructed to do, he confronted me on it without a moment of hesitation. It seemed that forwardness was accurate to a knight's description in my stories.

I could only give a nod in reply to the question. I did not see the point in keeping up with a ruse that had been seen through already. Thomas let out a hardly audible sigh through his nose as he stared down at me.

"Can't be helped, can it? Not in a place this small." Thomas concluded.

"He's trying to make sure you get on well." I said.

It was a shallow defense of my father's instructions, but I had to defend him somehow. The way Thomas' face contorted into a frown made it seem like the knight was mad at the whole world. It was as if having people in a small-town keeping watch over a stranger was offensive to him in some way and not a fact of life.

"I'm sure that's the case. And you likely don't have anything better to do either?" Thomas asked.

"You're my number one priority today, Ser Thomas." I answered smoothly.

It was the frown that gave me the courage to speak up. I had shaken off that momentary shock from our stark differences. It was true that Thomas was finely dressed, wealthier than all of Hamlet combined, and had a noble bearing – no one could deny that. But here in Hamlet, he was the one that stood out like a sore thumb.

"Yes. I suppose I am." Thomas' frown only grew at my answer.

"I won't get in your way, Ser Thomas. If anything, I can make sure you don't get lost like you did last night." I wore my winningest simile for good measure.

Chapter 8: A Stroll About Hamlet

“If I’m stuck with you, I might as well make use of you.” Thomas spoke as he sized me up, “I want to meet with everyone in Hamlet. What’s the best way to do that?”

“Go to where they’re at.” I didn’t have to think about my response.

“And where are they all at?” Thomas asked with a thinning patience.

“Out in the fields, or at the brewery. Could take a stroll around the fields before visiting with Mister Bartholomew.” I suggested.

Thomas found this plan agreeable, and we set off together. The first stop would have been to Otto’s store, but he and his apprentice were gone for the next week. I led Thomas further down the wending dirt path up to the first field.

It was planting season for wheat, so our fields were empty with a stray farmer littering the fields keeping themselves busy making sure their seeds were well tended to for the cold months ahead. They were focused on their work, so many did not notice us standing at the edge of the field. Those that did see us looked from me to Ser Thomas and quickly looked away in a discomforted fashion. Closest to us was the oldest man in Hamlet, Mister Tucker, and it was he that Ser Thomas decided to start with.

Tucker was in his late sixties by my estimate. He had one lazy eye, stood about six foot tall and was about as lanky as a newborn fawn. Tucker also had the attitude of a dead skunk and anyone that got on his bad side – which was the only side I knew – got to enjoy his stink for the duration of their visit.

“Good morning, sir.” Thomas greeted while walking toward Tucker.

“What do you want?” Tucker did not bother to look up from his planting to even acknowledge the knight.

“Just to have a chat. I’m Ser Thomas and…” Thomas began.

“And I’m busy. Gots no time for no chat.” Tucker interrupted, still without looking at Thomas.

“I understand. You’re a man of action, as am I.” Thomas changed his course in a vain attempt to navigate the conversation to a proper start, “So I’ll cut to the chase. How long have you been in Hamlet?”

“Long enough.” Tucker answered briefly.

“And do you like it here?” Thomas prompted.

“No, and I’m liking it even less now.” Tucker finally stood up and sized Thomas up and down. It almost looked like the old man was debating if he could take the knight out in a fistfight should the need come up.

“What has left the sour taste in your mouth, good sir?” Thomas asked.

“You!” Tucker’s shout was enough to turn a few heads toward the conversation turned confrontation.

“What have I done?” Thomas frowned; he was clearly not expecting the brilliant personality Tucker had.

“For starters, your boots are messin’ up all my work!” Tucker barked out while swinging his hand down at Thomas’ boots – which were, in Tucker’s defense, covered in soil he clumsily trod through. “And now you’re distractin’ me from fixing the mess you made. So yeah, I got a problem with you, mister fancy-pants.”

Thomas looked down at his boots before looking up to meet Tucker’s non-lazy eye. He wore a conflicted expression. It was like the knight was expecting an entirely different response

than the one he had gotten. I began to wonder if Ser Thomas had ever spent time ‘in the shit’ proper like he had told Marquis in the stables.

“I have been nothing but cordial to you, and you’re...” Thomas started.

“You ain’t been nothing but a pain in me arse since you got here. Piss off.” Tucker interrupted Thomas yet again.

I wish I could say the rest of the conversation turned better from there, but Ser Thomas did not prove to have a silver tongue for the old man Tucker. I would call the knight unlucky that his first real challenge in Hamlet was against a force such as Tucker, but even if Thomas was prepared for the old skunk, I doubt he could have made that man honestly answer a single question.

While Tucker’s reaction was not unexpected, I could not help but feel like he came out of the gate swinging and looking to fight Ser Thomas. Word does travel fast in a place the size as Hamlet, though, and I figured that everyone knew that Ser Thomas was a representative of the ‘Good’ Baron Gimsby. With a reputation like that weighing on the knight’s shoulders, I would be surprised if anyone freely answered questions for the man.

Ser Thomas turned and abruptly walked away from the exchange. His retreat earning him a few more jabbing remarks from behind as Tucker bent down to start his work again.

“What kinda man walks ‘round with two swords? Must got a small pecker I reckon.” Tucker spoke just loud enough for his voice to carry, but quiet enough that it pantomimed a whisper.

Thomas returned and looked down at me with an expression that I can only describe as off-put. It reminded me of Caleb whenever John made an offensive comment toward him.

Thomas looked the same way Caleb's jaw sets and his shoulders square, like he is just begging for the opportunity to take a swing at someone.

"I must apologize, Rose." Thomas sighed out and resisted the urge to look over his shoulder at Tucker, "No lady should have to hear such dribble in an open field."

"Dribble? That's just Tucker." I answered truthfully.

"You mean you're used to this sort of talk?" Thomas seemed genuinely upset at the question.

"I guess so. I was expecting you to hit him - surprised you didn't." I smiled before leaning to the side to look around Ser Thomas to the still-cussing Tucker, "He's going to end up bragging about how he made you run away with your tail between your legs."

"I could not care less what an old fool thinks of me." Thomas replied sharply before adding, "With no constable around, he should be the one caring what I think. I have the authority of the law here."

I wondered what Thomas meant by that. We did not have a prison in Hamlet, and any issues of legality were settled behind closed doors. Hamlet did not have any problems with lawlessness. Yes, we had a few that were rough around the edges like Tucker, but we were honest folk at the end of the day.

"Either way," Thomas continued with a sigh, "I think this field is a dead end now. Shall we move along and try to find some greener pastures?"

We spent the rest of the morning walking around Hamlet. Thomas tried to speak with various other farmers and each conversation went the same. There was a brief introduction, a few questions about how long they have lived in Hamlet. Thomas then asked what they thought of the region and if they had noticed anything out of the ordinary.

