

LADY OF THE JOUST
DEFINING AND CLASSIFYING FLAT CHARACTER ARCS

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ABSTRACT

Character arcs outline the growth or development a character experiences throughout a narrative. Of the three major types—Positive Change, Negative Change, and Flat—the third is often glossed over or ignored in academic settings. The Artist Statement addresses my experience writing a novel when I did not understand what Flat Arcs entailed and thus failed to recognize why my protagonist resisted the more popular Positive Change formula. In the Critical Paper, my analysis of texts dedicated to the craft of character arcs revealed that there are no consistent criteria by which to define or categorize them. Nevertheless, my research suggests that the three major arcs are best defined by whom the arc changes and the new worldview embraced. Additionally, I propose that these Primary Arcs are part of a multilayered classification system that explains where the remaining criteria reside. Finally, the Creative Manuscript includes chapters of my novel-in-progress, *Lady of the Joust*, and a screenplay adaptation of Act I.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

My creative manuscript, *Lady of the Joust*, consists of various chapters from the fiction novel I have been developing throughout this program. It is a medieval fantasy that follows eighteen-year-old Cassandra Ferron, who wants nothing more than to become a blacksmith like her father and older brother, who would rather marry her off at the earliest opportunity. Although she is not opposed to marriage itself, she grows increasingly uncomfortable with the men they choose for her. That is until one day, her rejection sparks violence, and she escapes by disguising herself as a man to enter a jousting tournament that promises a new life for the victor.

This story was inspired by a dream, as cliché as that sounds. Sometime in 2016, I had a dream about a young woman wearing a simple green dress and a heavy canvas apron, her dark hair tied back in a braid that fell to her ankles. She and her older brother worked happily as apprentice blacksmiths in their father's shop, a place where everyone was loved and respected as an equal member of the team—regardless of their age or gender. One morning, this young woman took a walk through the woods behind her house and found a small box half-buried between some large tree roots. She immediately brought the box home and showed it to her family, explaining excitedly that the contents could be modified and become a major boon to their business. Her family did not share her enthusiasm. They acted strangely tense, brushing her off and telling her to put the box back where she found it.

I woke up before I could see how the story ended, but I got a vague impression that the men were embarrassed or ashamed of their history with the box. I also got a distinct impression that the girl was going to follow through on her plan, and that it would work. This was interesting to me because her success would not only have reaffirmed her creativity and skill as a blacksmith, but it would have proved that her family was wrong to underestimate her. This was

also why I was drawn to the name Cassandra, because she reminded me of the figure from Greek mythology who was blessed with the gift of prophesy but cursed so that her predictions were never believed.

This dream struck a particularly painful chord with me because I identified with her experience. Between the ages of ten and seventeen I suffered from severe mold toxicity, but at the time, nobody could pinpoint the source of my pain. For years, I chalked up my symptoms to everyday causes: my chronic sinus infections were just seasonal allergies, stomachaches were probably food sensitivities, and obviously, staying up late to study every night was going to make me exhausted and anxious all the time. Unfortunately, there was a growing list of symptoms that grew harder to dismiss. Migraines, inflammation, temperature dysregulation, hair loss, and memory loss made it hard enough just to get through the day. They made searching for answers exponentially harder, especially when all my medical tests came back normal. Most doctors took that as proof there was nothing wrong with me. Instead of expanding the parameters of their search, they brushed me off. They labeled me a hypochondriac and a drug-seeker before I even learned how to drive.

I was sick. My mom and siblings were too, albeit with drastically different symptoms and severities. It was not until we started combing through Facebook forums dedicated to chronic illnesses that we found even a glimmer of hope. We were searching for stories like ours, for people who were sick and sick of being ignored by the people they trusted to help them. That was when we stumbled across a post about toxic mold and a list of more than thirty symptoms it is known to cause. My mom tallied up twenty-five. I counted twenty-three.

It was a step in the right direction, but the road ahead got much worse before it got better. Mold was growing in our house, and we knew it. The roof of our home was damaged during

Hurricane Ike in 2008, and our insurance refused to cover the repairs. But, seeing as the damage did not seem to cause any immediate problems, we left it alone for a while. Over the years, even after we fixed the roof, we noticed water stains appearing across our ceilings and trailing down our walls. A faint musty odor developed, too. We realized these were probably signs of mold, but we initially shrugged them off. We painted over the stains, got used to the smell, and promptly forgot about both. We had no idea how much danger we were in. We had no idea that the mold was slowly poisoning us, building up toxins in our bodies until they began to shut down.

We did not discover that Facebook forum until late 2014, and by then the water stains were the least of our worries. Months of more formal research led us to the conclusion that mold is nearly impossible to remove from the body or any other porous material. Even the best decontamination efforts do not guarantee anyone's safety, so even if we decided to renovate, we would never truly feel safe. Ultimately, on the day after Christmas, my family made the difficult decision to abandon our house and everything we owned. We started over in an empty apartment with nothing but our cell phones and the two or three pairs of clothes we bought from Walmart on the way over. Perhaps even worse than this, however, was not being able to tell anyone about what we were going through—and not being believed when we did.

For about the first year after we left the house, my parents asked me not to tell anyone about our situation. I think that they blamed themselves for our situation, that they were embarrassed for not taking the leaky roof seriously until it was too late. So, I did as they asked. I talked to our friends about school and church and books and music, but nothing about eating dinner in lawn chairs or sleeping on air mattresses. Honestly, sleeping on an air mattress was not even that hard. It made me realize just how many simple luxuries I took for granted. The hard part was withholding that information. Not only was I bottling up my own feelings, but I felt like

I was deceiving our friends by not sharing something that had such a huge impact on our lives. They would have wanted to know. They would have wanted to be there for us, and when we finally told them, they were. At least, they were there to offer encouragement.

Our friends did not always understand or accept the truth about the effects of toxic mold. Some thought our reaction to mold was like a peanut allergy, harmful to us but not to them. Others thought it was more like lactose intolerance, where a lot of exposure could be dangerous but a little was no big deal. Then there were some who thought, simply because we *looked* normal, that we were overreacting, exaggerating, lying for attention, or maliciously spreading misinformation. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The truth was that we were hurting and wanted to protect them from our fate. We wanted them to understand that toxic mold is more like a radioactive substance: in high enough doses, and with long enough exposure, it will affect anyone. That was why we finally decided to begin sharing our story, to warn them, especially if we recognized the signs in their homes and families. Of course, we probably should have expected some adverse reactions. Our story was dark, and nobody wanted to accept that it could happen to them just as easily as it did to us. But getting reactions like these—denial, skepticism, rejection—made us feel like we were yelling into a void. It made us feel like there was no point in speaking up if we were only going to be brushed aside.

Again, this is part of why I want so desperately to write Cassandra's story. We both know what it is like to be dismissed, to feel helpless, and to want to share something we know to be true even when it makes others uncomfortable. I want to use my experience to do justice to her story, and I want to use her story to shed light on my experience in a way that readers might be willing to accept. Moreover, I want Cassandra to finish her story in an even better place than I have. While my family is significantly better off now than we were in 2008 and 2014, some of

our symptoms are permanent. Our journey toward recovery and acceptance will be lifelong. Cassandra's story will be different. Even if her experiences stick with her character forever, she should be stronger than I was, more vocal than I was, and her efforts should have a greater payoff than mine. Her story is one of hope, and I hope to one day bring it to life.

That day was not in 2016, however, because I was barely two years into my recovery and about to graduate high school. I still did not have the time or energy to plot out a full-length narrative. Instead, I wrote down as many details of the dream as I could remember and promptly shelved it. The story stayed there for about two more years. By then I was in much better health and my third year of college, pursuing a major in journalism and a minor in creative writing. An assignment for a fiction workshop involved writing a fifteen-page short story on a topic of my choice, and I saw this as an opportunity to begin Cassandra's journey.

The first thing I did upon learning of this assignment was review existing fictional works that reflected elements of the story I wanted to tell. Some of my inspirations included books like Melanie Dickerson's *Hagenheim* fairytale romance series and films like *A Knight's Tale* (2001), *Mulan* (1998), and *Ever After* (1998). Most of these works fell between genres, having too little magic to be considered fantasy yet not enough historical accuracy to be historical fiction. But for all intents and purposes, they were generally considered fantasy. That was what I wanted to write, something that offered audiences an authentic medieval experience but were not necessarily true to life. Another element I appreciated about these works was that they all featured compelling female leads whose choices greatly influenced the plot, which is sometimes hard to find in fantasy or action pieces. Even if these women were temporarily damsel-ed, they often used their wits to save themselves. Or in some cases, they had previously had such a positive influence on the world around them that former antagonists (or at least reluctant allies)

were willing to help them in their darkest hour. This was how I imagined the overarching trajectory of Cassandra's story, even if I did not yet know where the plot might lead. This was also why one last thing I valued about these fiction works was how they varied in the frequency and intensity of action scenes. While I was unaccustomed to writing actions scenes, this was something I knew I wanted to include, and it was helpful having a variety of references from which to draw inspiration.

After reviewing these fictional works, I also conducted some basic Google research on medieval Europe just to get a feel for the mundane details of the narrative: clothing styles, food preparation, weather patterns, and so on. Again, Cassandra's story falls somewhere between historical fiction and fantasy. It is set in a fictional world that *resembles* the medieval era of this one but does not revolve around any historically significant people or events. With that said, I was particularly drawn to Germanic influences from the early 1500s. Honestly, I am not entirely certain why I was drawn to this atmosphere. I think part of the reason was because this region was a little more unique than the English or French settings of many medieval stories. Another reason could be that the early 1500s overlapped with the height of the Renaissance, which encouraged unprecedented creativity and invention. That was the kind of world Cassandra wanted to live in, so that was the world she ventured to create. My general research expanded beyond these parameters, of course, but these parameters formed a foundation for me to build on. They gave me a place to come back to for help and inspiration, filling in the gaps of my imagination and making my fictional world feel more *authentic*—again, not specifically *accurate*.

The last thing I did before writing was tweak the premise. Trying to expand on my original idea was going to be slightly problematic, at least given my current knowledge and skill

level. As much as I liked the idea of Cassandra finding a box and a good use for its contents—despite her family’s disapproval—I was not sure how spin this idea in a positive light. Any box found in the woods could very well be a Pandora’s Box (a cursed object, a murder weapon, stolen money) and anyone else who stumbled upon such a box probably would have been more cautious. This should have included Cassandra, and it would have included her family if they did not already know the history of the box. The fact that they *knew* did not mean their caution was unjustified. It only meant they were wrong for not trusting her with the truth and for underestimating her abilities to turn their failure into something useful. Likewise, I did not want to present Cassandra’s recklessness as justified simply because she succeeded. Her plan could have easily backfired. Her curiosity could have put her and her family in danger. Looking back, that could have been a compelling flaw for her character. That could also be where I began to have trouble pinning down her characterization. There were several aspects of the dream I wanted to keep intact, however. For one, I liked the idea of Cassandra working in a job she loved alongside a family who treated her as another capable and valued member of their team. I especially liked this idea in the context of a society that typically looked down on women and prevented them from pursuing certain jobs. So, I made that her goal. I flipped the original plot and began her journey in a less-than-ideal world. That way, she could work her way up and out.

This new idea was closer to that which I am developing now. In this version, Cassandra’s brother teaches her to forge but treats her more like a child to be protected than an equal, and their father refuses to let either of them graduate from apprentice to master blacksmith. Instead, he keeps trying to marry her off to whoever will take her. Her rejections, however polite, result in increasingly tense arguments with her father and an attack from her latest suitor. Still determined to marry on her own terms, she plans to escape by disguising herself as a man to

enter a jousting tournament that promises a new life for the victor. Throughout that journey she would prove herself capable of making her own decisions and come home to a family who regretted their treatment of her, and this would start them on a path toward reconciliation.

Obviously, I could not fit all that content into fifteen pages or fewer, so the finished short story read more like a first chapter and ended with Cassandra telling her brother about her decision to joust.

That was my plan for the narrative anyway, but the writing process brought up a lot of trouble with characterization. For one, this version of Cassandra was a lot more timid than the original. This version was a people-pleaser. She was quiet, insecure, and too afraid to speak up for herself (regardless of how much it hurt herself or others) unless she was backed into a corner. Then, she was suddenly too reckless. Her reactions were not desperate or explosive, like she was finally releasing the pressure that had built up over the course of the chapter, but rather like she flipped a switch and became a new person. She was instantly more self-assured, more aggressive, and fully prepared to take drastic measures to get what she wanted. Of course, there was nothing particularly wrong with either of the personalities. Plenty of people are shy and insecure, and plenty of people are a little overconfident. However, there were several key problems with how they appeared in this narrative. For one, there was no natural transition leading up to the change, and the effect was very jarring to readers. For another, neither of these personalities fit with the version of Cassandra that I wanted to write. I wanted her to be capable and confident but not without compassion or moments of doubt. And finally, the version of Cassandra that I wanted to write conflicted with my assumptions about what a protagonist should look like, assumptions which were partly responsible for the messy version of this character.

Throughout much of my education and experience with creative writing, I had been led to believe a protagonist needed to change in order to appeal to an audience. Usually this involved a Positive Change Arc in which the protagonist needed to overcome a major personal flaw or give up something he wanted for something he needed. Other times, protagonists followed a Negative Change Arc in which they gave into their flaws and made increasingly destructive decisions. But Flat Arcs were rarely touched on, and when they were, they were heavily implied to be the simplistic and boring alternative to the Positive Change Arc—if not simply a failed attempt to write one. Sometimes characters like Sherlock Holmes or James Bond were used as good examples, but these were serialized characters known more for their roles than their emotional depth—and emotional depth was what I wanted to write. As a result, I largely ignored anything to do with Flat Arcs.

This in turn led to more confusion about my protagonist and the characters who inspired her because I automatically assumed they followed Change Arcs. But the closer I looked, the more they seemed to drift from the Change-Arc formula. Even then, I understood that writers had the freedom to tweak an established formula to create more engaging experiences for the audience, but again, that did not seem to be the case for me. For example, the way I understood the titular character of Disney's *Mulan* (1998) was that she had flaws (doubt, clumsiness, impulsivity) but did not necessarily overcome them. In fact, these flaws were often portrayed as strengths that helped her to achieve her goals. She also recognized early on that her two desires (to be true to herself and to uphold her family's honor) conflicted by societal standards, yet she consistently found ways to achieve the latter through the former. Aside from a little boost in confidence, neither her behavior nor her goals changed much over the course of her narrative. In a similar vein, Danielle in *Ever After* exhibited traits perceived to be flaws by her society

(outspokenness, cunning) but rarely held back, often using them to stand up for herself and others. As for her personal goals, the first was to escape her wicked stepfamily. This one seemed to double as a want and a need, so her later-realized desire to marry Prince Henry became something of a bonus to be achieved after or in tandem with her primary goal, rather than a competing objective. Again, while achieving these goals changed her way of life for the better, the protagonist herself did not become a better or worse person than before.

This was exactly how I pictured Cassandra in my dream: unique and compelling with honorable intentions but unconventional methods, a character whose flaws made sense for her personality and pushed the plot forward but were not the primary obstacles to overcome. I wanted her to be in the right but not perfect, a protagonist with *depth* but no fundamental *change*. But it was precisely that absence of change that gave me pause because it directly contradicted everything I thought I knew about plotting and characterization. I still believed protagonists had to change in order for an audience to find them compelling, so I continued to assume Mulan and Danielle had Positive Change Arcs. I assumed I was simply not yet equipped to identify what kinds of changes they had undergone, which I also took to mean that I was not ready to embark on Cassandra's journey. Since I did not know how she could—or should—change at any point after the first chapter, I shelved the story again. I wanted to explore other projects until I felt prepared to properly develop hers.