While I can say these conversations went better than what had been with Tucker, I could tell based on the knight's expression after each talk concluded, he was no less satisfied with the answers he received. I couldn't help but wonder what Thomas was after with these questions. By the time we stopped for a midday meal, my curiosity got the better of me.

"Why are you asking all of these questions?" I wasn't subtle at all, and shameless in my direct approach.

We were leaned up against one of the many broken fences that marked the borders of the different fields. Thomas was chewing on a hardened piece of cured meat while I was enjoying the handful of maple seeds that I scavenged during one of Thomas' many talks. He looked down at me curiously as if he was having an internal dialogue with himself. After spending the time to take another bite from his meat, Thomas spoke.

"I'm just getting a read on people, Rose."

"What for? I heard you talking to Pa this morning about counting people." I pressed.

"Did you, now? Suppose the walls are thinner than I thought at your father's establishment." Thomas considered me a moment as he chewed on his food and then asked, "Do you listen to people often without their knowing?"

I flushed and looked down at my hands as I recalled the countless times I eavesdropped on nearly everyone in Hamlet. It was a habit I picked up nearly eight years ago. It started with small conversations here and there. I was always in the same room or close-by to begin with, and they were harmless conversations, too! Small talk, concerns about the lack of rain, whether or not this was the year they were going to leave Hamlet behind. Yet as I grew older, I discovered that even if my presence was minimal in a room, some topics were not brought up unless a group thought they were alone, so I started to practice being out of sight.

I always suspected that people knew but none ever went so far as to call me out on it. I will be the first to admit, I would not want people to spy on me, but I at least always tried to be careful to make sure I was actually alone before having any important conversations with people – not that I had many important conversations to begin with. Thomas was the first person to confront me with my little habit. I had gotten so used to not being suspected that I did not have any recourse to dissuade his line of thinking.

“Not my fault folk aren’t shy with their words.” I mumbled my admission. Honesty was likely the best option here.

“I suppose it isn’t.” Thomas sighed out.

“So? What’s it all for?” I asked again.

“Can you keep a secret? Won’t go telling anyone?” Thomas asked after a significant pause.

I nodded.

“I’m looking for people, Rose. Bad people.” Thomas answered.

“There aren’t bad people here!” I protested. “I – well, there’s Old Man Tucker, but that’s just how he is. He wouldn’t go hurting nobody regardless of what he says.”

“No, not people you know, Rose. Strangers. I’m looking for anyone odd that doesn’t belong in Hamlet.” Thomas assured me.

“Well, there’s nobody like that in Hamlet.” I said with confidence. The only one that stood out was Thomas himself, but I figured that he knew that already.

Thomas studied me for a good moment before seemingly deciding that he was done with his midday meal and tossed the remaining portion of his food out toward the tree line. I watched the waste of food with a mix of shock and confusion. People did not throw things away in

Hamlet. There was always a use for something, and if you could not find a use for it, someone else surely would.

“For the birds,” Thomas commented after he threw away his meal. “You said the brewery was close? I’d like to go there now.”

I tore my attention away from the wasted food as the wasteful knight made his intentions clear. Resisting the urge to go gather the food off the ground, I nodded and turned toward Bartholomew’s Brewery.

The walk was one of silence. Between Ser Thomas tossing away his food and saying that there were people in Hamlet that did not belong, I had a lot to think about. I began to think about the last few days and tried to see if I could spot anything out of place, but everything seemed to be perfectly normal up until –

“We’re missing some pans.” I broke the silence with my revelation.

“What?” Thomas asked, not sure how or where my statement came from.

“We’re supposed to have five pans in the kitchen, but two went missing and I don’t know where they’re at.” I clarified. “That’s odd. Right?”

“I don’t see how missing kitchenware is important to me.” Thomas answered flatly.

I felt like a fool at Thomas’ comment. He was looking for men and I was telling him about pans like they had grown legs and run off themselves. I sighed and resigned myself to asking John about the missing pans when I got home. My hopes at being helpful in the knight’s manhunt were dashed and I resigned myself to being just a nosy escort around Hamlet.

We eventually came upon Bartholomew’s Brewery. It was by far the largest building in Hamlet in terms of actual space that it took up. It had to be large, given that it was the main reason Hamlet managed to keep out of ruin. Nearly everything produced was put into the

brewery so that we could make sure we had something to sell to vendors in River Meet whenever Otto went out each month.

For all the building's importance, though I had never been inside. My father told me that it was no place for children when the brewery first got up and running. As I got older, I was told that it was no place for young ladies, and that I could get hurt if I went inside.

More recently, however, Bartholomew himself seemed to have gotten prickly about letting me anywhere near the building. Sure, I might have tried to sneak my way into the building and was caught climbing up along some crates and boxes along the outside wall toward the roof last year, but that was no excuse to prevent me from going inside. The whole misunderstanding could have easily been avoided if I had been allowed in at least once.

Thomas, on the other hand, had no qualms with walking right up to the entrance of the brewery and heading inside like he owned the place. For what it was worth, I figured he likely could have bought the building if he felt like it. I timidly walked inside after him and spent the first few moments looking around.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. I had smelt Bartholomew's brew after it had been bottled and just assumed the smell would be the same. But this was different. It was like an animal had died and since had its stomach bloat and pop. The aroma was mixed with a spattering of cow dung and heat. It nearly made me wretch – no wonder those that imbibed in too much alcohol were quick to throw it up. This was by no means a natural place.

I fought through the smell and looked around in an attempt to find the source. There were six people inside aside from Thomas and me. Each of them was busy with their own tasks and did not even take the time to notice us.

Two stood over a large wooden vat that required a set of stairs to reach the top of. Both had a stirring rod which I suspected must have been as long as the vat. The first thought that popped into my mind was that of witches stirring together some foul brew that would kill the hero if they drank it. The scale was too large, and everyone knew that a witch was covered in warts and had a long, crooked green nose, but the image remained with me.

One figure stood over a smoking pit dug into the dirt floor of the room. The person looked intently down into the hole and busied themselves with dropping cuts of wood down into the hole. There was sweat on this person's brow and from what I could tell that sweat came from them standing over a fire to guess how hot it burned. I wondered if I looked like that when waiting for the stove to heat up in our kitchen?

The remaining three were walking around in a controlled bit of chaos. They had heavy looking bags on their shoulders walking to and from the pit in the middle of the room. Pouring in the contents without a care for where they landed in that hole, I curiously began to make my way over to get a better view of what was inside of that pit other than a fire. Though just as I took my first steps, a voice called out.

“Step away from there, girl! Your father will flay me alive if he finds out you fell into a vat.” It was Bartholomew.

Bartholomew was the one standing over the pit and gauging its heat. I did not recognize him initially due to the heavy leather apron he wore and the strip of cloth acting like a bandana over his head. Yet there he was, clear as day, and I stopped in my tracks without another step or word. We both knew I was not supposed to be in here.

“Excuse me,” Thomas addressed Bartholomew. “I’m looking for the owner of this brewery, where can I find him?”