By the time I enrolled in this program, it had been another two years since the last time I committed to Cassandra's story. I was confident that approaching it with new knowledge and a fresh perspective would help me pin down her characterization. This helped in some ways more than others. The first thing I did before beginning to write again was conduct some more formal research. However, these sources were not always conventional. Some were academic books,

journal articles, and diaries. Some were interviews and demonstrations posted to YouTube. Some were more fiction books and films, and one was a reality TV show based on sixteenth-century German tournaments and hosted by professional jousters. Again, my narrative is set in a fictional world. I drew much of my inspiration from sixteenth-century Germany but did not limit my research to this region or era. My intentions were still just to pad my worldbuilding and spark ideas for how to expand my plot beyond the first chapter—and I just enjoyed exploring whatever information was available to me. For instance, my research on jousting alone split into four different categories: historical competitive (Bretel, Adams, Kingsley and Windsor), historical theatrical (Sarrasin), modern competitive (Bradley, Ventri), and modern theatrical (Nichols). As it turned out, there were few if any consistent rules in jousting regardless of the type, location, or time period. Learning as much as I could about all of these tournaments allowed for potentially endless possibilities in designing my own joust.

Some of the best help regarding characterization came from reading K. M. Weiland's *Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful Author's Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development*. In addition to exploring the mechanics of each major external plot point and differentiating wants from needs, this book introduced the concept of "The Lie Your Character Believes." It also explained the three major character arcs in a way that completely flipped my understanding of them. In short, a Positive Change Arc follows a protagonist who begins their journey as an incomplete person. They might hold a deep misconception about themselves or the world around them (the Lie), but whether they realize it or not, the ultimate goal of their journey is to correct his misconception (learn the Truth) and find the closure they need to be happy. Flat Arcs follow the inverse of this structure in that the protagonist is already aware of (or quickly becomes aware of) the Truth in a Lie-ridden world. As such, their journey

becomes more about resisting the Lie and convincing the world of the Truth. That is why these arcs are considered flat, not because the protagonist does not change *at all*—they can gain a broader perspective, learn new skills, or fill a new role—but because their *core beliefs* do not change. Their endpoint is not morally better or worse than their starting point, just different.

This was a huge realization to me because it completely changed my perspective on character arcs in a way that made sense and started to fill in the gaps. While I was still unsure of exactly how to describe Cassandra's Truth-Lie situation, the Flat-Arc formula sounded infinitely closer to the story I wanted to tell than the story I had been attempting to write. Learning about these concepts felt like experiencing a Positive Change Arc of my own. I was not incompetent, just misinformed, so finally discovering a tangible reason for my struggle felt incredibly validating. Interestingly enough, this felt similar to what it was like after discovering that toxic mold was the cause of my health issues. Knowing the cause gave me more control over my situation. It showed me there was a light at the end of the tunnel, even though I knew there was still a long road of recovery to be had.

This process has showed me that learning about Flat Arcs and putting them into practice were two very different skills. Reading a couple chapters from one book only touched the surface of what I wanted to know about them, but for the time being, it seemed like a solid foundation to build on. That is, until I started writing again. Positive Change Arcs are the norm. They were what I was used to writing and what my workshop groups seemed to expect, so there were many times when I unknowingly gravitated back toward that formula. An unchanging protagonist looked too perfect to me, so I kept giving her flaws that did not suit her personality and problems that did not contribute to the narrative. I was constantly battling myself over the ways that I thought Cassandra *should* act versus the ways I thought she *would* act if I relaxed and let the

character reveal herself to me naturally. This made it difficult to outline anything between major plot points because I could not anticipate her moves, which meant that I also could not anticipate how other characters responded to her and her choices. As a result, I focused primarily on scenes required for the story to be possible, like the rejected proposal and the suitor taking revenge. These scenes still have not quite lived up to my expectations and do not fit neatly together yet, but all this experimentation and workshop feedback has been an invaluable learning experience. In addition to helping me identify where I do (or do not) want the story to go, it has revealed some of my strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

Going forward, I would like to conduct even more research. I want answers to my lingering questions about Flat Arcs and the possibility of simultaneous arcs. I want to explore when and how these arcs can be used effectively, the challenges of writing them, and why they are so difficult to identify. I want to reanalyze the books and films that inspired my story and consider how each of my scenes could unfold in more convincing and compelling ways. Understanding why Cassandra resists traditional guidelines might give me the clarity needed to salvage the chapters I have written, saving elements I liked, rewriting what I did not, and filling in the gaps as needed. *Lady of the Joust* is a story very close to my heart. Despite the sometimes frustrating journey, this project has pushed me to explore new avenues of my craft and encouraged me to keep finding joy in every moment no matter what obstacles stand in my way. My hope is that this story, fully realized, might one day provide the same joy and comfort for others that it has for me.

CRITICAL PAPER

Introduction

Character arcs are often defined as the inner growth or development a character experiences throughout a physical journey. They are the heart of any fictional narrative, the reason an audience becomes invested in the story. As such, it is important for writers to know what types of character arcs are at their disposal as well as how they function.

Generally, character arcs appear in one of three forms: Positive Change, Negative Change, or Flat. Throughout much of my personal education and experience with creative writing, these forms were usually taught in the following ways. In a Positive Change Arc, the focal character—the character that the arc belongs to, not necessarily the protagonist—must overcome a major personal flaw or give up something he wants for something that will make the world a better place. This path is used most often for protagonists and sometimes their allies, especially those following the Hero's Journey. It is also the most popular form and thus the one that writers are expected to take. Frequently cited examples of this arc include that of Harry Potter, Elizabeth Bennet, and Ebenezer Scrooge. In a Negative Change Arc, the focal character will do anything to get what he wants regardless of the harm he may cause himself or others. This arc is common among antagonists and tragic heroes, such as Anakin Skywalker, Harley Quinn, and Macbeth.

Likely due in no small part to their name, Flat Arcs are harder to define and treated as the outlier of this group. If they are mentioned at all, they are often relegated solely to minor characters who do not change throughout the plot or do not have much impact on it. These characters are thought to be necessarily simplistic, filling the protagonist's world without drawing too much attention to themselves. On rare occasions, Flat Arcs might appear in

protagonists like Sherlock Holmes or James Bond, but these characters are experts in their fields and exist in heavily plot-driven narratives. There is little opportunity for these protagonists to grow, though they do not necessarily need to in order to meet their goals. Audiences stay invested not to discover *if* the hero will succeed but rather *how*. In any other context, however, audiences would probably expect to see them grow or change in some way. In other contexts, a lack of change is often considered a lack of depth—a hole in the story where its heart should be. As a result, many attempts to write Flat-Arc protagonists are dismissed as being underdeveloped or failed attempts to write Positive-Arc protagonists.

This definition of Flat Arcs, to me, sounded more like the definition of flat characters. I recognized plenty of protagonists in popular media who did not necessarily follow a Positive Arc, but they were much more complex than this definition of Flat Arcs gave them credit for. Protagonists like the titular character of *Mulan* (1998), Danielle de Barbarac from *Ever After* (1998), and Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* series were more or less the same people between the beginnings and endings of their narratives. They were focused more on surviving or proving themselves to others than overcoming their internal conflicts. My own protagonist was this way too. She actively resisted the Positive Arc formula no matter how I tried to apply it to her character. Given the prevailing attitudes surrounding Flat Arcs, I thought the reason for this resistance was my own failure as a writer. That is until about a year ago, when I began discovering new perspectives on the subject.

Initially this project was going to mount a defense for Flat Arcs. I wanted to explore when and how Flat Arcs could be used effectively, the challenges of writing them, and some of the reasons for their poor reputations. I wanted to demonstrate how Flat Arcs could be unique and entertaining story structures in their own right, and I wanted to do this to help other writers

like me understand why our stories sometimes resisted traditional guidelines. However, researching Flat Arcs in depth revealed that these issues were much more complex than I realized. The problem was not a matter of different sources presenting slightly different perspectives on Flat Arcs. Rather, few sources agreed on the criteria by which to define any individual character arc, leading many to rename or recategorize them based on their own interpretations. Oftentimes this led to different sources using the same or similar names for drastically different definitions. For instance, some called the Positive Change, Negative Change, and Flat Arcs by these names (Bayne, Jorstad, Weiland). Others called them Change, Fall, and Growth Arcs (Bradshaw, Sicoe, Warner). Then there were others who included a Change or Growth or Ambiguous Arc in addition to the original three (Brown, Siler, Trottier). Stranger yet, each new arc was not always defined by the same criteria by the same author. These criteria sometimes included who the arc changed, the type or extent of the change itself, the outcome of the arc, or some combination of these factors.

These efforts to more accurately define character arcs, however well intended, only added to the confusion surrounding Flat Arcs. So, this research shifted to focus on the question: which criteria should be used to define and categorize character arcs, especially as they related to Flat Arcs? Based largely on my findings in works by K. M. Weiland, Lewis Jorstad, and David Trottier, I propose that the original three character arcs are defined by who changes and which new worldview they embrace. Additionally, I propose that these three arcs are part of a multilayered classification system, illustrated in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, which categorizes the other criteria in other branches of the hierarchy (Hybrid Arc Diagram, Arc Conclusion Diagram).

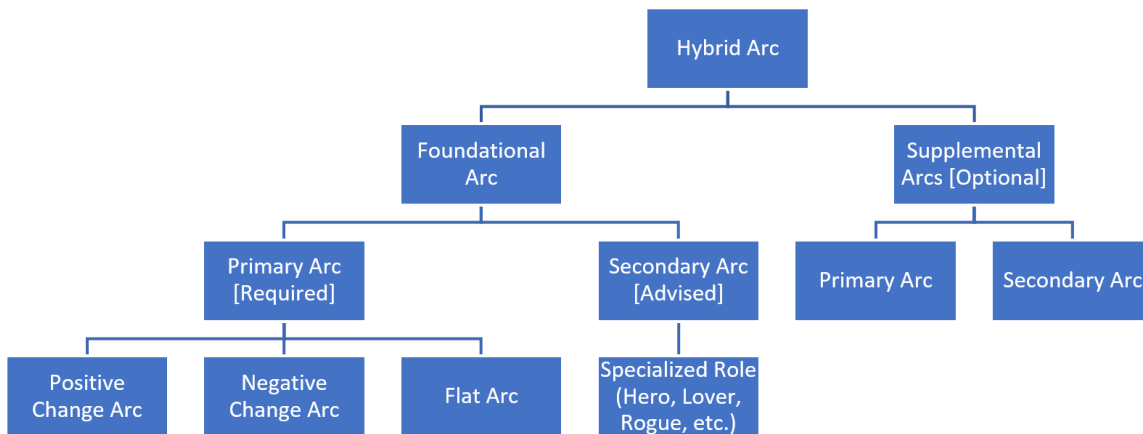


Fig. 1.1 Hybrid Arc Diagram. *Note.* This figure illustrates a system designed to identify and categorize the parts of a Hybrid Character Arc. It is based largely on the arcs identified in Lewis Jorstad’s *Mastering Character Arcs: How Fifteen Universal Journeys Can Power Up Your Novel’s Cast*.

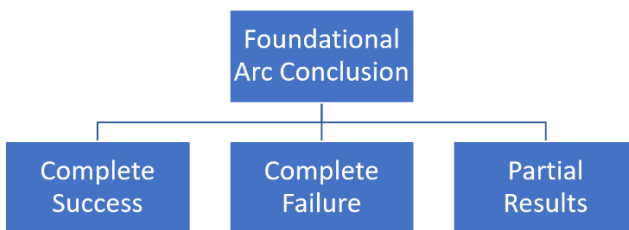


Fig. 1.2 Arc Conclusion Diagram. *Note.* This figure illustrates that the conclusion of a Foundational Arc is not a criterion for defining Primary Arcs, nor is any one conclusion exclusive to any one Primary Arc. This figure is based largely on Lewis Jorstad’s *Mastering Character Arcs: How Fifteen Universal Journeys Can Power Up Your Novel’s Cast* and David Trotter’s *The Screenwriter’s Bible: A Complete Guide to Writing, Formatting, and Selling Your Script*.

Defining Positive, Negative, and Flat Arcs

K. M. Weiland is an award-winning author of four fantasy novels and six writing craft books. She offers by far the most comprehensive analyses of Flat Arcs (if not character arcs) out of any author discovered throughout this research and is often cited as a primary source by other authors. In her book, *Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful Author’s Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development*, she differentiates three major character arcs based on two specific criteria, each with two specific limitations.

The first of these criteria is the subject of the change, which can either be the focal character or the supporting cast. While it may seem self-explanatory that the subject of a character arc is the focal character himself, character arcs are also about change throughout a plot. With that said, the subject of the *arc* is not always the subject of the *change*—as is the case in Flat Arcs. But in a Positive Change or Negative Change Arc, these two subjects happen to overlap, specifically in the focal character. The difference between these Change Arcs rests on the second criterion, the new worldview embraced.

These worldviews can take the form of either the Truth or the Lie. Although they function differently in other arcs, they are easiest to explain in the context of a Positive Change Arc. In a Positive Arc, Weiland defines the Lie as a “deeply held misconception about either [the protagonist] himself, the world, or probably both” (*Creating Character Arcs* 12). This misconception prevents the focal character from recognizing what he really needs, the Truth, and thus how to obtain what he wants. Whether he realizes it or not, the ultimate goal of his journey is to accept the Truth. If he succeeds, then he should become a more complete person and able to accomplish what he set out to do (11-12, 19-21). In this particular arc, the subject of the change is clearly the focal character, and the new worldview he accepts is the Truth. Exchanging either of these options for the other—the Truth for the Lie, or the focal character for the supporting cast—would result in a new type of arc. This is where Negative Change and Flat Arcs originate.

Negative Arcs, like Positive Arcs, are about the focal character embracing a new worldview. Unlike a Positive-Arc protagonist, however, a Negative-Arc protagonist may begin his narrative with some awareness of the Truth and the Lie. The problem is that he takes the Truth for granted, and he ultimately rejects it so that he can pursue the “false promise of the Lie” (177-179). Whether he succeeds or not depends on his specific goals and ability to achieve them,

though his choices usually lead to the destruction of himself and the world around him.

Regardless of the outcome, the specificity of Weiland's two criteria and their limitations makes defining this arc very simple: Negative Change Arcs are about a focal character who embraces the Lie. These criteria work identically for Flat Arcs, except it is the focus of the change that differentiates them from the two Change Arcs.

In Flat Arcs, the subject of the *arc* is still the focal character, but the subject of the *change* is the supporting cast. Flat-Arc protagonists often begin their narratives believing the Truth, or they accept it by the end of the first act. The rest of their journey is about using this Truth to “overcome the challenges of the plot—and, probably, transform a Lie-burdened world” (140-142). This does not mean the protagonist will not doubt his cause or his ability to see it through. In fact, in a successful Flat Arc, his dedication to the Truth despite these doubts is what should ultimately convince others to accept his point of view. Once again, this arc is easily defined by Weiland's criteria: the subject of the change in a Flat Arc is the supporting cast, and the worldview they come to accept is the Truth.

Weiland is one of the few authors discovered throughout this study to use criteria that is so consistent between each arc. Moreover, these criteria are specific enough to clearly outline three major character arcs yet broad enough to account for various outcomes and levels of change. For instance, a character who accepts the Truth but fails his objectives would still fall within the parameters of a Positive Change Arc. There is no need to create a new character arc that includes this specific outcome as a criterion. There is also no need to create new categories depending on whether the focal character's acceptance of a new worldview changes their entire personality. Regardless of how much or how little a focal character has changed, it is the specific

worldview adopted that determines which arc they follow—the Truth for a Positive Arc or the Lie for a Negative Arc.

An author who mirrors this approach to defining and categorizing character arcs is Lewis Jorstad, a developmental editor and author of six writing craft books. In *Mastering Character Arcs: How Fifteen Universal Journeys Can Power Up Your Novel's Cast*, he also defines Positive, Negative, and Flat Arcs by who embraces a new worldview (Jorstad 55-56). Though Weiland discusses each of these three arcs in greater depth, Jorstad looks at the bigger picture. He groups these three together as Primary Arcs, which when paired with arcs defined by other criteria, can add depth and development to the focal character.

Defining The Hybrid Arc

As the heart of any narrative, character arcs are one of the first craft elements taught to new fiction writers. Yet Primary Arcs are often taught quickly and in isolation, giving the impression that these are the only three options available, and perhaps the only options needed. But Primary Arcs are only a fraction of a much larger system. Again, Primary Arcs are defined by the subject of the change and the new worldview they embrace. This alone does not tell readers much about the character except for one decision he will make late in the narrative. Each new branch of the Hybrid Arc creates opportunities to fill in the gaps.

If Primary Arcs determine the overarching inner journey of the focal character (or supporting cast, in a Flat Arc), then Secondary Arcs outline the details of this journey. Jorstad explains that Secondary Arcs “focus on specific story beats and patterns that help your characters fulfill more specialized roles” (49). These roles are often archetypal in nature, like the Rebel or Lover, because they reflect universal experiences like growing up, accepting responsibility, or

loving another person (48-50). Any character given a moderate amount of focus by the writer will have some form of Primary Arc. If they are a main character, then they will likely also have a Secondary Arc. Together, Primary and Secondary Arcs form a Foundational Arc.

Foundational Arcs serve as a baseline for a character's internal and external journeys, and there are dozens of possible combinations (189). This is in part because nearly any Secondary Arc can be paired with any Primary Arc. For example, a Coming-of-Age Secondary Arc can have a Positive, Negative, or Flat Primary Arc. The Coming-of-Age story itself is often about a character discovering his identity and learning to navigate the challenges of adulthood. However, the trajectory of this arc will look different depending on the Primary Arc paired with it. In a Positive Coming-of-Age Arc, the focal character might realize that he is indeed capable of establishing his independence from a caretaker. In a Negative version, the focal character might come to (mistakenly) believe that he will never be able to survive on his own. In the Flat form of this arc, the focal character already believes in his ability to be independent but must prove this to other characters trying to shelter him or hold him back. Although the story beats will take different forms for different Secondary Arc roles, the same principle applies. Chosen Ones, Lovers, Hermits, Mothers, Rulers, and so on can each be Positive, Negative, or Flat. Once again, most main characters will have a Foundational Arc, but again, this only represents a fraction of the character's potential.

Supplemental Arcs are additional Primary-Secondary Arc combinations that enhance or add depth to the Foundational Arc, thereby creating a Hybrid Arc. This is where writers can begin layering and intertwining different character arc combinations into a cohesive narrative (187-189). One popular combination is a Hero Arc overlapping a Coming-of-Age Arc. Part of the reason for this is because they tend to occur within the same phase of a character's life,

sometime between adolescence and young adulthood. Another reason is that they follow a similar story pattern. Both generally force the character to venture away from home, face the unknown, and return with newfound skills or wisdom (189-190). But, again, these are only the Secondary Arcs. Each can have their own Primary Arc and their own conclusion, and they do not have to match. In the case of a Positive Hero Arc overlapping a Flat Coming-of-Age Arc, the focal character might begin his story believing he is capable of living independently (the Flat Arc Truth) but incapable of saving the world (the Positive Arc Lie). Therefore, the ultimate objectives of each arc would be to dispel his caretakers' belief that he is incapable of supporting himself (the Flat Arc Lie) and accept that he is capable of heroism (the Positive Arc Truth). In many cases, the external antagonistic forces of these arcs will overlap, which means that resolving one arc will often resolve the other. For instance, the focal character might first have to accept the Positive Arc Truth in order to have the necessary tools to face the antagonistic force. If he later succeeds in defeating this antagonistic force, then he would not only prove his heroism to himself but also prove to his caretakers that he can be independent.

Of course, this is not always the case. The focal character can successfully complete his Positive Arc objectives and fail his Flat Arc or vice versa. One way this might happen is if his caretakers are especially stubborn and refuse to believe in him no matter what he does to convince them—even defeating the antagonistic force. Alternatively, the focal character might not defeat the antagonistic force, yet his willingness to try might be what convinces his caretakers of his independence. Whatever the circumstances, these Foundational-Supplemental Arc pairings are separate yet closely intertwined. Although they are broad enough to account for various outcomes and levels of change, each is clearly defined by its own Primary-Secondary Arc pairing. These Hybrid Arcs add complexity to the narrative, allowing Supplementary Arcs to

complement and build off the Foundational, enhancing the core theme in ways that would be difficult to do alone.

One final element that should be mentioned is the conclusion of an arc. The reason for this is because Jorstad is unclear on whether arc conclusions are a criterion that defines Primary Arcs or a decision to be made after crafting the Foundational Arc. While it is true that Jorstad defines Primary Arcs as the “overarching inner journey of your character,” he also specifies that they determine “the final outcome of their story” (49). This is not directly elaborated on, though it could be surmised that each Primary Arc often leads to or is associated with a particular type of ending. For example, a Positive-Arc character who accepts the Truth would be expected to then be able to fulfill his plot goals. He would be expected to win, which would be a satisfying and probably happy ending for the character. But Jorstad later seems to contradict this definition, explaining how a plot that becomes too much for a character to overcome can result in a failed arc. He elaborates that failed arcs are not specific to any one Primary Arc and can take various forms within each of these Primary Arcs (74-76). Failed Positive Arcs could occur, for instance, if acting on a newly accepted Truth would cause more harm than good. Failed Negative Arcs could result in the focal character freezing—neither continuing his destructive path nor accepting the Truth in a moment of redemption. In a Failed Flat Arc, the focal character may simply fail to convince those around him of the Truth. These failures deprive the character of closure, and audiences of catharsis. Such endings are not necessarily bad—they can actually add complexity to a story by revealing morally gray areas—but no endings appear to be exclusively linked to a particular Primary Arc. Again, Positive Arcs may generally follow a path that leads to success, or Negative Arcs to destruction. But failed arcs seem to indicate that Primary Arcs are not *required* to end in the expected way and thus could not be a defining criterion. Rather, arc conclusions are

another modifier of character arcs, which is why Figure 1.2 is not included within the hierarchy of Figure 1.1.

Arc conclusions are still a vital component of crafting a character arc. After all, it is difficult to plot the details of a story without knowing how it will end. Even so, it is better not to use this component as a criterion for defining character arcs themselves. The same applies to factors like the type or extent of the change a character experiences throughout an arc, which are frequently used in other sources as criteria for defining Primary Arcs. While these decisions are understandable, these elements are composed of too many variables. This can lead to a system of defining individual Primary Arcs by different criteria. With this in mind, these other criteria might be better explained by other branches of the Hybrid Arc.

Evaluating The Extent of Change

It is not uncommon for authors to rename or reclassify Primary Arcs. Unfortunately, there is little congruency in why or how each author goes about redefining them. Some focus on the outcome of the arc while others fixate on the types of changes a protagonist might undergo throughout the narrative. The most frequently observed trend, however, is the tendency to redefine Primary Arcs based on how much a character changes by the end of the narrative. Though similar names and definitions are often switched around between sources, there are generally four¹ levels of changes represented. From the most extreme to the least, these levels include Transformational or Change Arcs, Positive Change or Growth Arcs, Shift Arcs, and some variation of Flat Arcs. This methodology is reasonable in theory but problematic in execution. For one, degrees of change are fairly simple to recognize and compare. But, without

¹Most sources also included a Negative Change or Fall Arc, but they are excluded from this discussion because they all demonstrated roughly the same level of change as Positive Arcs (albeit with a less desirable outcome).

additional criteria or limitations by which to differentiate these degrees of change, the scale is largely subjective. For another, few authors recognize Flat Arcs as a valid Primary Arc due to the unchanging nature of the focal character. As a result, Flat Arcs and their replacements are often defined by different criteria than other arcs in the same sets, which is why Flat Arcs will be addressed in the next chapter. These inconsistencies make the extent of change an unreliable criterion by which to define Primary Arcs, but it could be a key feature of various Secondary Arcs.

Transformational and Change Arcs

The first new arc represents the most drastic changes a character can undergo, but the key features used to define this arc as Primary actually bring it closer to a Secondary Arc, if not an entire Foundational Arc.

Dan Brown, bestselling author of thriller novels like the *Robert Langdon* series, wrote a *MasterClass* article that defines a Transformational Arc. He describes it as being closely linked to the archetypal Hero's Journey and capable of turning a "regular person" into a true hero by the end of the narrative (Brown). Veronica Sicoe, author of science fiction novels and an award-winning writing craft blog, also shares this view. Her Change Arc aligns with the Hero's Journey and turns an "unlikely fellow" into a savior (Sicoe). Additionally, she specifies that this transformation is radical, changing almost everything about him aside from an inner strength that he already had. Both of these interpretations are similar to one by John S. Warner, who has spent more than twenty years teaching creative writing at the collegiate level. In his book, *The Secrets to Creating Character Arcs: A Fiction Writer's Guide to Masterful Character Creation (Growing Authors Out of Writers)*, he outlines three Primary Arcs (Positive, Negative, and

Static) as well as two variations of the Positive Arc (Change and Growth). His three Primary Arcs are defined nearly identically to Weiland's, but the subcategories describe more specialized roles. His Change Arc, specifically, follows an "underdog-like character that ultimately ends up achieving large goals like saving or protecting their worlds" (Warner 91).

All three of these views focus on the same criteria: an unassuming protagonist who undergoes a radical change and pulls off an enormous feat of heroism. This Hero's Journey or Hero Arc criterion is by Jorstad's definition a Secondary Arc. It is a specialized role that can be Positive, Negative, or Flat. Neither Brown nor Warner mention precisely what kind of change the protagonist goes through. However, the extreme nature of this arc (especially compared to the Growth Arcs) makes it reasonably safe to assume that this change improves the protagonist's worldview as much as his physical prowess. As such, Transformational/Change Arcs could be considered a Positive-Hero Foundational Arc. With that said, Sicoe's specification about the protagonist's preexisting and unchanging inner strength could also categorize this scenario as a Flat-Hero Foundational Arc. Either way, these definitions of Transformational/Change Arcs are much too detailed to classify them as strictly Primary.

Positive Change and Growth Arcs

The protagonist of this category undergoes a moderate amount of change, but some sources are vague about the specific type of change he undergoes. Overall, this form might meet Weiland's definition of a Positive Change Arc, but the slightly subjective interpretations of this arc make it difficult for it to stand as a separate Primary Arc altogether.

Brown's Positive Change Arc is defined very much like Weiland's in that the focal character develops a positive worldview by the end of the story, but he specifies that this arc is

similar to the Transformational, just “not quite as dramatic” (Brown). Warner’s Growth Arc follows this pattern as well, being similar to the Change Arc but with a “more subtle tone” (Warner 91). He also states that these protagonists will “mostly change themselves for the better without changing the world” (91). Likewise, Sicoe’s Growth Arc is a toned-down version of her Change Arc. But again, she clarifies that this “Protagonist 2.0” is essentially the same person by the end of the narrative as he was in the beginning, just more rounded after overcoming an internal conflict (Sicoe).

These sources agree on the moderate extent of the change concerning the protagonist himself and the minimal impact on the world around him. These factors on their own would not be enough to categorize Growth Arcs in any one of the existing Primary Arcs, let alone enough to warrant their own. But, given the comparisons to Change Arcs and emphasis on overcoming inner conflicts, it could be argued that they simply fall under the umbrella of Weiland’s Positive Change Arcs.

Shift Arcs

While Transformational and Growth Arcs overlap in that they are defined by a protagonist’s level of self-improvement—and sometimes his level of impact on the world—Shift Arcs are about neutral, external changes.

Sicoe coined Shift Arcs as a subcategory of Growth Arcs. In this form, the focal character “changes his *perspective*, learns different *skills*, or gains a different *role*. The end result is not ‘better’ or ‘more than’ the starting point, just *different*” (Sicoe). Unlike Growth Arcs that focus on overcoming an internal conflict, or Transformational Arcs that essentially create a new character, Shift Arcs fixate on external changes. This is an interesting perspective to have because it seems to simultaneously defend and dismiss Flat Arcs as a Primary Arc. Sicoe does

not list a Flat Arc among her Change, Growth, Shift, and Fall Arcs. She does not acknowledge a scenario in which the focal character does not change. But on the other hand, Flat-Arc characters are frequently misinterpreted as having no depth or development whatsoever. One of the keys to writing a good story is change, and audiences expect to see that change in the protagonist. Flat Arcs by Weiland's definition have unchanging focal characters—when it comes to worldview, though not every writer is aware of this condition—so the whole concept sounds counterintuitive to becoming successful as a writer. Even those who try to defend Flat Arcs often do so by presenting them not as entirely unchanging but rather as changing externally.

That could be what Sicoe is doing here, proposing a protagonist that changes in unexpected ways. What this does, however, is find a midpoint between Positive Arcs and flat characters rather than adequately define Flat Arcs. It also ignores the bigger picture that is Secondary and Supplemental Arcs, which are where a Flat-Arc protagonist can change externally and accept additional Truths, respectively. Flat-Arc characters *can* change; these changes are simply not the result of the Flat Primary Arc itself.

Evaluating The Types of Change

Another common way to reclassify character arcs is by splitting Flat Arcs into two different categories: Arc-less, and one that has no label but is usually described as an arc that shows itself in a surprising way. The latter will be hereafter referred to as Surprising Arcs. Both are valid interpretations of Flat Arcs, but the criteria defining them are not clear enough to warrant subdividing or creating new Primary Arcs. If these variants were instead defined by Weiland's criteria, then Surprising Arcs already meet the definition of a Flat Arc, and the so-

called Arc-less variant would describe characters with a Foundational Arc but no Supplemental Arcs.

Margery Bayne² is a librarian as well as an author of speculative and literary fiction. In her article posted to *The Writing Cooperative*, “The Three Types of Character Arcs: Understanding the journey your protagonist is taking,” she claims that Flat Arcs are not really arcs at all because the focal character does not change throughout the narrative (Bayne). Then she describes the two types of Flat Arcs as they apply to protagonists. In the Surprising Arc, the focal character does not undergo significant change over the course of the story. Rather, his “inner strength/truth/insight on the world” withstands any doubt caused by external trials, changes the people around them, or both (Bayne). This definition is almost identical to that of Weiland’s Flat Arc. Both clarify that the subject of the *arc* (the focal character) is not the subject of the *change* (the supporting cast), and both acknowledge that this change consists of the supporting cast accepting the focal character’s worldview (the Truth). Moreover, neither treat the unchanging nature of this character as a sign that he lacks depth or development. On the contrary, they treat this character’s resilience as an asset. His resilience is meant to inspire those around him as well as the audience. As such, the Surprising Arc is simply a Flat Arc, not a subcategory of a Flat Arc.