“That’d be me,” Bartholomew answered while moving to approach Ser Thomas. “I hope you’re not here with a complaint about our product? Afraid I left my sword in my office.” The man grinned in jest as he eyed the knight curiously.

“Can’t say I’ve ever had anything you made.” Thomas answered evenly, “I’m hoping you can answer a few questions for me, though. I’m Ser Thomas.”

“Thomas? Ah – the hound.” Bartholomew’s lips curled into a grin at that. Before I could even begin to hazard a guess as to why he was smiling, Bartholomew looked down at me. “Well, run along. Get out of here, Rose.”

I looked to Ser Thomas as if expecting him to explain the situation, that I was invited along and acting as a guide around Hamlet. The knight looked down at me with a smile, and just as I felt hope lifting in my chest that he would come to my defense, Thomas gave a wave goodbye with his hand.

“So long, Rose. Thank you for your help.” Thomas dismissed me.

“I can wait right outside...” I started to speak.

“That’s quite alright. I can find my way back.” Thomas interrupted me gently.

I felt betrayed. Sure, Thomas had no real obligation to keep me around, but the man did not even lift a finger in my defense. He could have at least pretended to be reluctant to get rid of me. With a defeated nod, I turned and walked toward the exit of the brewery. If I had any sort of consolation, it would be that I could get away from the stink of the building.

I could feel a set of eyes on me, it was likely Bartholomew was watching me like a hawk. He made sure I was out of earshot before speaking. If anything, Bartholomew was a careful man that kept to himself. Out of all the people in Hamlet, he was the one that I never really felt comfortable around. He had the face of a schemer if I had ever seen one before, and

Bartholomew only left things feeling more uneasy with me when he referred to Ser Thomas as ‘the hound.’ I guess out of the everything that happened this morning, that title was the one thing I had to bring back to my father as actual information.

All that was left for me to do was head back to John’s and wait for my father to return from wherever he went off to. I walked with a sense of purpose back to the tavern. I had come to realize that my understanding of knights was different than I first learned through reading.

There was a taste of disappointment to this revelation, but I was also a little happy that I discovered there was a difference between reality and fiction, and all it took was a simple stroll around Hamlet for me to recognize this fact. I could not help but wonder what else I could learn with Ser Thomas around.

Chapter 9: Orcs in the Woods

My return was an uneventful one, as when I arrived my father was nowhere to be seen. I suspected he was at our home, so I went down the beaten path behind the tavern and he was not there either. It was an odd thing, for all the time I was alive, my father was always at his tavern doing something to make himself busy. I never considered where he might go to spend spare time otherwise.

I found myself bored waiting. Normally I would hunt down Caleb and harass him in an appropriate sibling manner, but he was off in the city. The few others near my age were also busy with work in the fields, making sure their family had a dinner ready, or were doing other important chores. I think I started to realize why my father swept the floor so often.

Before I knew my feet were moving me, I was in our kitchen. I took to counting the plates, pans, and cutlery. Everything was accounted for, minus two pans. I frowned. There was

something going on around Hamlet that I did not have all the pieces to, and that fact was making me frustrated.

I went through what I knew from when I started to notice things were odd. I was asked to make two too many pies for dinner one evening. That night, Bartholomew was paying a visit for dinner – something he rarely did. Otto also flirted with me that night, but it was a regular occurrence at this point that I hardly paid any attention to him.

The next day, we were missing two full pies and two pans. Nothing else stood out until the night Ser Thomas arrived and started to ask questions about how people felt in Hamlet. Thomas did say he was looking for bad men as well, and then Bartholomew called Thomas a hound as if he knew the knight by another title.

And that was all I knew. I tried to connect the missing pans to Ser Thomas, but he was not even around when the pans went missing, nor did I suspect he was the sort of man that would steal a pan. Maybe there was no connection? Maybe I spent too many hours reading stories about adventuring knights where everything pointed toward a greater meaning? I recalled what Caleb said to me earlier about my choice in books.

It was possible that Ser Thomas was right and there was no connection between his search for bad men and the mystery of my missing pans. Though I also could not help but shake the feeling that these two things had to be connected. People did not steal in Hamlet, after all. There were no bad people in Hamlet. So, it stood to reason that there were bad people that were not a part of us, and they would steal pies.

Why steal pies, though? The thought came unbidden, and I did not have an answer for it. There was a reason for it all, but I had to be missing something. Another piece of the puzzle that I was not aware of. But where would I find it?

I was wracking my mind to figure out some sort of place to start searching for missing links when the kitchen door opened, and my father walked in. He had in his hands two pans. Our plans. We stared at each other for a few moments. Me in stunned silence, he in mild confusion.

“What are you doing here? Where’s the knight?” John asked.

“Bartholomew made me leave his brewery.” I half-answered while eyeing the pans suspiciously.

“Of course he did.” John sighed while moving to hang the two pans along the wall. “Did you at least get anything out of our guest?”

“Where did you find our pans?” I asked.

My question caught John off-guard. John turned to look at me, and I could read on his face that he was trying to figure out what to say. My father eventually sighed and gave a humble shrug of his shoulders.

“Just went to go pick them up. Loaned ‘em out a few nights ago.” John answered easily enough before adding, “Anyway – you learn anything from the knight?”

Picked up from who, I wondered to myself. I did not have long to consider the answer, but I felt like John was hiding something from me.

“Not much,” I answered after shifting my focus from the hanging pans to my father. “Said he was looking for some bad men, and before I left ways with him, Bartholomew called him a hound.”

“A hound?” John repeated with a furrowing of his brow, “Guess that’s something. Good job, Rose.” His praise seemed genuine, but it felt hollow upon receiving it. “I’ll start making dinner, you go relax – think you earned it for the day’s work.”

I nodded my head and spared one last look at the two pans. I wanted to ask a few more questions, but I recognized the quiet dismissal my father gave me. Without another word, I turned and walked out the back.

Assuming that John was going to start cooking immediately after I left, I would still have a few hours to spare before I needed to go back. I had to clear my head, so I went for a walk toward the woods. I wanted to find the glade I had fallen asleep in before so I could get away from everything for a time.

Bad men in Hamlet, borrowed pans, and a hound sniffing around was too much for me to struggle with at the moment. I thought about Caleb's reaction to it all before he left. Strange was the right word I concluded as I walked through Hamlet to reach the section of wood I was familiar with. The one consolation I had was that Ser Thomas would be gone soon – just a few days he had told his horse – and then things could go back to normal.

It was odd wanting things to feel normal again. I had only been in this curious state for a short while and I found it exhausting. With a book, I could just read to the next page and solve the mystery or advance the knight's quest along at my own pace. The reality of the situation was proving to far less simple than enduring until the end of a chapter.

I made it to the tree line quickly. I only realized that I had hurried at a pace somewhere between the speed of walking and running through Hamlet. The eagerness to be away from everything carried my feet and only once I was surrounded by the familiar trees that I found myself slowing to a walk.