Bayne presents a similarly positive outlook on the Arc-less variant. Again, she describes Arc-less protagonists as unchanging, but she clarifies that they “usually appear in heavily plot-driven stories that are episodic” and “often have a good hook to them (they’re super smart, suave, funny, etc.)” (Bayne). She provides Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, and sitcom casts in general as examples. While she is correct in that these characters do have Flat Arcs—they

² The Arc-less and Surprising Arcs appear almost identically in articles by content specialist and copywriter Sarah Rexford, and Claire Bradshaw, a freelance editor and proofreader of fantasy novels.

themselves do not change as they change the world around them—the criteria she lists are better suited to Secondary Arcs than Primary. Jorstad explains that Secondary Arcs determine the role or specific journey a character will play throughout a narrative. These roles are often archetypal in nature, like the Lover or Rebel, and outline patterns that often appear throughout those plotlines (Jorstad 87). Traits like “episodic” and “good hook” may not be exclusively linked to a particular role, but such qualities are more closely linked to plot patterns (as in Secondary Arcs) than influencing a character’s worldview (as in Primary Arcs). With this in mind, characters like Sherlock Holmes or James Bond could be associated with filling a Flat Hero or Chosen One role, having already found their callings and established themselves as experts in their fields (Jorstad 139-140, Reedsy). But the traits commonly associated with these stories are likely factors of the Secondary Arcs, meaning they cannot be criteria for redefining an existing Primary Arc.

Once again, the Arc-less and Surprising Arc variants are understandable conclusions to draw based on such little information, but the criteria offered for the former are not solid enough to support a new Primary Arc. Rather, the Arc-less variant describes properties of various Secondary Arc roles, and the Surprising Arc is simply a Flat Arc. This arc is likely only considered a surprise due to the “flat” moniker, which is misleading in more ways than one. Similarly, arc conclusions are often perceived as criteria for defining Primary Arcs but might function better when addressed after the Foundational Arc has been established.

Arc Endings

Jorstad claims that Primary Arcs “determine the overarching inner journey your character goes on, as well as the final outcome of their story” (48). The first part of this definition suits the aims of this study well, but the latter half can lead to some of the same issues addressed in

previous chapters. For one, Primary Arcs are defined by who changes and which new worldview they embrace. Adding outcomes as a criterion could lead to any number of variations of Primary Arc, the perceived goodness of a particular outcome might mislabel one Primary Arc for another, and it does not account for the fact that each Foundational and Supplemental Arc requires its own ending. Arc endings should only determine whether the arc was completed, and if so, how successfully it was completed. Thus, this criterion should be decided after building a Foundational or Hybrid Arc.

Fiction author and zine publisher Bucket Siler discusses the three Primary Arcs but adds two additional types: Ambiguous and Bittersweet. He defines the first as presenting readers with “the opportunity to interpret the arc for themselves—was it positive? Negative? Flat?” and provides a few literary examples like *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. This category was not featured in any other selected source and is thus difficult to place. It could be that any arc might be considered ambiguous unless or until audiences actively try to define it, or it might merely allow readers to determine whether a Positive, Negative, or Flat Arc’s conclusion was subjectively satisfying.

The Bittersweet variant is described as combining “positive and negative aspects...but feel that the positive outweighs the negative.” This criterion does not focus on a change in worldview at all but rather a bittersweet outcome of a Positive Arc. This situation calls back to Jorstad’s failed arcs, during which the subjects of the change might have accepted a new worldview but were ultimately unable to complete their plot objectives. These two phenomena seem to suggest that there are three possible endings for any Primary Arc: success, failure, and one where the character gets partial results. These might look different depending on the Primary Arc, but in short, success is defined by the acceptance of a new worldview and the completion of

all plot objectives—regardless of how good or bad these objectives seem. In contrast, failure would mean that no plot objectives were completed. Then a conclusion with partial results might look like a character accepting a new worldview but failing their plot objectives, or successfully doing both but at a cost. These ideas are explained more in depth by David Trotter, a screenwriter, script consultant, and award-winning teacher.

In his book, *The Screenwriter's Bible: A Complete Guide to Writing, Formatting, and Selling Your Script*, Trotter outlines eight different kinds of plot endings. These include The Character Wins, The Character Loses, The Character Sows the Seeds of His Own Destruction, The Character Grows By Doing the Right Thing, The Character Grows Up, The Character Learns, The Character Fails to Learn, and The Character Declines. Few of these would be exclusive to any Primary Arc, but it appears as though they could be divided up into the categories of success, failure, or some sort of bittersweet ending.

In The Character Wins, the character strives for an external goal and achieves it (52). This is a success story that could apply to any of the three Primary Arcs, even a Negative Change, because embracing the Lie could have been his objective from the beginning. The Character Grows By Doing the Right Thing would be a bittersweet ending, usually for Positive Arcs, because the character surrenders something they want for something they need, the latter of which is often the Truth (53). The Character Grows Up and The Character Learns would likely be types of Positive Arcs or possibly changes tied to their Supplementary roles (54).

Even Weiland falls into this trap. She splits the Negative Change Arc into three categories: Disillusionment, Fall, and Corruption. In the latter two, regardless of what the character believes at the start of their stories, they ultimately embrace the Lie (178). However, the Disillusionment Arc presents a character initially believing a Lie but overcomes it by

accepting a tragic Truth. While it makes sense that such a sad or frustrating end would be classified as a Negative Change, the fact that the character accepted a Truth, and potentially changed for the better, should classify this arc as a Positive Change with a bittersweet ending.

Once again, the subjective satisfaction derived from a particular conclusion is not a reliable criterion for defining Primary Arcs. Rather, arc endings should only determine whether all of the arc's objectives were completed, meaning that this element of the narrative should be decided after building the Foundational or Hybrid Arc.

Conclusion

Initially this project was going to mount a defense for Flat Arcs. I wanted to explore how Flat Arcs could be used effectively, the challenges of writing them, and some of the reasons for their poor reputations. I wanted to demonstrate how Flat Arcs could be functional and entertaining so that other writers like me could understand why the stories we wanted to share always resisted traditional guidelines. But as it turns out, character arcs are surprisingly difficult to define. There are so many types, often overlapping each other, and each defined by their own criteria. Moreover, every author who has published on the craft of writing seems to have their own interpretation of which arcs should be used and which criteria best describes them. This is especially true of Primary Arcs. By far, the most specific and consistent definitions found were constructed by K. M. Weiland. She claims that Primary Arcs outline precisely who the arc will change (the focal character or the supporting cast) as well as the specific type of change they experience throughout the plot (embracing the Truth or the Lie). Others have tried defining them by other types of change, the extent of the change, or even the outcome of the arc, but these

factors are too broad. They allow for too many variables that could be better defined and categorized in the hierarchy described by Lewis Jorstad.

CREATIVE MANUSCRIPT

Lady of the Joust: Act I

FADE IN:

INT. FERRON FORGE (MEDIEVAL GERMAN TOWN) -- MORNING

Orange sparks fly as HANS FERRON (40s) hammers a horseshoe into place.

Two anvils flank a roaring hooded furnace, and two work benches form a path between it and the long shop window. Broken tools lie scattered around the room.

Standing beside the window is GUSTAV FERRON (22), who shouts a customer's order over his shoulder.

GUSTAV

Two hinges and two handles,
standard. Four nails, small.

HANS

Plenny'a nails in the drawer.

Hans places the horseshoe in the furnace and pulls out a glowing rod, gestures to a chest behind Gustav.

HANS (CONT'D)

Handles in back. I can get to
making the hinges now, but it's
gonna take a bit.

Sitting beside the chest is CASSANDRA FERRON (18): tall, broad-shouldered, long dark braid. She stares longingly at the sparks while twirling a threaded drop spindle but lunges to pick out nails for Gustav before he gets there.

He accepts, smiling gratefully, then rushes to the back.

HANS

Cassandra, if we needed your
help, we woulda asked for it.

CASSANDRA

But I was sitting right here

and heard what he needed. Why
wouldn't I—

HANS

You have your own tasks. Let
us do ours.

CASSANDRA

There is no good reason I cannot
do both. I could even help make
the hinges! I've been practicing
a way to—

HANS

Your brother and I have
everythin' sorted.

Cassandra starts to return to her seat but stops short.

CASSANDRA

Are you certain? At least
allow me to—

HANS

Cassandra.

Hans strikes the rod *hard*, distorting the rod and cracking
the hammer's wooden handle. Cassandra sits to resume her
spinning, and Gustav places the products on the counter.

GUSTAV

(to customer)

That will be nine marks now, and
three at pick-up this evening.

CUSTOMER

That much?

Gustav shrugs apologetically. The customer pays and leaves.
Cass, still spinning, hops up on the counter beside Gustav.

CASSANDRA

Gustav, I can take orders if you
would like to help Father with—

GUSTAV

I know you wish to involve
yourself, but there is little
to be done.

CASSANDRA

But—

GUSTAV

Don't test him, and don't worry
about me. We can practice tonight.

CASSANDRA

(quietly, to Gustav)

Fine.

(to Hans)

If I cannot help, may I at
least take my work outside?

HANS

By all means! Better out there
than takin' up space in here.

Hans laughs as Cassandra packs her spindle in a basket of
wool, but he waves the broken hammer to stop her.

HANS (CONT'D)

Wait! Go an' get these fixed again
while you're out.

Cass freezes, then slowly collects the broken tools into
her basket as Hans finds a replacement tool.

CASSANDRA

Yes, Father.

HANS

And see if you can't convince that
friend of yours to go with you,
the boy who's sweet on you.

She turns to face him, now more uncomfortable than afraid.

CASSANDRA

Must I?

HANS

You're eighteen, girl. Either you find someone who'll have ya, or I'll find someone for ya.

CASSANDRA

Do you or Gustav intend to come with us, then? As a chaperone?

Hans freezes just as he's about to strike the rod again, flings the new tool across the table, then turns away from her to work on a different project.

HANS

Do whatever you want! Just leave if that's what you're going to do.

EXT. MARKETPLACE -- DAY

When Cass opens the front door, the petite and warmly dressed LIESEL KRAUS (15) has a fist raised to knock.

CASSANDRA

Liesel!

LIESEL

What a coincidence!

CASSANDRA

I'm sorry, I thought we were meeting at midday?

LIESEL

Well, that was the plan, but I need to run a few errands in town first. Want to join me?

CASSANDRA

As it happens, I have an errand of my own. Lead the way!

Cass plants her basket on her hip and closes the door behind her.

LIESEL

Aren't you cold?

CASSANDRA

Believe me, it is much colder
inside than out.

Liesel looks confused but shakes it off, then she drags
Cass around town more to window shop than run errands.

LIESEL

You better tell me what you want
for Christmas, or you might not-

Liesel holds up an olive-green scarf to Cassandra's face.

LIESEL (CONT'D)

It matches your eyes!

Cass brushes Liesel's hand away.

CASSANDRA

As I tell you every year, save your
money. The only thing I want is-

LIESEL

A sense of humor?

CASSANDRA

To forge!

LIESEL

But Gustav has been teaching you
for years.

CASSANDRA

At *night*, and even if the guild
allowed me to sell what I make,
Father would not. He even refuses
to promote *Gustav*, who has more
than met the qualifications of a
master blacksmith.

Cass walks toward the carpenter's shop, so Liesel returns
the scarf and follows her.

LIESEL

That's still *something*, isn't it?
It is not as if he bans you from
the shop altogether.

CASSANDRA

Is it so wrong to long for more?
Why should we have to beg to be
acknowledged in our own home?

LIESEL

You know you wouldn't have to
worry about that anymore if you
just—

CASSANDRA

Please, not this again.

LIESEL

But ROLAND would marry you in
a heartbeat if you let him!

Liesel stops at the carpenter's shop, but Cass walks on.

CASSANDRA

Lee, I want to resolve our
differences, not avoid them.

LIESEL

Cassie...

CASSANDRA

That aside, I do not see your
brother in the way he sees me.

LIESEL

Cassie...!

CASSANDRA

Does he not deserve more than—

LIESEL

Cassandra Ferron!

Cassandra turns to face Liesel, who points to the
illustrated sign above the carpenter shop's door.

LIESEL (CONT'D)

Forgetting something?

Cassandra smiles apologetically but eyes the shop nervously
before they enter.

INT. CARPENTER'S SHOP -- DAY

A counter divides an organized storefront from a chaotic workshop. BRUNO MATTHIAS (30s) whittles a flute behind the counter and smiles when Cass and Liesel enter.

MATTHIAS

A pleasant morning to you, ladies.
How might I be of service?

Cass hesitates by the door but quickly gathers her nerve and sets her basket on the counter.

LIESEL

Mornin'!

CASSANDRA

Good morning, Mr. Matthias.

CASSANDRA (CONT'D)

I have more tools to be repaired,
if you would be so kind?

LIESEL

(quietly, to Cass)

I'm going to look around.

Cass tries to stop her, but Liesel is already gone. Matthias crosses his arms over the counter and leans close, ignoring the basket of tools.

MATTHIAS

So soon?

CASSANDRA

Yes, sir.

Matthias glances in the basket, then ogles Cass again.

MATTHIAS

And so many! One might think they
were broken *intentionally*.

Cassandra steps aside and lays the tools across the counter in order of preference.

CASSANDRA

My father uses these two more than
most. Could you repair them first,

if it is not too much trouble?

MATTHIAS

You needn't make excuses to see me,
my dear.

CASSANDRA

The price, sir?

MATTHIAS

For you? No charge.

CASSANDRA

I am not in the habit of accepting
favors, sir.

MATTHIAS

Consider it an early Christmas
gift, then.

CASSANDRA

I do not believe we know each other
well enough for that...*sir*.

Matthias chuckles and stands upright.

MATTHIAS

How about I replace everything for
half the charge, since my repairs
did not last the month?

CASSANDRA

I...suppose that would do.

MATTHIAS

Three marks now, three at pickup.

Cass pulls three coins from a pouch on her waist and pushes
them across the counter.

CASSANDRA

Thank you.

She picks up her basket and meets Liesel at the door.

MATTHIAS

Say hello to your father for me!

Cass ushers Liesel outside before anyone can say more.

EXT. KRAUS STABLES -- DAY

A stable with short walls and a tall triangular roof sits where a stretch of pastureland meets an evergreen forest.

With a picnic basket in hand, Gustav leads two saddled horses out of the stable. ROLAND KRAUS (20) leads two more horses as Cass and Liesel arrive from town.

ROLAND
Mornin', Cass!

He locks Liesel in a side hug and tousles her hair.

ROLAND (CONT'D)
And *you*. You should have been back ages ago.

LIESEL
Roland! It took me six tries to get this braid right!

When Liesel breaks free of Roland's grasp, she slugs his arm and unravels her braid. Gustav and Cass laugh.

CASSANDRA
Where are we headed today?

ROLAND
To the hill overlooking the neighbor's pasture.
(teasing Gustav)
If that's not too far?

GUSTAV
A regular jester, you are.

CASSANDRA
(teasing)
Oh, come now. The talent for riding may elude him, but he is not *incapable*.

Cass ducks as Gustav takes a playful swing at her head.

Roland boosts the girls into their saddles but lingers beside Cass before he and Gustav mount their horses. They ride up a hill toward a large tree.

EXT. KRAUS PASTURE -- DAY

On the hill, Gustav's foot sticks in the stirrup as he dismounts. The horse walks forward, and he has to hop to keep from twisting his leg or falling over.

The other three dismount. Roland grabs the reins of Gustav's horse, and Cass tries to fix the stirrup.

CASSANDRA

Hold still!

GUSTAV

(sarcastically)

Right.

Cass frees his leg, and he walks off the pain.

GUSTAV (CONT'D)

Thanks.

They let the horses graze as they sit under the tree: Roland beside Cass, Liesel, Gustav. They pass around the basket containing pottage, cheese, and rye bread.

LIESEL

This is really good! Gustav, did you make it?

GUSTAV

Cass helped.

Liesel makes a pitiful face at Cass.

LIESEL

You did not.

CASSANDRA

I did so!

GUSTAV

I did most of the *cooking*, yes,

but she grew and chopped all the vegetables.

LIESEL

Thank the Lord.

Cassandra shoves Liesel's shoulder with her own.

ROLAND

Have I missed something?

LIESEL

Be grateful you have not had the displeasure of tasting her food.

GUSTAV

In all fairness, she has improved. Not enough to share with friends, but—

Cass reaches across Liesel to backhand Gustav's arm. He dodges, drops his bread, dusts it off, eats it anyway.

CASSANDRA

(to Roland)

Cooking is a skill I haven't the ability to master—yet.

ROLAND

I have never heard claim that cooking is a simple task.

CASSANDRA

You and Gustav have never stepped foot in a kitchen together either.

ROLAND

Another fair point.

When they finish eating, Cass re-braids Liesel's hair, and Roland stands to dust off his pants.

ROLAND (CONT'D)

Gustav, come here. I need a sparring partner.

GUSTAV

Is it really "sparring" if you
are the only one with any skill?

ROLAND

Well, I can't practice on *them*.
Besides, you're taller than me.

GUSTAV

By the width of two fingers!

Roland waves dismissively. Gustav reluctantly joins him.

CASSANDRA

(quietly, to Liesel)

I gather he still sneaks off to
watch the knights train?

LIESEL

(quietly, to Cassandra)

Undoubtedly.

CASSANDRA

Do you never go with him anymore?

LIESEL

Hardly! But *you* could.

Gustav poses as if to attack. Then all at once, Roland
wraps both arms around one of Gustav's and rolls forward,
flipping Gustav over his shoulder and pinning him.

LIESEL (CONT'D)

I don't understand you both. You're
practically courting already. Why
not make it a formal arrangement?

Gustav stares at the sky, dazed, while Roland checks that
Cass is still watching. He stands, offers a hand to Gustav.

CASSANDRA

Even if I were interested, how
would *this* constitute a proper
romantic outing?

Gustav accepts Roland's hand only to tackle *him* this time.

LIESEL

It's chaperoned.

CASSANDRA

As I have told you before, the love I feel for your brother is the same I feel for my own. It would not be fair to either of us for me to accept his proposal.

LIESEL

I still don't understand your hesitancy. You're not blood.

CASSANDRA

No, but it— It would be like you marrying Gustav. Would that not be odd?

LIESEL

I could do worse.

CASSANDRA

Liesel!

LIESEL

What? He cooks!

INT. FERRON FORGE -- NIGHT

Orange sparks fly as Cass hammers a padlock shackle into shape. When she finishes, Gustav inspects her work.

GUSTAV

Would you look at that? I taught you well.

Cassandra scoffs in mock disgust and angles the still-glowing metal rod at him.

CASSANDRA

Watch yourself.

GUSTAV

Your threats mean little if you haven't the nerve to follow through.

CASSANDRA

Do not tempt me.

GUSTAV

And risk waking Father?

CASSANDRA

You know the world would have to
crumble for him to wake.

She dunks the rod into a bucket of water, then places it on
a thin sheet of metal. Gustav hands chalk to her. She
sketches the front plate of the lock around the shackle.

CASSANDRA (CONT'D)

Gustav?

GUSTAV

Yes?

CASSANDRA

Why do you think Father has not
allowed you to submit your work
to the guild for review?

Gustav hands her a small hacksaw and points to her sketch.

GUSTAV

Don't cut too close here. You can
trim it later if needed.

She begins cutting the plate as instructed.

CASSANDRA

Until your induction, you cannot
advance, increase your earnings,
or inherit the forge—let alone
recognize me as your apprentice.

GUSTAV

Is that not reason enough?

CASSANDRA

Which do you mean?

GUSTAV

Have a guess.

Cassandra puts down the saw and turns to face him.

CASSANDRA

You believe he would hinder your growth to prevent mine?

GUSTAV

Keep cutting.

CASSANDRA

That's absurd!

GUSTAV

I agree.

CASSANDRA

But you are his son and his successor!

GUSTAV

Yes.

CASSANDRA

So he should be championing your progress! Why would he not—

GUSTAV

Because he is afraid!

CASSANDRA

Of what?

GUSTAV

That if I am promoted, I will choose you over him.

CASSANDRA

How so?

GUSTAV

If I am promoted, I am free to travel wherever I please. I could start my own forge elsewhere, and I could take you with me.

Cass picks up the saw again and runs her index finger along the dull edge of the blade as the realization hits her.

CASSANDRA
Leaving him without an heir.

Cass resumes cutting, but with more force than before.

INT. FERRON HOUSE (CASSANDRA'S ROOM) -- DAWN

HANS (V.O.)
Cassandra. Cassandra!

Cassandra wakes up to Hans looming over her bed. He looks exhausted, but he's dressed up and smiling broadly.

HANS
Wake up, girl!

CASSANDRA
Huh...?

HANS
Wonderful news!

CASSANDRA
What is it?

HANS
Hurry and dress your best, then
meet us at the table.

Hans practically dances out of the room. Cassandra sits up and stares after him, baffled.

INT. FERRON HOUSE (COMMON ROOM) -- DAWN

Cass, now dressed up, enters the common room, which is small but sparsely furnished. Hans and Matthias lean against the hearth, chatting amicably.

CASSANDRA
Where is Gustav?

HANS
Is that any way to treat a guest?

CASSANDRA

I-I'm sorry. Of course. Good morning, sir.

MATTHIAS

Now, now, we won't be needing any more of that "sir" business, but I suppose I can forgive you since you don't know.

CASSANDRA

Know...?

Hans waves Cass to him, but she stays rooted on the spot.

HANS

That the good Bruno Matthias here has asked for your hand, and I've granted it.

Hans waves again, insistently. She walks forward in a daze.

CASSANDRA

Marriage? To- But we hardly know each other-

HANS

Plenny'a unions built on less.

MATTHIAS

Is it truly so hard to believe? That a man would want a kind young lady like yourself?

CASSANDRA

But Father, w-who will tend the garden? Or the cooking, or the laundry?

Hans laughs but withholds comment on her cooking skills.

HANS

Gustav can take over your duties for now.

CASSANDRA

But you would lose my income from

spinning...

HANS
Cassandra, this is not up for
discussion.

Hans grabs her and pulls her aside, not quite out of
earshot.

HANS (CONT'D)
This may be the best—the only—
offer you'll ever get. Now get back
over there, take his hand, and say
you're sorry for all this nonsense.

Cassandra hesitates.

CASSANDRA
What if I marry Roland?

HANS
Have you gotten him to ask ya?

CASSANDRA
N-no, but—

HANS
Then you've missed your chance!

Matthias cautiously approaches the two.

MATTHIAS
Mr. Ferron, please pardon my
interruption.

Hans lets go of Cassandra and turns to include Matthias in
their conversation.

MATTHIAS (CONT'D)
I can tell this is a lot for Miss
Cassandra to take in. Why don't I
leave and give her a few days to
think over the offer, hmm?

HANS
...Yes, I think that would be fine.

Hans shakes Matthias's hand and escorts him out, then stands with his hand on the door to watch him leave. He waits until Matthias is out of sight before speaking.

HANS (CONT'D)

Get out.

CASSANDRA

What?

Hans whirls around and marches toward her.

HANS

I said get out!

CASSANDRA

A-and go where?

HANS

I don't know! I don't care! Just get out of this house and don't ever come back!

Cass is frozen. Hans grabs her by the neck, throws her into the street, and slams the door behind her. Cass pulls herself up, staring into space for a moment. Then the pain and realization set in, and she cries.

INT. KRAUS HOUSE (COMMON ROOM) -- EVENING

SUPER: "Two weeks later"

Cassandra sits at the table with Roland, Liesel, and their parents, HENRIK and JOHANNA KRAUS (40s). The table is set with lit candles and holly, and the dinner includes meat.

Everyone holds hands and bows their heads, and Henrik recites The Lord's Prayer. The family begins to eat, but Cassandra hardly touches her food.

HENRIK

Cassandra, we are delighted that you are with us this evening.

Johanna glares at Henrik over the rim of her mug, then smiles a little too sweetly at Cassandra.

JOHANNA

Though we wish it were under more joyous circumstances, of course.

Johanna glances at Roland and back. Only Cassandra notices.

HENRIK

R-right. Of course! I only meant-

JOHANNA

That you are a dear, and you are always welcome in our home.

Cassandra attempts eye contact and a smile but quickly drops them to her plate. Roland leans closer.

ROLAND

Are you feeling alright?

CASSANDRA

I just need some air.

ROLAND

Would you like me to go with you?

CASSANDRA

No, stay. I will be back.
(to the family)
Excuse me.

Cassandra stands and ducks out the door.

EXT. KRAUS HOUSE - EVENING

Frost crunches underfoot as Cass runs to Johanna's garden on the side of the house. She plants her hands on her knees and breathes slowly to prevent an oncoming panic attack.

When she calms down, she stands and tilts her head to listen to nature: wind rushing through trees, birds twittering, a wolf howling in the distance.

A minute later, Roland jogs to meet her but stops an awkward distance away. He's hiding something behind his back.

ROLAND

Cass, hey... Are you sure you're alright? You left so quickly-

CASSANDRA

I'm sorry-

ROLAND

No, don't apologize-

CASSANDRA

I did not mean to worry you, or your family.

ROLAND

That doesn't matter.

CASSANDRA

Just a little longer, and I will come back indoors.

ROLAND

Take as long as you need.

He starts to step closer, hesitates, then closes the gap.

ROLAND (CONT'D)

Actually, I wanted to give you this. I know it's a little early...

He hands her a ball of neatly wrapped cloth. Cass unwraps it to find a copper brooch. It's shaped like a bird, its head and back tempered blue. The beak operates the clasp.

ROLAND (CONT'D)

Gustav made it, obviously, but, uh, I helped with the design.

CASSANDRA

It's beautiful. Thank you.

ROLAND

May I?

He holds out his hand to help her put it on. She stifles a laugh but hands it over.

CASSANDRA

H-how? I did not bring my cloak.

ROLAND

Turn around.

Cassandra turns. He tries looping it through her braid, but it's too loose and heavy to stay upright, and the pin starts to undo her braid as he carefully removes it.

ROLAND (CONT'D)

This wasn't my best idea...

CASSANDRA

Liesel is going to have your head.

Defeated, he hands the pin back to Cass. After accepting it with one hand, she uses the other to tousle his hair.

CASSANDRA (CONT'D)

There. We're even.

INT. KRAUS HOUSE (COMMON ROOM) -- EVENING

When Cass and Roland enter, Liesel races to her chair as if she hadn't moved. They exchange a knowing look and return to their seats without a word about their "chaperone."

JOHANNA

I hope everything is alright, dear?

She smiles at Cass again. It seems genuine this time.

CASSANDRA

Yes, ma'am. Thank you.

HENRIK

You know, something occurred to me while you were out.

He pauses, making sure he has everyone's attention.

HENRIK (CONT'D)

There will be a Christmas festival in town tomorrow. You kids should go. A little time outdoors, around other folk, might do you some good.

EXT. MARKETPLACE (OUTSKIRTS) -- DAY

Gustav and Roland escort Cass and Liesel to the festival. The outskirts of town are quiet, but the music and clamor grow as they move inward. Castle Elhardt is visible above the most distant shops.

Gustav flicks the brooch holding Cass's cloak closed, and they fall behind their friends to talk in private.

GUSTAV

How are you settling in?

CASSANDRA

(annoyed)

Just fine. And you?

GUSTAV

Can't say Father's mood has improved much—

Cass opens her mouth to respond, but he cuts her off.

GUSTAV (CONT'D)

But that could be due to me having burned his supper one too many times this week.

Cass laughs and makes an effort to relax.

CASSANDRA

I'm...settling. The Krauses have been nothing but kind to me.

GUSTAV

As to be expected.

CASSANDRA

And you?

GUSTAV

Honestly, I'm not certain. There are moments when he seems *almost* remorseful for that day, and when I'm *almost* ready to speak to him.

CASSANDRA

But?

GUSTAV

Most days he carries on as if it never happened, and I remember why I stopped.

CASSANDRA

As to be expected.

She frowns as they approach Matthias's shop. Roland shifts to walk in step with her, placing himself between her and the shop as they pass. She pretends not to notice.

GUSTAV

I should have been there.

CASSANDRA

You couldn't have known.

GUSTAV

But I should have realized he was plotting something when he sent *me, across town*, for an errand you make here all the time.

CASSANDRA

Then we might *both* be living with the Krauses.

GUSTAV

That...may be true.

Roland smiles and clasps Cassandra's left hand. With her right, she pulls her cloak tighter around her shoulders and clutches her new broach.

EXT. MARKETPLACE (TOWN SQUARE) -- DAY

The square is alive with festivities: food venders, carolers, musicians, actors, etc. Between the entertainers and the crowds, there is hardly room to walk.

LIESEL

Where do we even begin?

Trumpet blasts silence the noise. The crowd slowly parts to reveal mounted knights leading DUKE WALDEMAR (50s) and his children, twins DIETER/LORD ELHARDT and LADY GISELA (19), through town. Gisela is hidden behind the men.

GUSTAV

The noble family, I presume.

ROLAND

That's Duke Waldemar in front.
Beside him is his eldest son,
Dieter—Lord Elhardt.

CASSANDRA

How do you know?

ROLAND

You know how I sometimes watch the
knights train in the castle's
courtyard?

CASSANDRA

Yes...?

ROLAND

Who do you think trains them?

Liesel drags Cass to the edge of the crowd for a better view. Gustav and Roland follow to avoid losing them.

LIESEL

Is it true that he and Lady Gisela
are twins?

ROLAND

Yes. That could be her behind them,
but I've never seen her in person.

LIESEL

Is it also true that her betrothed
recently died of some illness?

ROLAND

(unsettled)

I wouldn't know. That's not the
sort of rumor I pay mind to.

Another trumpet blast cuts through the noise.

DUKE WALDEMAR

Welcome, all. I pray you find these festivities enjoyable because they will be the last for some time.

Whispers spread through the crowd. The duke ignores them.

LORD ELHARDT

These next four and one-half months will be set aside for a tournament of jousting and mêlées unlike any other.

DUKE WALDEMAR

Any man of at least fourteen years of age may participate, regardless of rank or skill.

LORD ELHARDT

And the lasting two competitors shall secure positions as knights under our command.

Roland steps back as if physically struck. Gustav squeezes his shoulder in support. The duke pulls a parchment from his gauntlet and hands it to Dieter, who holds it up for the crowd.

LORD ELHARDT (CONT'D)

We will review the rules at length at a later date, but they are here for those who are curious now.

Dieter smiles, beckons a reluctant young boy from the crowd, and hands him the scroll. The boy, WREN (12), runs to pin the scroll to the town bulletin.

LIESEL

(quietly to Cassandra)

Aww, that was sweet.

CASSANDRA

(quietly to Liesel)

Except no one will be able to read the rules. The priest, maybe...

Liesel frowns, unsure if Cassandra is joking.

LORD ELHARDT

I will lead a training camp in the castle's outer courtyard after the start of the new year, for those interested.

DUKE WALDEMAR

Thank you for your attention and your patience. Good day.