Gathering herbs and edible nuts came naturally to me as I walked. The act slowed my progress toward the glade, but it did wonders to clear my head. Focusing only on what I could

control and see was a grounding force in the tides of chaos that were filling my mind just moments before. And as my mind cleared, I began to let my imagination wander once more.

Instead of picturing sneaking through the woods to find a camp of goblins, or dreaming about killing orcs with my trusted Orcbane, I found myself in a scenario where I wandered into the woods and never came out. I had grown sick of all the rumors and secrets that everyone had and I went to make a new life for myself away from it all.

It was a nice fantasy, getting away from everything, but even as I was living it, I realized that life was never so easy. I would probably get bored living in isolation – I already felt the same way in Hamlet. Running away would be trading one problem for another, and despite how I felt about things, I did still prefer the company of my family over trees.

As I crouched down pull up an edible mushroom I saw, I heard a rustling to my right. I froze on the spot – there should not be anyone in the woods from Hamlet right now. I held my breath and slowly moved my way into a nearby bush while making as little sound as possible.

My eyes were wide as I looked around for the source of the noise. The initial movement sounded too heavy to be a small animal like a bird or a snake slithering through the brush. I kept my focus low and to the ground to try and see the cause of the sound. I worried that the rapid beating of my heart would give my position away, so through what felt like willpower alone I managed to calm myself some to try to keep a level head.

I began to wonder if whoever made the sound heard me as well when I went into my hiding spot. They had not made another noise since the first, and it appeared that we were both playing a waiting game. I had no clue but a general idea where this stranger was, and I had hoped they only knew my general location as well.

A stillness fell over the woods as the tension rose. I struggled against the oppressive feeling. I wanted to move and shift. I wanted to relax some and find a more comfortable position to hide in, but I was too afraid to make another sound.

I had no idea how long had passed since this contest of hiding started, but it appeared that my opponent grew tired and started to move once more. My blood ran cold as they began to move closer to my position. Did they know where I was? I shrank up just a little more into a tighter ball. I wondered what my next course of action should be. Should I run immediately while shouting and screaming? What if there were more out there than just the one that I heard? Could I fight them off if it came down to it?

I looked around for a weapon of some sort to defend myself with, but aside from the thin sticks that littered the ground, I did not see anything that looked good enough to protect me. I had decided to run. It was the best option I had – it was the only option I had. Taking in a slow breath through my nose, I held it and slowly repositioned myself in a way where I could break off into a sprint at a moment's notice.

Closer and closer each step came before I saw him. A deer! I had been planning my escape from something that was more skittish of me than I was of him. I could have kept walking and the deer would have turned tail and ran away from me because he presumed that I was a threat – and here I was crouched and cowering in a bush acting like our roles were reversed.

The deer was walking toward me and likely had no inclination of my presence. He was walking closer now, but not toward me. No, he moved to a nearby shrub and began to nip and bite at the greens while ignoring me entirely.

I would have been offended at the deer's boldness if I was not feeling so relieved already. I wanted to laugh at my own caution and how silly I had been. I decided to relax myself by

watching the deer eat. At the very least, it was a nice prize for all the turmoil I put myself through.

He was a majestic creature. I might have come up to his shoulder if I was standing next to him. Atop his head he had a crown of horns that branched out evenly into four pointed tips on each side. He seemed healthy, too. A coat of dark brown covered him, with just a hint of white along the underside of his neck and moving down to his belly.

I let myself relax even further as I watched. I smiled and felt at peace – one with nature where I could sit and enjoy the company of the wildlife without any cares or concerns. I began to wonder what the deer's fur felt like. Would he be offended if I came out of my hiding spot to pet him? I decided to risk ending the moment we shared by moving out of the bush that had concealed me.

I was slow and methodical, making as little noise as possible while I moved – but I still made enough noise for my companion to lift his head and stare at me. I stared back and we found ourselves in another contest. I did not want to breathe in a wrong way that would send my skittish friend running away.

Resisting the urge to speak and assure that I was not going to harm him, I carefully began to lift my hand up. We were too far to touch, but I figured moving my hand now would be less startling if I were to move it later. And it was in this position that we found ourselves in for a few minutes. He, filled with so much potential energy to bound off at a moment's notice, and I on my hand and knees with another reaching out toward him.

I could count the seconds with each beat of my heart. Controlling myself as best I could, I slowly started to get up to my feet in a crouch while keeping my one hand extended out toward the deer.

“It’s okay,” I mouthed as if the deer could understand me.

The deer did not understand me, or if he did, he did not believe me. He began to step back, his foreleg rose and from the way his muscles tensed, the deer was just a moment away from running. I lowered my hand back down, knowing that the moment was soon to pass, and tried to at least enjoy a view of the deer running off. I never got that chance.

There was a quiet noise in the distance. Like a puff of air being blown out between someone’s teeth that was just learning to whistle. There followed a soft whooshing sound – this was a sound I was familiar with, as I had heard it before whenever Caleb was chopping trees. It was the sound air made when it was cut. The subtle noise of something moving quickly through an open space. Then there was an impact followed by a scream.

It all happened so slowly in front of me. An arrow had pierced through the air from some unknown location and landed solidly in the deer’s flank. I stared dumbfounded for the space of a breath. The deer had already turned and ran with the arrow still in his side and a trail of blood running from the wound. My first instinct was to scream – and I did, loudly. I soon ran myself, finding that I was no different than a scared deer being hunted.

I do not know in which direction I ran other than away from where I once was. This was a good way to get lost in the woods, but I was not worried about getting lost. I was worried about arrows flying from the trees and piercing me like they had to the deer. If someone was willing to shoot such an animal unaware when I was standing nearby, then they could have been the sort that would not mind if the arrow went wide and hit me instead.

Orcs. There were orcs in the woods. That thought kept repeating in my mind as I ran senselessly through the woods. I tripped multiple times in my flight over roots and stone. Sometimes I caught myself on a nearby tree, others I fully fell and tumbled, but I never rested

long. My body would not allow it. I was always on my feet and running for as long and fast as I could. It was not until my chest burned and I could not draw breath that I stopped.

Collapsing onto the cold ground, I rolled over onto my back and tried to remember how to breathe. The world was spinning, and I heard a ringing in my ears matching the pace of my heart. My chest felt heavy, like I could not get in any air to my lungs, and I was suffocating. With a labored effort, I managed to roll onto my side and felt my breath coming easier.

With the immediate struggle of not being able to breathe passed, I could instead focus on the pain I felt all throughout my body. Running through the woods at a full-on sprint was foolish at best. I had scrapes and cuts along my arms and legs. My dress was torn in places, and I lost the apron I had tied around my waist somewhere in my mad dash. I was bruised and battered, but I did not think I had broken anything in my many tumbles and falls – though I could not be certain of that until I had the strength to stand up once more.

I also had the threat of not knowing where I was in the woods. What steps could I take to backtrack? How would I find a familiar path to take me home? I had escaped from one danger and fallen into another. The one saving grace that I did have was the sunlight. Based on what I saw, I had about three more hours until it started to grow dark and two more hours of dim light after that before it was pitch night.

Five hours to get my bearings and find my way out of woods with orcs in them. I wished that this was just another fantasy of mine, but the pain shooting through my body as I found the strength to sit up was an ever-present reminder that I was in the thick of things. I did not have a magic sword or the stealth of a cat. There were no helpful witches around that could teach me magic that could navigate me home, either. I was on my own in this.

Looking around from my seated position, I considered my options. I could try to retrace my steps, but that would lead me toward the danger of the archer. For all I knew, he was coming after me – though if he was after the deer, it's likely that he went after his actual quarry. The other option I had was to continue further into the woods and hope that I stumbled across a familiar landmark.

I was originally heading toward the glade that I found myself sleeping in the other afternoon. It was possible that I was nearby. It was also possible that I went in the opposite direction and had no clue where I was. Based on the position of the sun, though, I at least knew which way was North. I knew Hamlet was to the South and then West, but I did not know how far to the South and West it was. Too far in either direction without a proper orientation would see me walking around Hamlet completely unaware that I did.

Loathe as I was to make the choice, I knew that finding a familiar trail was the best way to find home. The familiar trail for me was from where I came and closer to the danger that I fled from. It was not an easy choice to make, but it was the only choice I felt I had. So, with a deep breath, I pushed myself to my feet and began to slowly make my way back to where I encountered danger.

The one saving grace I had was that in my panicked flight, I left a trail that even a newborn could follow. If the broken and bent branches were not enough for me to follow, the many heavy falls I took left behind slides and smears in the foliage were a constant guide to my clumsiness. Then, of course, there were the bits of cloth from my dress that were caught on the sides of some trees. I even found my apron covered in dirt and mud on the forest floor.

I would have been embarrassed if I was not so grateful for my clumsy running. With each step I took, I grew more confident in my ability to make it home before it was too dark to see. I would be safe – assuming, of course, that there was no archer lying in wait with an arrow for me.

As my tracks grew less noticeable, I slowed down to both make sure I did not lose my position as well as to not give myself away. I eventually made my way to where I found the deer. I could tell due to branching path that fired off in a different direction. There was also a streak of crimson upon the ground – blood from where the deer was shot.

I frowned at the memory while looking around the scene to make sure I was alone. I seemed safe for the time being and I realized shortly after that I was no longer lost. My gamble had paid off and I could get back to Hamlet well before nightfall. Just as I was about to make my way home, a thought occurred to me – if there were orcs in the woods then would it not be helpful to know exactly where they were camped at and how many there were?

This was not the sort of thing that one should keep a secret, but the people in Hamlet would likely think I was spinning a tale if I said an orc shot at me in the woods and hit a deer. I could see my father frowning in disapproval and telling me that I should not be playing in the woods. I could picture Ser Thomas looking me in the eye and telling me that a hunted deer has nothing to do with his investigation. I needed proof, and the only way I was going to find that was by following in the tracks of blood on the ground.

No one worth their salt would have shot a deer and left it to rot in the woods, not even an orc. It was safe to reason – since I was not being shot by arrows myself currently – that whoever let the arrow fly went after their quarry. I closed my eyes and drew a deep breath through my nose to steady myself.

Was I really about to try and stalk after someone I had just ran away from in a panic? Every fiber of my being told me that this was a bad idea. I was a stone's throw away from home and safety. I could put this all behind me and wash my hands of it. But could I live with myself if I did? I was about to run away from the vague problems I had in Hamlet just moments before. Now I was going to run away from this problem I faced in the woods? If I kept up this sort of pace, then I would be out of places that I could run away to. Fighting against my urges to go back home, I turned and crouched low to the ground as I began to follow after the streaks of blood littering the forest floor.

I soon found that tracking a deer that had just been struck by an arrow through the woods was harder than retracing my own steps. I could have blamed the cause of this on being extra cautious about being heard or how it was hard to follow blood through the roughage of root and bushes. The main cause for this slow pace was because with every step forward I took, I hesitated long enough to where it was like I was walking backward.

Despite the snail's pace I had taken, I eventually came across a clearing where the deer had given up and died. There was no corpse, but there was a clear path where something large had been dragged through the woods. The trail marks were headed away from Hamlet. I had secretly been hoping that this was just someone from Hamlet hunting. Maybe he did not see me when he took the shot? But if that was the case, why would he be pulling a deer further into the woods and away from Hamlet if that was the case?

This was the point of no return. I just knew that if I started following this path, I would come across the truth of who was in the woods with me. I could head home and tell people what I found. I had evidence of a deer being drug through the woods and a path to follow. I could have gone back.

It was my own curiosity that overrode my better judgement. I got low to the ground, and I followed down the path. I did not know how long I had been following this trail, but the light sneaking through the canopy was starting to dim. I only had a few hours left of daylight now before it would get too dark to see. While it was a dangerous game I was playing with time, it also meant that whoever I was tracking also only had a few hours left until they could not see either.

Given the constraints, I could only assume that the person I was following was not far from their home. Though as time passed, the trail did not seem to ever end. How much of a head start had this person gotten on me that he could still be outpacing me with a deer? It was then that a thought sent an unbidden shiver down my spine.

What if he was not working alone, but there were multiple people pulling the deer? And if there were multiple people that were all headed away from Hamlet, would it stand to reason that these were the people Ser Thomas was talking about? Then, as if to answer one of my questions, I heard voices in the direction I was heading.

I tucked myself quickly behind a tree. I held my breath and strained my ears to listen. I heard a laugh. I relaxed some. They did not know I was following them. As they spoke to one another, I tried to make out who they were from the sound of their voices – but at the distance I was from them, I could not make out who they were or any of their words. I had to get closer but doing so could alert them to my presence.

I closed my eyes and silently wondered what I had gotten myself into. I had no plan, and I had no recourse if things went poorly for me. Slowly exhaling, I opened my eyes and began to ease out of my hiding spot. Just as I moved, a hand clasped over my mouth, and I was pulled back into the woods with muffled screams against a palm.

Chapter 10: A Knight's Discretion

“What are you doing here?” Ser Thomas hissed into my ear. His grip over my mouth was too firm for me to respond, but as soon as he noticed I was not going to continue screaming, he gripped my arms and turned me around to face him. “Answer me, girl.”

What was I doing? I wish I had an answer for that other than ‘I’m an idiot who’s in way over her head.’ I looked down and to the side, ashamed and hoping my face would tell the tale for me. Though Thomas’ grip on my arms did not lessen. It was almost like he was afraid I would go flying away if he let go – he might have been right. I felt my legs trembling in a ready state of panic.

“I’m...” I swallowed at the lump in my throat. My voice sounded unfamiliar to me, like I had swallowed a frog and was trying to croak instead of talk. “I was just getting herbs for cooking. They shot a deer in front of me and then I ran away.”

“Ran away? Rose, you’re sneaking – poorly I might add – toward them. Tell me the truth, girl, or I’ll need think the worst of this situation.” Thomas’ words were harsh and hurried.