The entourage trots out of town. Gustav gently backhands Roland's chest, waking the latter from his stupor.

ROLAND

A tournament...for knighthood?

GUSTAV

It's more than you could have ever hoped for, huh?

He pauses, realizing something.

GUSTAV (CONT'D)

Knights sometimes purchase steeds from your father, correct?

ROLAND

More squires than knights, but yes. Why?

GUSTAV

Have you ever asked them for advice about how to fight—or could you, now that you have reason?

Liesel leads the group toward a makeshift stage where actors are finishing the nativity story. Roland pauses to consider the question, then shakes his head.

ROLAND

We're more likely to *offer* advice than receive it.

Liesel grins and pokes a finger into Gustav's side.

LIESEL

I'm surprised you're asking. You know this gives him all the more reason to spar against you, right?

Gustav waves her off, and Roland claps him on the back as their group nears the stage.

ROLAND

How about you?

GUSTAV

What do you mean?

ROLAND

What we wouldn't have thought possible is now reality. Might you consider a change in vocation?

An actor with a shepherd's crook and a melodic accent orders his men to pack when he notices the group approach.

SHEPHERD 1

(to actors)

Hold, men!

(to spectators)

Esteemed sirs and ladies, how might The King's Creed be of service this fine day?

Liesel and Roland each pull a coin from their pocket, but he lets her make the request while he waits for Gustav.

GUSTAV

I...don't know. It's certainly something to consider.

CASSANDRA

What? But what about—

He shoots her a warning look, then smiles at their friends.

GUSTAV

Excuse us.

Gustav ushers Cassandra into the nearest shop.

INT. POTTERY SHOP -- DAY

Earthenware lines the shelves. A woman works the counter, and a man sits at a potter's wheel behind her. Three customers glance around, then leave. Cass and Gustav start whispering but grow louder.

CASSANDRA
You *love* the forge.

GUSTAV
Of course.

CASSANDRA
Well?

He sighs and drags his hand down his face.

GUSTAV
You cannot marry Matthias, and you will not marry Roland—

CASSANDRA
I *am* marrying Roland.

GUSTAV
But you do not want to.

CASSANDRA
What choice do I have?

The couple behind the counter looks at them, annoyed, so the siblings lower their voices again.

GUSTAV
None, save for me.

CASSANDRA
What?

GUSTAV
The way I see it, we have two options.

CASSANDRA
Which are?

GUSTAV

Father has what he wants. As far as he is aware, you are out of our home and soon to be married.

CASSANDRA

So you have said.

GUSTAV

So perhaps now he will allow me to submit my work for review.

CASSANDRA

That could take years. I could not impose upon our friends for all that time!

GUSTAV

Or I can compete in the tournament. If I win, I can buy us some land, maybe start our own forge, or hire someone to teach you—

CASSANDRA

And if you're killed?

GUSTAV

(joking nervously)
Tourney deaths are rare.

CASSANDRA

Or maimed?

GUSTAV

You can craft a new limb for me.

CASSANDRA

You cannot even dismount a horse without incident!

The shopkeepers glare at them again, and they quiet again.

GUSTAV

Cass, Roland will fight no matter what you choose. If I also compete, then there is a greater chance of

someone providing for you.

CASSANDRA

I would never expect so much from you, let alone ask for it.

GUSTAV

Then what would you have me do?

CASSANDRA

Apply for mastership. I will marry Roland.

GUSTAV

But—

CASSANDRA

As you said, Roland will compete regardless of my choice. If he wins, we have nothing to fear.

GUSTAV

If he fails?

CASSANDRA

I can craft a new limb for him.

Gustav sighs and rubs his face again.

CASSANDRA (CONT'D)

You should rejoin the others.

GUSTAV

Without you?

CASSANDRA

I would like to find gifts for the Krauses as thanks for hosting me. I cannot do so with two of them hovering over my shoulder.

GUSTAV

Or me?

CASSANDRA

I will not go far.

EXT. MARKETPLACE (TOWN SQUARE) -- DAY

Roland and Liesel watch the actors perform another Biblical skit as Gustav returns. The boys nervously watch Cass wander in the direction they came, deeper into the crowds.

ROLAND
(to Gustav)
This feels wrong.

GUSTAV
(to Roland)
Agreed.

LIESEL
Shh! This is the best part!

Cass's progress through the crowd is slow, but her friends quickly lose sight of her.

ROLAND
I don't like this.

GUSTAV
Go. Liesel and I will follow.

Roland moves toward the place where Cass disappeared but is still unable to find her. Cassandra stops at a booth partially blocking the alley between two shops. The vendors are mysteriously absent.

Two hands reach from the alley. One covers Cass's mouth. The other drags her in and shoves her against the wall.

EXT. ALLEYWAY -- DAY

The crowds either don't notice the abduction or don't want to get involved. The figure's body presses close to Cass, his lips hovering beside her ear.

MATTHIAS
If you raise the hue and cry, you
will not live to hear it answered.

His eyes are wild and bloodshot. His breath reeks of alcohol. Cassandra struggles. A dagger presses up under her ribcage. She freezes.

MATTHIAS (CONT'D)

You will loathe rejecting my
offer, girl.

The dagger trails down her neck and slices the fabric around the cloak clasp. It falls to the ground. He breathes her in, kisses her neck. She squeezes her eyes shut.

Roland leaps into the alley and punches Matthias. The latter releases Cass and crumbles, apparently unconscious. Roland shakes his now-injured hand.

ROLAND

I think he broke my knuckles.

Cassandra is about to pass out. Roland catches her as Gustav skids into view of the alleyway. They lead her to a bench at the front of the shop.

EXT. MARKETPLACE (TOWN SQUARE) -- DAY

Gustav and Roland lower Cass onto the bench. She stares blankly ahead, still in shock.

GUSTAV

(to Roland)

Find the authorities. Meet us at
your home when you've finished.

ROLAND

Where's Liesel?

GUSTAV

I sent her there ahead of us.

ROLAND

You left her *alone*?

GUSTAV

You'd rather her here with us?

Roland makes a face but nods curtly and marches toward the castle. Gustav kneels before Cass to look for injuries and growls when he sees the fingerprint-bruises along her jaw.

GUSTAV (CONT'D)

If Roland hadn't already, I'd slug

the lout myself.

Then his anger dissolves.

GUSTAV (CONT'D)

He didn't hurt you, did he? He didn't...do anything?

CASSANDRA

No.

GUSTAV

Why Matthias, of all people? I knew Father was desperate, but—

CASSANDRA

Matthias is deceitful. He is a dream in public. In private...

She turns away from him, but he sits beside her.

GUSTAV

He's done this before?

CASSANDRA

Not in so many words.

GUSTAV

Why did you not come to us?

CASSANDRA

Father permits me to do *one job*: deliver tools for repair. I did not want you to think I could not handle something so simple.

Roland returns with the bailiff and another officer. He casts a confused glance at Gustav and Cass, then disappears into the alley.

GUSTAV

We should go.

CASSANDRA

No, I want to see this.

Cass peers into the alley. Matthias is gone, and Roland speaks desperately with the irritated guards. They proceed to ask her questions, and she answers, but the conversation is inaudible.

When they leave, Roland returns Cass's cloak to her.

ROLAND

Are you alright? Can you walk?

CASSANDRA

Yes.

GUSTAV

Are you hungry?

CASSANDRA

No.

(pauses)

But I have realized something.

The boys exchange looks of concern.

CASSANDRA (CONT'D)

I'm not safe here. I am not safe at home, or in public. I do not even feel welcome in *your* home.

She nods at Roland.

ROLAND

What? Cass, no, we hate what you have endured, but we feel blessed that you're staying with us.

CASSANDRA

On the condition that I marry you?

Roland reels back, surprised and hurt.

ROLAND

That's not... I mean, I hoped...

GUSTAV

Cassandra!

Cassandra slowly removes the brooch from her cloak and

returns it to Roland. She frowns, feeling intense guilt.

CASSANDRA

I'm sorry, but I am done letting
others decide what is best for me.

GUSTAV

What are you saying?

CASSANDRA

I will compete in the tournament.

FADE OUT:

Chapter 4³

Stepping through the castle gates into the outer courtyard was the closest thing Cassandra could imagine to stepping into another world. No longer was she cushioned between two rows of wattle-and-daub houses but confined between walls of brick and stone. She found herself staring jaw-dropped at the sheer enormity of the inner wall, so tall she could no longer see the roof of the great hall within or the two bastions behind.

Roland nudged her shoulder to keep her moving with the crowd. Soldiers ushered them around the western wall toward what Roland called a list. To Cassandra it looked like a long, narrow paddock dissected lengthwise by a wooden wall—a tilt rail. There was space roped off on both sides for standing spectators. Behind those were elevated galleries, and on one side, a covered dais for the tournament hosts and heralds.

They followed the flow of people up into the gallery along the outer wall, facing the list and dais. She expected a decent number of townsfolk to attend the demonstration joust, if not compete in the main event, but not so many that she and Roland were crushed between a rather amorous couple and a family of nine. At least they had a satisfying view of the terrain.

Excited chatter rippled through the stands as two men made their way onto the field. They were dressed similarly in long-sleeved tunics and fabric boots that came up to their knees. Both also wore colorful shawls, but one was blue and white in a repeating diamond pattern while the other alternated red and gold stripes.

The one in red threw his hands skyward and shouted, “Good people, prepare yourselves! Prepare yourselves for a spectacle that will have you weep with joy. You have gathered here today for a purpose, and a most holy purpose it is. You have come today to watch, to learn, and

³ This chapter no longer fits my vision for the narrative, but it would have appeared between the nobles' tour through town and Matthias's attack.

to ultimately submit yourselves to the service of our lord, the Duke of Elhardt, who serves the Lord of Lords himself.” He paused as cheers burst from the stands. When they settled, he continued, “But your efforts mean little if unaided by those who have come before you, so today I have the honor of introducing you to a knight. But not just any knight! A knight so powerful, so genuine, so awe-inspiring that he is recognized from here to the New World. So without further ado...Nicholaus von Kesske!”

At the sound of his name, a knight in red and gold stripes rode a swift destrier onto the list. He carried a matching flag as he circumvented the tilt rail twice, then halted his horse at one end of the field. The crowds cheered all the while.

The herald in blue threw his hands up next, staring in mock astonishment between the red herald and the crowd. “I cannot believe my ears! This man has stolen my introduction! I came here today to speak of how my lord’s power and generosity is known across the globe, yet I speak too late to do him justice. Well then, far be it from me to mar my lord’s reputation, I shall let silence do him justice. Now you, my good people, let us hear your admiration for Franz Leweling!”

Another roar rose up from the crowd, louder than the first, as the blue knight also circumvented the list and took his place across from his opponent.

Roland was trembling with euphoria. He stood and leaned out against the railing, smiling wider than a child at Christmas. Cassandra couldn’t help but laugh. Growing up, he rambled about knighthood and chivalry and jousting to anyone who would listen. To see him here now, beginning the journey toward that dream, filled her with as much joy as if she had achieved a dream of her own.

There was something unsettling about the way he looked at her, though. He glanced back often as if to see if she were still focused on the events unfolding before them, but every time, there was an almost imperceptible twinge of discomfort in his expression.

She didn't have time to consider why this was because a man ascended the dais on the far side of the field, rousing the spectators once more. It was Lord Elhardt, donning the black and green of his family crest. At a glance, his imposing figure and stern expression might have seemed intimidating, but something about him made Cassandra question if the look was genuine.

Lord Elhardt approached the edge of the dais to address the audience. "Good morning, friends. I am Dieter Waldemar, Earl of Elhardt. Allow me to thank you for your attendance, to welcome you into my home, and to prepare you for battle—as I am certain that this is the reason many of you have come today."

He paused for the clamor to settle. "Before we begin, I must inform you that the joust you will lay witness to today is theatrical. A performance. The knights are real, I assure you, but they have choreographed this production in such a way that you may grasp the rules and techniques required for a competitive joust. The tournament to come, the jousts in which you will take part, *will be* competitive. They will be difficult, dangerous, and possibly deadly. I encourage you to stay for today's instructions, but I strongly advise you to consider what you are willing to risk—and why—before you risk it.

Chapter 8⁴

There was only an hour or two left until dawn, but Cassandra couldn't sleep. She lay flat on her back and stared at the barrack ceiling, trying to shut out the snores of the men around her. Today was the day. If she did not pass the test qualifying her for the tournament, she had nowhere else to go. Her father had not spoken to her since she refused Matthias, and the Krauses expected her to marry Roland, who had been as much a brother to her as Gustav.

Cassandra gritted her teeth and sat up. Abandoning her efforts to sleep, she crawled carefully off her little sack of hay and stretched her arms over her head. The ache in her left shoulder was hardly noticeable anymore. Briefly, she considered waking Roland to spar with her, but he needed the rest. It was a big day for him too. Instead, she tiptoed around the other men and crept outside.

The air nipped at her face as she made her way across the training grounds toward the stables. When she pulled on the door, the warm, musty stench of manure rushed over her. She trailed the length of the barn, listening to the soft shuffle of hooves and swishing of tails, then stopped at Brunhilde's stall. The steed raised her head to investigate Cassandra's presence but quickly decided sleep was more enticing.

After choosing a fine-haired brush from a bucket beside the door, Cassandra slipped into the stall and began working through the horse's mane. It had really grown out over the last few months and was starting to look matted. She took her time with the chore, beginning at the end and slowly working her way up.

⁴ This chapter picks up after four months of training, on the day of the qualifying exam. By this point, only Gustav, Roland, and Liesel are aware of Cassandra's double identity. She has made new allies (Wren, Lorencz, and Dieter), realized Matthias plans to compete, and identified the most skilled opponents (Valentin, Ritter, and Löwe).

In addition to achieving a cleaner look for Hilde, she hoped that the repetitive motion would lull her back to sleep until sunrise. Unfortunately, the relative silence did nothing to calm her nerves. She tried humming softly to keep her mind occupied and warm up her voice for the day, gradually lowering the pitch until she found a comfortable range for speaking.

Someone sneezed nearby.

Cassandra tensed, then crouched behind the stall door. How long had someone been there? How had she not heard them come in? The ceiling was tall and carried sound; it was unlikely she'd missed the opening door and approaching footsteps, even if they'd tried to sneak in. She held her breath and listened, but there was nothing to be heard.

Minutes passed without another sound. Why did this person not make himself known? Finally, she peered around the door, coming face to freckled face with Wren, crawling on his hands and knees toward the entrance. The two scrambled away from each other, and Cassandra slammed her head on the post behind her.

“Mr. Neumann! I-I’m sorry! I didn’t— I wasn’t trying to—” His voice cracked, and his mouth clamped shut.

“No harm done,” she assured him, trying to keep her pitch low. She rubbed the sore spot on the back of her head and showed him her fingers as proof. “No blood.”

He glanced between her fingers and her face as if still waiting for her to confess. Then, seemingly satisfied, he crossed his legs and slid uncertainly toward her. “I’m sorry. For startling you, and for”—he gestured vaguely to her head. He could not meet her eyes.

“I apologize too. I did not hear you come in.” She paused, realizing what direction he came from. “Were you trying to *leave* just now?”

“N-No. I, uh...”

Cassandra resisted a smile. “How long have you been here?”

Wren fell quiet for a moment, then his defenses crumbled. “I’m sorry! I couldn’t fall asleep last night, and it’s just comforting, being around animals, you know? My Gretel reminds me of home. But then you came in just as I was about to leave, and I didn’t want to scare you, so I was going to wait until you left, but then you didn’t leave, so I tried to leave quietly, but then I sneezed, and I thought that if I just...I’m sorry!”