The worst of the situation? Thomas couldn’t possibly think I was with these people, could he? Though it made sense that he might. His expression was grim, I could tell he was ready to make some sort of difficult decision, and it would be in my best interest to tell him everything.

“They shot the deer, and it scared me. I ran away and got lost so I had to backtrack to where the deer was.” As I explained, Thomas’ expression shifted slightly to something more neutral. I could tell he was fitting pieces together in his head. “When I got back, I wondered who hit the deer. When I saw they weren’t headed back to Hamlet I thought to follow them and find out who they were, and that’s it. That’s the truth.”

There was a long pause after I spoke my peace. Thomas considered me quietly before releasing me and looking me over. As the knight grew relaxed, so did I.

“You’re not hurt too badly? Look like you took a few tumbles.” Thomas asked.

I shook my head no in response.

“Good. Then turn around and go home. If I heard your scream from where I was, then it means they heard you too. It’s a small wonder they went for the deer and ignored you.” Thomas made a shooing motion with his hand. “We’ll count our blessings later. Go. Leave. I don’t need you in my way.”

I knew the knight was right. I knew that I had no room to argue his point. I knew that if I continued after these strangers that I had no plans to do anything else. I think it was my cowed position that gave Thomas the reason to believe that I was going to head home. The knight turned and moved after the men we had both been trailing.

As I watched Thomas go, I had difficulty keeping track of him. His movements were so fluid and easy, it was like he was a ghost hovering over the ground rather than a man walking through the woods. His silence was impressive, and more than that, it gave new meaning to his insult of my own sneaking prowess.

I had lived in Hamlet my whole life. I made a game of sneaking through the woods and hiding from goblins and orcs alike. In my mind, I was the most skilled sneak that ever existed in the world. But that was all make-believe. I became acutely aware of how the slightest shifting of my weight caused a sound. In comparison to Ser Thomas, I was like a lumbering ogre knocking over trees and stomping my way through the woods. I was equally impressed as I was dismayed by his eloquent display. And then, I lost sight of him completely. The knight had vanished like the mist to a rising sun.

Even after Thomas had vanished into the woods, I could not quite bring myself to move. I was torn between heading back home and continuing from behind. Now that Ser Thomas was a part of the equation, I did not need to make any plans. He would handle whatever needed handling, and I might be satisfied with that if I did not have a strong desire to see what happened, rather than to hear about it later.

I let out a slow breath through my nose and crouched down once more, and in a vain attempt, I tried to imitate the knight's graceful stride through the woods. I still made noise with every step, but I could only hope that I was quiet enough to not attract the attention of Ser Thomas or the men carrying the deer.

As I crawled forward following the trail, the light of the day was fading, and evening was approaching. It would not be long now until things were too dark to see. I was having trouble following the trail at this point, and to make matters worse, the conversation from the two men was far gone from earshot. I would likely have given up if not for the saving grace of the light of what I presumed to be a campfire in the distance. With an objective in sight, I made my way toward the light, and eventually I came to the outskirts of another glade within the woods.

There were three men stood around the fire while a fourth was knelt and field dressing a deer. They were having an animated conversation with each other and seemed to be in good spirits. Each was dressed in a very similar fashion. They had thick blue coats that went down to their thighs. Gambesons from the look of them, padded cloth armor that one usually wore under heavier plated armor. They all wore the same light brown pants and thick boots that rode up to their knees. All their clothes were dirty like they had been living in the woods for some time.

Over the left breast of each of their gambesons was a design like a coat of arms. A stitched shield with four windows in it, each housing a different image. The top two images were

a bouquet of daffodils and a sheaf of wheat. The bottom two images depicted a traditional longsword and a canary. I had no idea what that crest was supposed to represent, but from the looks of these men, they were all representing the same person.

As I looked around the camp, I could see three tents that looked like they had seen better days. Holes were poorly patched in the sides of two, and from the size of them, it would fit two men per tent comfortably. Around the campfire were fallen trees which looked to have been working as make-shift benches, and against these benches were large travel sacks and a few swords nestled comfortably in their scabbards.

I had no idea who these men were. I had no clue what they were doing here. But they seemed to be in high spirits with whatever their reasons. I kept hidden along the outskirts of the camp. When I did not see Ser Thomas with the men, I began to look along the tree line surrounding the glade hoping to catch a glimpse of him, but he was nowhere to be found – at least not that I could see.

“I’m telling ya, the captain hasn’t let us down yet.” One of the men spoke up loudly and directed my attention back to their conversation. There were a few nods of agreement and “Hear hear’s” from the other men. “So, I’m asking this with the upmost respect, Captain, but what are we going to do about that girl in the woods?”

“Just a damn local twat.” Another man spoke up to dismiss the concerns. “I say we’s forget about it. Place like this gonna think it’s some ghost story she came up with for attention I reckon.”

This seemed to earn a few muttered responses that I could not quite make out. Whoever these men were, I figured that they were not fond of the idea I was around when they killed their

deer. It was as if my presence alone was a problem. I wondered what they would say if they knew I was spying on them right now.

“Might be time to move on soon. Heard from the tavern owner that there was a hound sniffing after us.” An authoritative voice spoke up which drew in the attention of the men – mine especially at the mention of a tavern owner. “Town might not believe the girl, but the hound might think it’s suspicious. Two to a patrol tonight, we’re relocating at first light.”

There was some murmured talk around the camp before two men broke off and grabbed a sword each to tie off around their waist before walking off in opposite directions from one another and out of the glade. Neither were headed toward me, but I knew the purpose of a patrol was to keep a secure perimeter around a position one wanted defended. The other two went about their business in the camp, one to finish dressing the deer and the other finding a comfortable spot to sit on a log while talking to each other.

It was about this time that I thought to leave before I saw movement in the brush to my left about twenty feet away. A figure darted out of its hiding spot and scurried up a tree as quick as a cat – but no cat was that large. It was a man, and I wondered if it was Ser Thomas. I did not have long to think about it, as moments later I heard heavy footsteps heading my way from the same direction.

One of the men from the camp came into view. He seemed bored and was not paying much attention – I had worn that same expression before while waiting for water to start boiling. His expression soon shifted into shock to mirror my own as the figure I once saw run up the tree fall down upon him. There was the sound of a quiet gurgle and then silence.

“Something over here!” Ser Thomas shouted over the body of the man he had subdued.

This aroused the attention of the two at the camp still, and one hopped to his feet to start jogging over in the general direction. He did not take the time to grab a weapon.

As the man moved, Ser Thomas darted through the trees and hid himself from the view of the approaching guard. I still had a clear view of Thomas, though, and he was waiting poised with his short blade close to his chest. I saw blood running along its edge and my eyes went wide. He was going to kill them all.

“What’s got you shouting?” The unsuspecting man asked as he drew closer to his companion’s corpse. “This better not be another one of your – Good gods!” His exclamation was cut short as they were the last words he uttered.