“Wren, you are not in trouble.” She leaned forward and tilted her head to draw his attention. “You know, I could not sleep either. I came to see my Hilde here. She is the most *pig-headed* horse I have ever met, but she has yet to let me down. Your Gretel seems so powerful, yet so gentle. You must not have anything to fear today, huh?”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far...but thank you.” He paused again, his expression twisting like he wanted to ask a question but wasn’t sure how. “I’m sorry. I really don’t mean to pry, but your voice...”

“You heard?”

“Not well! More of the echo than anything. It just sounded...”

“Feminine?” she asked in her own voice.

Wren’s eyes expanded. “That’s not what I— I wouldn’t call it *that*.”

She chuckled and shifted back into a lower register. “You are not the first to say so. This”—she gestures to her throat—“better meets expectations. Humming simply prevents soreness.”

He opened his mouth to reply when shouts echoed across the training grounds outside. Before they could move to investigate, the stable doors flew open. A dozen or more men

marched in, some in full armor, some still in their nightclothes, and most lugging their saddles from the tack room.

Wren caught sight of a familiar limp among the crowd and waved to get the man's attention. "Mr. Vogel! What's happening?"

Lorencz was still near the entrance when Cassandra spotted him. He had a saddle propped up on his good leg. Recognizing the two as they made their way toward him, his expression brightened. "Morning, soldiers. Orders from Lord Elhardt came around just now. Everyone needs to suit up, saddle up, and meet by the gatehouse to the inner courtyard."

"You mean the trials are inside? Not on the training grounds?"

"Well, it could be that we're performing on the *tournament* grounds. Can't say for certain, though." He hefted the saddle higher up on his hip. "You two better scurry if you want a decent place in the lineup. Otherwise, you could be standing in the sun all the day long."

He chuckled as the two scrambled to prepare, Wren darting for the tack room while Cassandra raced back to the barracks for their armor. Roland was already gone, as was their equipment, but Wren's was in a burlap sack at the foot of his bunk, right where he left it the night before.

Ignoring the sinking feeling in her gut, she scooped up his gear and raced back to the stables. The kid had already placed Brunhilde's barding in her stall and returned from storage with another set for Gretel.

"Are we supposed to put armor on our horses?" she asked.

He shrugged helplessly. "Mr. Vogel didn't say, and nobody knows what the test will require. I just want Gretel to be safe."

Cassandra nodded. They worked in tandem to prepare their horses as if for battle, then she helped strap Wren into his armor.

“Where is yours?” he asked when she finished.

“I think Roland has it, but I do not know where he—”

Manifesting as if by the sound of his name, Roland appeared in the doorway. He held up two large leather sacks. “Looking for these?”

He set them down, and the three of them quickly got to work. On their way out, they stopped by the stall belonging to Lorencz’s horse, helped the man and steed into their armor, then followed their lead to the gatehouse.

A good number of competitors were already waiting: Sir Valentin, Ritter, Löwe, a few men whom she was acquainted with through training, and a host of others whose names she did not know. Matthias was nowhere to be seen, but for some reason, his absence made her stomach turn.

Roland switched the reins from his right hand to his left so he could walk beside her. He leaned in and lowered his voice, “I was worried when you weren’t in the barracks this morning. Are you alright?”

“As well as can be expected.”

“Are you nervous about the qualifiers? You don’t...*have* to go out there today, you know. You aren’t officially in the tourney yet, so there’s no harm in turning back.”

Cassandra tensed. “This again? If I fail today, then you have nothing to worry about.”

He held up his free hand, giving up on his point. He opened his mouth as if to change the subject, but before he could say another word, a heavy thud sounded from behind the gate. Metal

clanged against metal as thick chains raised the portcullis. Sir Valentin mounted his horse, prompting others to do the same, and led the assembly through to the inner courtyard.

Cassandra gasped when she saw the castle. An enormous stone keep rose up from the hillside. There had to be at least ten towers of all shapes and sizes clustered around it, as if built to match separate structures and pieced onto one over time, and all of this surrounded by another heavily fortified wall.

Lorencz let out a long whistle. “That’s not something folks like us see every day, though I s’pose we might if we make it through this trial.”

Cassandra nodded as she surveyed the rest of the inner courtyard. It was not so much different from the outer courtyard, albeit a bit smaller. Around the eastern wall was a chapel, a couple of workshops and storehouses, the servants’ quarters, and what could have been a dining hall. Along the southern wall, west of the gatehouse, was the tournament list. This one was much grander than that of the demonstration joust months ago. Instead of a rope stretched down the center of the training grounds and temporary stands for spectators, there was a sturdy fence dividing cleared pastureland and elevated galleries made of wood and stone.

Lord Elhardt stood about halfway down the list, on the north side of the tilt. Across from him stood a quintain identical to those used in training. Sir Valentin led the party onto the list and gathered them around the noble to hear him speak.

“Good morning, all,” the earl began. “The goal of this examination is to perform as you would in the tournament. Demonstrating all the skills you have amassed these last four months, you will be expected to ride at top speed and aim your lance at the target. Only today”—he approached the quintain and removed the shield, revealing a rope wrapped three times around the end of the crossbar—“*this* is your target.”

Whispers spread among the gathering. The shields they used in practice were large enough to protect a man in battle. This rope target was no larger than the palm of a hand.

“Each of you will be allowed four passes during which you must strike the bar three times. The power behind your strike matters not, only the accuracy and consistency. Judges are positioned along each side of the list to determine your results. Those of you who prevail will qualify for the tournament. Those who do not must return home.”

At the conclusion of his speech, the lord assumed his place on the gallery dais. Meanwhile, Sir Valentin rode back to the east end of the list and ordered the potential competitors to fall in line behind him. Once they had done so, he trotted up to the edge of the tilt. A nearby squire handed a lance up to him.

“Jouster,” Lord Elhardt shouted from the gallery, “come about!”

At the noble’s call, Sir Valentin urged his steed onward. The destrier bolted, moving with incredible speed and grace for its size, and its rider lowered the lance with equal ease and control. He struck the target cleanly in the center. His next two passes concluded with the same results, as did those of Ritter and Löwe after him. The victors gathered by the galleries on the opposite end of the list.

Roland leaned forward in his saddle, completely enraptured by the action taking place before him. “They make it look so simple.” When he noticed Cassandra and Wren exchanging looks of concern, he corrected himself. “That’s not to say I don’t think *we* can succeed!”

Cassandra leaned sideways to count the number of remaining jousts. A dozen or more lay ahead of her, including Roland and Lorencz, and nearly twice that waited behind her. While no one specified a limit to the number of competitors permitted to qualify, more qualifiers meant the road to victory would become longer and much more arduous.

Wren must have realized the same because he began wrapping and unwrapping the reins around his hands. Cassandra nodded encouragingly at him, but he just stared at the competition ahead of them.

The next six jousters failed. While some lost due to careless mistakes, most missed the mark by a thin margin. Cassandra wasn't sure whether to feel motivated or intimidated.

Then a peculiar brindle-patterned horse stepped onto the list, and Cassandra sucked in a sharp breath. Matthias was next. His steed pawed the ground impatiently, then lurched forward so quickly that Matthias nearly fell out of the saddle. He managed to regain his bearings in time to lower the lance but not soon enough to aim. The tip crashed into the quintain post, toppling the contraption, and snapping the crossbar clean off.

Exchanging looks with Cassandra, Roland snorted, then burst out laughing. Cassandra restrained herself, though she could not help but smile as Matthias apologized profusely to Lord Elhardt. Despite the slip in decorum, the noble waved away his concerns. By then a handful of squires were clearing the wreckage and carrying a new quintain onto the list.

The contender circled the track to start again—and he was ready that time. When the steed charged, Matthias kept his seat and aimed the lance directly at the target. The tip connected with the rope sheathed around the crossbar, sending the beam spinning wildly on its post.

He made his third pass with no less trouble than the second. Cassandra held her breath as he charged a fourth time. The lance wobbled as he leveled it at the quintain, but when the tip made impact, it slipped off the right edge of the target.

Wren whirled to face Roland and Cassandra. “Wait, does that count?”

Neither knew how to answer, though it seemed Matthias was equally unsure of the outcome. At the end of his run, he looked to the judges for a decision. The four huddled below the gallery, and after a moment of deliberation, they declared the hit a success.

Cassandra felt the blood drain from her face. Matthias made it in. How? His efforts during training had been less than impressive, and he hadn't the coin to bribe the judges even if he'd known who they were in advance. Was this trial a fluke, or...was he more skilled than he had led everyone to believe?

Matthias smirked at the other competitors as he passed the lance to the next jousting line, then trotted across the list to join the other victors.

Roland glared at his back before glancing at Cassandra in concern. He opened his mouth to say something but immediately thought better of it. Whether he was going to try to comfort her or ask her again to withdraw from the trial, she did not know, but she set her jaw and moved forward with the line. There were only three men in front of her friends now.

The first one succeeded. The next two failed.

Lorenz chuckled nervously. "Wish me luck, men!"

Roland clapped his shoulder in ardent support. "Godspeed, sir."

Cassandra and Wren also wished him well as the merchant led his horse onto the list. His first pass was a success. During the second, something went very wrong.

About one third of the way down the list, he buckled over the right side of his horse. He managed to stay in his seat, but he dropped the lance, and his horse veered left, dragging Lorenz's leg along the tilt. He yanked on the reins, and his steed skidded to a halt. Two squires ran to his side, one grabbing the harness while the other inspected the damage to horse and rider.

A hush fell over the arena, but they were too far away for Cassandra to hear what they said. She could only watch as one of the squires adjusted the armor of Lorencz's right leg.

After giving the merchant a moment to compose himself, Lord Elhardt called from the gallery, "Jouster, are you able to continue?"

"Yes, my lord," he answered. "Apologies for the delay."

The squires backed away to let Lorencz direct his steed back to the starting line. Another squire handed the lance back to him, and he passed his next two runs without issue.

Lorencz rejoined his friends when he finished rather than meeting the other victors by the gallery. Now Cassandra could see the abrasions crisscrossing the pair from the horse's bare shoulder to the armor around the rider's leg. The damage didn't look too bad, but it was enough to be noticeable.

"What happened?" Roland asked as Lorencz handed the lance over to him.

"Tch, just my old injury acting up again. Every now and then I'll feel a sharp pain in my leg, like it was set ablaze. It usually settles down pretty quickly and never causes any real trouble, but I guess my reaction spooked old Kolby here."

Wren still looked worried. "Are you hurt?"

"No sir, I'm alright. Just wasn't expecting it right now, is all."

"That's...good, I guess? I'm glad you're not hurt—and that you won!"

Cassandra nodded her agreement. "Yes, congratulations. You are well deserving of the honor."

"Thank you kindly. Apologies for not staying to watch you all run, but if you'll excuse me, I should get these scratches patched up."

Roland reached to shake the man's hand. "Right, of course. Take care."

Lorenz returned the gesture and wished them all luck, then rode past them toward the gatehouse that they'd entered through not long before.

Roland was next. He grinned nervously at Cassandra before focusing on the target ahead. Horse and rider blurred as they flew down the list, and Roland lowered his lance with as much skill as Sir Valentin. In his first three passes, he struck the quintain with near-perfect precision.

At the end of his final pass, he looked over his shoulder at Cassandra, raised the lance, and cheered. His friends waved and cheered back as he loped toward them, standing in his stirrups as if physically unable to contain his energy.

"That was incredible!" Wren said as the victor slowed to a stop between them.

"As if there was any doubt about his success," Cassandra teased.

Roland frowned at her. "Don't say that. I worked hard for this!"

She shrugged, nearly prompting an outburst before he realized what she was doing. He sank back into his saddle and scoffed in mock disgust, but when she reached for the lance, his fingers wrapped tighter around the hilt.

Cassandra gestured toward Wren with her eyes, reminding Roland to tread carefully. She was well aware that he did not approve of her wanting to compete, but would he really go so far as to refuse her access to the exam? After all her efforts? In front of all these people?

"Is there a problem?" she whispered.

He quickly switched the lance to his left hand, then clenched and unclenched his right fist as if to work some tension out of his muscles. "Sorry. Cramp."

Finally, he handed the lance over to her. Forcing a smile, she accepted it and approached the tilt. The lance wasn't heavy but felt like an anvil in her hand.

This was it. The rest of her life depended on this one moment.

She closed her eyes and her mind. She couldn't think about that right then. Her father's anger, Matthias's threats, Roland's disappointment—those things didn't matter right then. What mattered was this polearm hitting the target before her.

When she opened her eyes, she focused on her mark and adjusted her grip on the lance.

Then Lord Elhardt gave the order to ride, and she dug her heels into Brunhilde's sides. The steed scrambled to find her footing before launching herself into a full gallop. Cassandra shifted her weight to match her stride, then let the lance fall. The tip connected just above the center of the target.

Laughing in relief, she circled the track to repeat her attempt. It was just like practice—with slight alterations. It should have been easy.

Her second strike landed but even higher than before, a stark reminder to avoid complacency. She tried tweaking her aim for her third pass, but when she charged, the lance grazed the underside of the crossbar. The judges only confirmed her fear.

She paused at the end of the list, breathing slowly to ease her racing heart. That was her third attempt. That should have been more than enough. It all came down to her final pass.

As she rounded the tilt to return to the starting line, she noticed her friends waving their encouragement. Though she suspected only Wren meant it, the sentiment renewed her strength.

She charged one last time. The lance suddenly felt lighter than before, yet it fell smoothly to align with the target. The tip slammed directly in the center.

Brunhilde must have taken the lead after that because Cassandra was unaware she had rejoined her friends until Wren caught the lance slipping from her grasp. "Mr. Neumann! Are you alright?"

Cassandra laughed, not quite believing her luck. "I...passed?"

“You passed,” he assured her. “You passed!”

“Congratulations,” Roland said. He offered a halfhearted smile and clapped her on the back with a little more force than necessary. “I knew you could do it.”

She returned the smile but felt a pit forming in her stomach. Qualifying for the tournament was a monumental step forward, but it was only one step of many. Now she had to follow through with her scheme—competing as a man in front of countless spectators, possibly against her friends, possibly against Matthias—all for a *chance* to earn her freedom.

Cassandra shook her head to clear her thoughts, glancing up just in time to wish Wren luck as he walked his horse onto the list. He looked so small. It wasn't the first time she'd noticed this, but now that he was alone on the track, standing before the empty galleries and a line of older, larger, and more experienced victors, the comparison was unnerving.

When Lord Elhardt gave the order to charge, Wren and his steed stayed rooted at the starting line. Cassandra and Roland exchanged looks of concern as the noble called again, as if Wren hadn't heard him the first time, but he still didn't budge.

Lord Elhardt asked, “Jouster, are you able to ride?”

Cassandra leaned forward in her saddle, trying to decide if she should intervene. She couldn't see Wren's face, but she was sure he was terrified. His outpouring to her in the stable that morning said as much, even if he set his feelings aside long enough to cheer for his friends.

Roland must have sensed what she was thinking.

“Wait,” he said. “Let him find the courage himself. It's not a good look for him if others interfere.”

“Ro, he's fourteen.”

“Exactly.”

A squire approached Wren and reached for the lance, but Wren did not surrender it to him. He did not reply to the lord either. Instead, he waited for the squire to retreat, straightened his spine, and urged his horse forward. Gretel took her time getting up to speed, but Wren did not drop the lance until reaching a full gallop.

By then, it was too late. The polearm dragged across the top of the crossbar with a horrible scraping sound that sent a shiver down Cassandra's spine.