Ser Thomas had slipped up behind the man, grabbed his mouth and face thrust the short blade into his back deeply three times. The man’s body crumpled to the ground like a sack full of potatoes. Thomas took a moment to look out toward the camp before silently running along the tree line outside. I suspected he went off to hunt for the other man on patrol while the man dressing the deer at the camp was left unaware of what had just occurred.

I could not move. I felt all the blood drain from my face. My arms and legs were like melted wax. I thought I was going to throw up. I could not look away from the two bodies which lay nearly on top of one another. Dumped and left on the ground as if they were nothing more than something for the birds. The phrase echoed in my mind in Ser Thomas’ voice. Did he value people as lightly as he did his lunch? Something to be thrown away because he was done with it.

Moments later I heard a blood curdling scream from across the glade. It broke me from my daze, and I looked out toward the camp. The one man remaining had stood and armed himself. His sword was outstretched while he turned circles frantically looking for the source of the cry. Was he waiting for his deceased companions to come out of the woods to assist him?

As he turned, the figure of Ser Thomas walked almost casually toward the campfire. He had both of his blades drawn and by the time he stepped into the light, I had a clear view of the man's state. He was dressed in a crimson sheet. The blood of three men he had slaughtered soaked into the clothes he wore. It was only hours before that his ensemble was so spotless that the knight stood out among the people of Hamlet. Now, he seemed an entirely different man – or beast, as I found to be a more fitting description.

“Are you Captain Baxter?” Thomas asked conversationally as he approached.

“Who – what did you do to my men?” Captain Baxter – I presumed – asked with a rattle of sword toward Ser Thomas.

“Tried them for desertion, as the proper authority in the region.” Thomas answered evenly.

The comparison of what happened and how Ser Thomas explained it would have been laughable. He butchered two men in front of me without blinking an eye. I could only guess as to why he was taking the time to have a conversation now.

“Surrender peacefully, and I'll see you make it to your trial alive.” Thomas commanded.

Baxter was trembling. I thought he was about to run away, but in a flash, he shouted and charged toward Ser Thomas. Baxter held his sword in two hands and pointed with the blade's tip aimed at Ser Thomas. With a piercing thrust that broke through the air, Baxter extended his arms forward to try to stab into Thomas' breast.

Ser Thomas nimbly stepped inside of Baxter's guard while bringing his long sword up to parry and pushed Baxter's sword to the side. All in the same motion, the short blade Thomas carried in his off hand was thrust toward Baxter's abdomen. Baxter was quick on his feet and attempted to leap backward while twisting his torso to the side, he was not fast enough to escape

the strike entirely. Baxter swung his sword with a wide swing that caused Thomas to back off from his assault. This gave time for both the men to size each other up for their second engagement.

“Captain, do you really want to die here like this?” Thomas asked while keeping his guard up. “Your position at least earns you the respect of a trial and a hanging.”

Baxter shouted and charged forward once more. His two-handed grip brought his sword over his shoulder and with a mighty downward stroke, he sought to cleave Ser Thomas in twain. Thomas never gave Baxter the chance to recover as he nimbly jumped back before diving forward with the reach of his long sword pierced into Baxter’s right shoulder. Rushing forward, Ser Thomas tackled Baxter to the ground, and before the man could even get a proper guard up, Thomas had delivered two fatal stabs with his short blade into Baxter’s chest.

The whole encounter lasted only a few seconds. Once the skirmish settled, Thomas stood up from Baxter’s body and spared a moment to wipe the sides of his swords against the man’s pantleg to clean them. Thomas sheathed his blades with a breath and a sigh. He looked around casually, as if what he had just done was as normal as planting wheat in a field.

I felt so numb to everything that I did not blink as Ser Thomas began to walk toward me. I didn’t bother to try to move as he called my name. I felt so heavy, and I just couldn’t bear the oppressive weight over me. Tears were running freely down my cheeks, and I did not know why. Was I afraid? Was I mourning these men I never met?

“Rose. Look at me.” Thomas instructed. He had knelt down in front of me and placed a hand that he must have thought was comforting on my shoulder before asking. “Are you alright?”

I shook my head no.

Interlude: Secrets and their Consequences

Caleb had a secret that was weighing on him. It all started when he first went to cut down a tree to make firewood for his father's tavern. It was a day like any other, one where he spent more time thinking about an opportunity to sneak away from Hamlet with Bartholomew's eldest daughter, Mary. Neither of them wanted this life for themselves. Something they both felt was thrust upon them without their consent.

Whenever he and Mary spoke, their conversation went toward River Meet, and how if they only managed to scrounge up enough silver, their lives could be better. But it was always Mary that brought up her kid sister, Sarah, and how she would be torn apart with their sudden flight from Hamlet. Caleb wondered how Rose would take the news – probably dramatically, if he knew his sister at all.

Conversation usually soured after family ties were brought up. They both knew that escaping from Hamlet was a dream neither could achieve, and even if they did manage to scrounge up the coin for it, family would always hold them back. Still, it was to dream, and that shared dream brought them closer together, so Caleb couldn't find a reason to complain.

The sun had just barely begun to paint the morning skies pink when Caleb borrowed the wheelbarrow from Seth and carried it, and the dull axe Otto skimped on sharpening – again – into the woods. He had just gotten his first swing into the tree when a peculiar sight caught Caleb's attention.

There were a group of four men all dressed in uniform. They looked beleaguered, like they had been on the march for a few days now. Caleb recognized their uniform; they were all military men from Fort Fredrick, defenders of the barony and allies alike. It was odd to see an armed squad of soldiers walking through the woods, but technically, they weren't in the wrong –

the King's Wood did fall under their control, and technically Hamlet was a place governed by Baron Gimsby, even though it seemed like he had forgotten about the town over a decade ago.

Upon spotting one another, there was an awkward silence that filled the air. Caleb leaned against his axe in a resting position while the soldiers each exchanged glances and muttered words with each other. The stint went on longer than it should have, and Caleb decided to take the initiative.

“Morning.” Caleb greeted with a wave of his hand, “Help you fine folk with anything?”

One of the men approached and extended his hand in an offer to shake. Caleb obliged with a firm grip and the two men nodded at one another in a mutual understanding. The people of Hamlet didn't have much, but Caleb knew how to judge a man on his handshake.

“Morning. I'm Captain Baxter, part of the protectorate.” Baxter introduced himself.

“Caleb. Part of Hamlet” Caleb responded with a lazy grin before dropping his free hand to rest at his waist.

“Well met, but listen, we're here on a special mission and need two things from you. It's official business, so I'll need your compliance.” Baxter explained as if this was all routine for him. He was secretly hoping that Caleb didn't ask too many questions, and that he could fool the young man for just a little while. “First, we'll need something to eat. Our – uh – supplies were stolen in the night by some wolves.”

Caleb found that odd for two reasons. First, the wolves around Hamlet weren't known for attacking people, especially when a campfire was involved. The second thing he noticed was that the men behind Baxter all had travel backpacks. If a wolf was going to steal food from a bag, they would steal the whole bag instead of rooting through it.

“The second thing we’ll need is your cooperation in our investigation. We’re on the lookout for a man that might be wandering into the region. He’s very dangerous, and if spotted, you must inform us immediately.” Baxter continued after Caleb did not voice any complaints about supplies. “Can you do that for us, Caleb?”

“Sure, I reckon.” Caleb agreed before looking down at his axe. “I’ll convince Pa to let you folk get some food tonight. Come ‘round back of the big building in Hamlet, we’ll keep a lookout for ya.”

Captain Baxter was satisfied with the response and gave his thanks before returning to his men. Caleb let out a sigh before turning to head back to Hamlet. He would have to be quick to get home in time to tell John the news.

“And there’s all that, Pa.” Caleb finished recapping the events that brought him back without any firewood.

“Guess I could spare to make a little extra tonight. You believe them?” John asked with a curious rub to the back of his neck.

“Not one second, Pa. They stumbled out of the woods at me, ain’t no way they’re here on anything official.” Caleb confirmed John’s suspicions with a shrug.

“Still, no reason to not feed ‘em. Might as well keep them happy while we can.” John sighed before waving a hand. “I’ll get your sister to make some extra pie tonight. Don’t tell her nothing, you know how she is.”

Caleb knew exactly how his sister was like. Excitable and lost in her own mind. It made him worried sometimes, especially after having caught her sneaking around in the woods

pretending to hunt some imaginary creatures. He worried that if she kept up her imaginary hunts, then she might stumble upon something real and dangerous.

The next few days were difficult for Caleb. While keeping up with his chores, he also had to keep one eye on his sister and the other eye out for the soldiers that were lurking in the woods. The secrecy led to a fight and a fright when Rose didn't come back from the woods until late one evening. She also had with her a knight – though Caleb soon put two-and-two together and that this 'Ser Thomas' character was here for the same people he was inadvertently housing in the woods.

From what Caleb gleaned, Ser Thomas was only going to be hunting these men for a few days. The people in Hamlet that knew about these soldiers: John, himself, and Bartholomew at John's insistence, had no clue where these men were in the woods. The knight would likely wind up with nothing, and everyone would move on. At least, that is what Caleb hoped. He had no way of knowing, since he was heading out to River Meet with Otto on a supply run for Hamlet.

"All I'm saying is that maybe we don't need to stay out here the whole week." Caleb protested.

Caleb was sitting with Otto in a tavern at some place at River Meet. Caleb couldn't remember the name of the place, even though Otto had been bragging about how all the serving wenches here were in love with him. The truth was, the 'wenches' that cared so deeply for Otto were ladies of the night, and they made Caleb uncomfortable, even more-so since Otto had wrapped his arm around one and pulled her to the booth they were sharing.

"Whaddya mean? We always spend a full week out here!" Otto answered with a grin.

“I mean, we already got the supplies on the list, right? What’s stopping us from leaving come morning?” Caleb asked.

“Come on, son!” Otto urged – Caleb hated when Otto said that as there were only a few years separating the two – “Live life a little. Enjoy some of what the city’s got to offer. I know I will.” He concluded with a jostle of the woman at his side and a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows.

“I’m living life just fine, Otto.” Caleb countered with a bit of heat in his voice, “Not living some fantasy lie out here like you.”

“What’s that some supposed to mean?” Otto glowered back.

“Means I ain’t dumb enough to think that lady likes your ugly mug.” Caleb snapped back before adding to the woman, “No offense, ma’am.”

“None taken.” She giggled.

Otto looked between Caleb and the woman at his side. He had already spent more silver than he had wanted to admit for her company – and that was just to sit in the same booth as him. Still, the less Caleb knew about that, the better.

“We agreed to a week, Caleb, and I’m not telling the other fellas that came up with us we’re going back to that shit hole without our well-deserved break.” Otto slapped his hand down atop the table as if he just had an idea. “So, I’m going to get us some drinks, and we’re going to enjoy ourselves whether you like it or not.”

Otto slipped from the table after that, leaving Caleb and the lady there alone. The pair looked at each other and shared in a moment of appreciated silence away from Otto. It was a small comfort to be away from him, but it did nothing to alleviate the gnawing worry in Caleb’s gut about what he left behind at Hamlet.

“So, you’re Caleb?” the lady asked while shifting forward to rest her arms neatly against the table with an extended hand for a shake. “I’m Jordan, it’s nice to meet you.”

Caleb took the offered hand and gave it a shake. Jordan was a pretty woman, like one would expect working at an establishment such as this. She had fiery red hair in a tangle of curls rolling down just past her shoulders. She was pale and soft, looked like she never worked a day in her life at hard labor.

“Pleasure’s all Otto’s, I’m afraid. Can’t say I’m too keen on being here.” Caleb sighed after he realized he repeated himself. “There’s just business I want to get back to while not sitting on my hands for the next few days. Got me worried, you know?”

“Left your stove burning or something?” Jordan quipped with a smirk.

“Nah – I’m just worried about...” Caleb started.

“Your sweetheart?” Jordan interrupted with a guess.

“Her, some, and how she’d think of me for being in a place like this. But it’s mostly my little sister I’m worried about.” Caleb explained.

“Little lie about where you were never hurts when it comes to keeping relationships healthy.” Jordan gave her unsolicited advice, which Caleb didn’t find himself agreeing with.

“Sister though? What’s got you hung up on her?”

“Well, she’s a troublemaker for starters. Can’t leave her alone for half a minute without her wanderin’ off.” Caleb answered while resting his cheek in his palm. His elbow had since rested on the table to give him a proper perch to watch Otto clumsily try to get the bartender’s attention.

“She sounds young, what’s her name?” Jordan asked to keep the conversation going.

“Rose, and she ain’t too young. ‘Bout a year younger than me.” Caleb answered.

“Young enough to still make you worry.” Jordan sighed wistfully, “I used to fret the same way about my little sister. But you’ve got to learn to let them go off on their own sooner or later.” She paused to give Caleb a level look, “-Nothing more frustrating than a man trying to do everything for a lady like we’re going to break if unattended. Doesn’t matter the lady, either, could be your sweetheart, could be your sister.”

Caleb frowned as he mulled over Jordan’s advice. She was not wrong, as far as he could tell. He remembered the argument he had with Rose in the woods about her reading habits. A sigh left him before Caleb nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right. Guess we all still got some growing to do.” Caleb said.

Caleb relaxed back in his seat just as Otto returned to slide back in next to Jordan. Two drinks were placed down, one for Otto and the other for Jordan. Caleb couldn’t help but grin as he was excluded from the tap.

“What’s got you grinning like an idiot – more like an idiot.” Otto adjusted himself in his seat.

“Just thinking, Otto, you got yourself a wise woman in Jordan here.” Caleb said while rapping his knuckles against the table as he stood. “You’re right, by the way. Just a few days won’t kill nobody.” And with that, Caleb walked away to find himself something to drink.

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