As Wren rounded the tilt, she waved at him in support. He gave no indication he noticed.

When he made it back to the starting line, he hesitated again. She could only imagine the dread he felt. She was fighting for herself; he was fighting to keep his family from destitution.

Cassandra closed her eyes and waited.

The scrambling of hooves signaled the charge, picking up speed with each stride and much sooner than during his first pass. The farther he traveled, the more she strained to hear past the beating of her own heart.

Then that horrible scraping sound echoed throughout the arena. Then silence.

Cassandra opened her eyes.

Gretel plodded around the far end of the tilt, slowing to a stop in the middle of the list. The devastation on Wren's face was enough to break anyone's spirit.

Ignoring Roland's advice, Cassandra loped onto the field to meet Wren. Up close, she could see the tears welling in his eyes, and she fought back her own as she took the lance slipping from his grasp.

"Wren? It...it's going to be alright."

He didn't seem to hear her, and he probably wouldn't have believed her if he did. When he made no move to continue onward, Cassandra dismounted, took the reins of both steeds, and

walked them all off the list herself. Lorencz had returned by then as well, so he and Roland followed their friends around the side of the lower galleries for some privacy. Everyone was quiet for a moment.

“This is not your fault, Wren,” Cassandra said at last. “This is a burden that should never have been placed on your shoulders.”

The other two nodded in solemn agreement as silence descended over them again.

“None of us has a squire.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to Lorencz. He rested his elbow on the pommel of his saddle and looked between them as if that were the most natural solution in the world.

“Or a herald.”

Roland’s expression relaxed as he warmed to the idea. “That’s true. The winners of each round are paid. It probably won’t *be* much, and we probably can’t *offer* much, but you wouldn’t have to put your life on the line for it.”

“I...don’t want your charity,” Wren said slowly. Cassandra couldn’t be sure of his thoughts, but something about his tone told her that he did not quite believe his own words. It was as if he thought that was the response he was supposed to give.

She shook her head. “It’s not charity if you’re working for us. It’s compensation.”

Wren still looked doubtful. “I don’t know anything about being a squire...or a herald, for that matter.”

Lorencz chuckled. “You can pass a lance, can’t ya?”

“Course.”

“And you can holler, can’t ya?”

“I guess?”

“There ya go, then.”

Wren stared at the ground. At first, Cassandra thought he was deciding whether to accept the offer, or maybe struggling to understand it. Then he sniffled.

“I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe anyone would...” He paused to take a deep breath, then tried again. “Thank you.”

Lorencz shrugged. “Hey kid, don’t you mind it. Any decent fella woulda done the same.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the remaining line of competitors. “Why don’t we go see who else we’re up against, hmm?”

Chapter 9

It was late morning when the last man completed his examination. Having taken the exam herself, and almost failed, Cassandra knew how difficult it was. Even so, she hadn't expected so few trainees to qualify, only sixteen out of several dozen. She wasn't sure whether to take comfort in her minor victory or fear the skill of those she now had to face.

Her friends' reactions didn't make the decision any clearer. Roland had been engrossed in the scene before him, hovering beside her to narrate each joust's ride until something new or exciting robbed his focus. Lorencz sat oddly still in his saddle. His eyes followed the other trainees as they passed, but slowly, as if his mind were elsewhere. Wren just looked relieved. Of course, it probably *was* a relief now that he was no longer under any pressure to compete—not that becoming a squire for three would be easy. It was simply the lesser of two evils.

Lord Elhardt's voice drew their attention back to the gallery above them.

"Congratulations, those of you who remain." He paused as if anticipating some response from the audience. The competitors returned his gaze with blank stares, none daring to breathe. The earl continued, "While you have greater challenges ahead, you have already proved your mettle in coming this far. Having said this, I now extend a formal invitation to you and your families attend a banquet in Castle Elhardt's Great Hall following Monday's festivities."

Cassandra looked to Roland in surprise. Leaning closer to him, she whispered, "Is that typical of tournament celebrations? For nobles to invite commoners to dine with them?"

"It's not unheard of for the nobility to dine with *competitors*," he answered, "but competitors have always been knights or nobility themselves...until now, anyway."

"A concept that begs a few questions of its own."

"*I'm* not going to question it."

Cassandra shrugged to drop the subject. Above them, Lord Elhardt closed with orders to report to the tournament list at dawn on Tuesday for further instructions. Once dismissed, Sir Valentin and the two squires returned to the stables by the chapel while several of the remaining competitors, Matthias included, stayed on the field to train.

Meanwhile, Cassandra and her friends began walking their horses back to the stables in the outer courtyard. As they neared the portcullis, she tilted her head back and inhaled deeply through her nose. Clear skies and the hint of lilacs promised good days to come, and, for the moment, put her mind at ease.

“It seems we have a couple days to ourselves before the joust,” Roland said, looking between Lorencz and Wren. “What do you plan to do with them?”

“Work, mostly.” Lorencz let up on his reins and twisted his torso to stretch, his armor squeaking with the motion. “My wife’s been handling the business as long as I’ve been away. Done well too, last I saw. May not be much I can do to help in just two days, but we’re still preparing as if this tournament thing won’t work out for me.”

Roland’s face paled. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Lorencz waved away his concerns. “In any case, I might just bring her to this fancy supper they’re planning. I can finally introduce you.”

Not waiting for Roland to respond, he asked, “How’re you all gonna spend your time?”

“I’m still trying to decide how to tell my parents I failed,” Wren said, speaking up for the first time. He wrinkled his nose in distaste, but Cassandra couldn’t tell if he actually feared the outcome or if he was trying to lighten the mood.

“Do you want us to come with you?” she asked. “To confirm we hired you?”

He squinted as if thinking hard about her offer, then shook his head. “No, this is something I should probably do myself. Besides, you are all doing so much for me already. I don’t want to add to your troubles.”

Cassandra opened her mouth to reply, but Wren was already dismounting and leading his horse into the stable. She and the others did the same.

The group fell silent as they set to work caring for their steeds, but there was more than enough creaking and clanking and shuffling to make up for the lack in conversation. While Cassandra and Lorencz removed the horses’ barding and saddles, Wren rushed to and from the tack room to get the gear out of their way, and Roland lugged large buckets of water from the well outside.

When they finished with the horses, they paired up to help remove each other’s armor—Roland aiding Cassandra, and Lorencz aiding Wren—then gathered in one stall to finish their discussion.

Lorencz leaned against the door frame and nodded to Roland. “You’ve got family in town, don’t ya?”

“I do, but I’m not sure if I’ll go home right away. I may stick around and train some more with Xander.”

Cassandra shot him a look of confusion. Since she couldn’t go home or risk Roland’s parents recognizing her, it made sense that she would stay in the barracks until the festival, but that didn’t explain why he chose to linger.

“You’re always welcome to train with me,” she said after a moment, “but don’t feel obligated to keep me company. I’m sure your family misses you.”

Roland snorted. “I’m sure they could survive without me until the festival, at least.”

Lorenz planted a hand on Cassandra's shoulder. "If you've got nowhere to go, why don't ya stay with me?"

"No—thank you," she answered quickly. Before he could insist, she grinned and added, "It's been a long few days. Wouldn't mind a little peace and quiet."

"Offer's still on the table if you change your mind. Anyway, it's about time I head out. You coming, soldier?" he asked Wren.

The kid jolted, being addressed for the first time since they regrouped. "Sir?"

"Walk me to the gate, will ya?"

"Yes, sir!"

With that, the two gathered their belongings and made their way to the door. Wren stopped at the entrance and poked his head back inside. "See you at the festival!"

Cassandra could hear festival music all the way from the barracks. Though too distant to identify the song, she thought she recognized the light twittering of flutes and the unique whine of a hurdy gurdy.

She leaned back on her little sack of hay and sighed. Most of the competitors had returned home for the weekend, and those who stayed had already left to enjoy the fair. All except Roland, who returned home long enough to find nicer clothes for the two of them to wear to the banquet that evening, leaving her alone for the first time in weeks.

It should have been a relief, having a moment to herself without him hovering worriedly over her shoulder, but now there was nothing to distract her from her own worries.

This would be her first festival since Matthias's attack. The memory was still fresh in her mind: the red spider veins in his eyes, the alcohol on his breath, the tip of his dagger pressed up under her ribcage. She could still feel his lips trailing down her neck.

It didn't matter how many times she faced the man or how well she convinced herself that he wouldn't come after Xander as he would Cassandra; she couldn't shake the feeling that she would never be safe until she was out of his reach. Winning this tournament was her only chance.

Just then the door swung open, and Cassandra scrambled to her feet. It was Roland.

"What are you doing?" he asked. She started to answer—with what, she wasn't sure—but he shook his head to cut her off. "Never mind. Here. Put these on."

He tossed a bundle of clothes at her but didn't even wait to see if she caught them before stepping back outside and closing the door behind him.

Cassandra snatched the bundle just before it hit the ground. Right away she could tell there was something unusual about it. The colors were too bright. The belt holding it together was too smooth, smelled too strongly of leather and tallow.

Roland was wearing his best clothes, and these were too new to have belonged to her brother. He had to have purchased them, but why? Even if he had the money, the cost must have been enormous, especially when something of theirs would have served her well enough for one night. This was too much.

"Roland?" she called through the door. "Where did you get these?"

"Borrowed from a neighbor. Now hurry up!"

Shaking her head at the obvious lie, she quickly exchanged her brother's old work clothes for a bright indigo tunic and brown hose. Paired with a fitted vest, loose jacket, and knee-high

boots, the ensemble was likely the nicest thing a craftsman could own without having to pay a fine for dressing above his station. This really was too much.

Roland was leaning against the wall when she joined him outside, twirling a flat wool cap around his index finger. His brows shot up in surprise when he saw her, but then he grinned.

“Took you long enough!”

“I still don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Like I said, they’re borrowed from a neighbor.”

“Not the clothes. The festival. I don’t think I should go.”

Roland stopped twirling the hat and stood up straight. “And just what do I tell Liesel when I show up without her best friend?”

“I—” She hesitated, feeling a stab of guilt. “That’s not fair. What if someone recognizes me?”

“Cass, *I* hardly recognized you just now. The only people you might have to be concerned about are your father and my parents, but your father isn’t coming, and I have a plan for my parents.”

“Have you forgotten Matthias?”

“Matthias would not risk disqualification from the tournament for picking a fight with Xander, and clearly he has no chance of finding *Cassandra* today.”

“You think he could never recognize one as the other?”

“He has not recognized you in all the months we’ve been holed up in this camp together. He’s not particularly observant, so you have nothing to fear.”

Cassandra narrowed her eyes in doubt, but he flipped the hat between his fingers and pulled it gently over her ears. “You’ve hardly seen Liesel in months. Come with us. Please?”

Cassandra shooed his hands away from her face and turned her back to him. Of course he didn't understand. The tournament, these festivals—they were all sport to him. He might have been watching out for her all this time, but at the end of the day, it wasn't *him* who needed to be looking over his shoulder.

Still, he was right about Liesel. They had gone from seeing each other every day to once in passing every five or six weeks, and that was only during training. Should she win the competition, then they could be apart for much longer.

“Fine,” she said at last, turning to face Roland again. “I will go.”

“You will?”

“Yes, but if I sense anything amiss—”

Before she could finish, he smiled and gently shook her shoulders. “*No one* is going to discover you. That, I can promise.”

Cassandra mimicked his smile though she did not share his confidence. But, convinced she did, he nodded toward the gatehouse to the inner courtyard.

The music grew louder as they drew nearer. Now they could pick out the softer strums of a lute beneath those whistling pipes and that buzzing wheel fiddle. The odd miscellany of sounds filled the air around them, each twisting and rising and falling in rapid succession, crafting a tune that would put a spring in anyone's step.

Beyond the heavy iron portcullis, covered booths followed the bend in the courtyard's wall. They stretched from the gatehouse all the way to the castle's front step, creating a colorful path around the tournament list while also blocking workshops and servants' quarters from view.

Half the town was milling about the grounds already, wandering from tent to tent in search of the next great curiosity, yet a steady stream of new festivalgoers trailed in behind them.

It would take a miracle to find anyone in this crowd, but Cassandra felt the horde closing in around her, like anyone could be the one she most feared.

“Roland!”

He and Cassandra turned around at the sound of Liesel’s voice. Though it took them a moment to search, they finally spotted her tucked between the gatehouse wall and the first tent in the row, bouncing on her toes and waving her arms overhead. She motioned for them to follow as she retreated further behind the booths, and they jogged to catch up with her.

When they rounded the corner, they found Liesel and Gustav waiting for them, both dressed as if for church. For Liesel, this meant a pale blue, square-necked dress with brown trim and a drawstring pouch tied to her waist. Her light blonde hair was woven into two braids as always, but today a velvet headband held them tighter against her ears. Gustav was wearing the clothes that Roland should have borrowed for her—an older, simpler version of the clothes she was wearing—which only confirmed her suspicion that one or both spent their money unnecessarily.

As soon as the group was out of sight, Liesel tackled her in a hug. “Cassie! Finally, you’re here!”

Cassandra tensed and peeled her friend’s arms off her waist. “It is good to see you too, but *please* do not use my name here. I cannot afford drawing that sort of attention to myself.”

“I know that, but there’s nobody back here! I didn’t think it would hurt...”

Sighing, Cassandra pulled Liesel into another hug. “It’s been too long.”

“*Much* too long.”

Roland waited for them to part before cuffing the back of his sister’s head. “If both you and Gustav are here, then who is distracting our parents?”

“Ow!” she screeched, rubbing the sore spot on her head. “They’ll meet me here at noon. They allowed Gustav to escort me early so we could spend more time with *you*.”

“It’s true,” Gustav said as he pulled Cassandra into a hug of his own. “Until then, you have the pleasure of *all* our company.”

Roland blinked in surprise, then turned a look of apology to Liesel. “Make it up to you over a game of ninepins?”

Liesel’s glare morphed into an impish grin. With a quick “race you!” and a firm punch to his arm, she took off around the tent toward the arena.

“Wait, don’t—” He cursed under his breath as he took off after her.

Cassandra and Gustav followed closely behind, which wasn't easy, given the crowds. As small as Liesel was, she could weave between them like water through a sieve. The others had to squeeze through until they were spat out onto the tournament list, which had been transformed into an arena for popular festival games like horseshoes, tug-of-war, and archery. There were even a few tables set up for alquerque boards and Gluckhaus dice.

Gustav, noticing Cassandra had stopped to take in the scene, grabbed her arm and kept running. Roland was still only a little ahead of them but was quickly gaining on his sister. When she glanced over her shoulder to gauge the distance between them, he closed the gap and finally overtook her.

At the end of the list, he skidded to a halt just shy of a young woman holding a wooden ninepins ball. Except Liesel lost her footing and barreled headlong into her brother. All three crashed to the ground.

Cassandra and Gustav stopped in their tracks. The collision was drawing the scrutiny of bystanders, some eying the group in disgust while a sympathetic few offered to help. Unsure of

what else to do, the Ferron siblings inched forward until they were close enough to hear their friends but far enough to avoid detection themselves.

A chorus of grunts, squeals, and apologies erupted from the pile as Liesel struggled to climb off her victims. Once she was free, she lent a hand to Roland, and he to the woman they toppled. The woman accepted his hand but turned aside to dust off her dress and then retrieve the ball she had dropped during the scuffle.

Roland opened his mouth to apologize, but she silenced him with a look that fell somewhere between a smirk and a frown of disapproval. “Let’s try knocking only the *pins* to the ground from here on out, hmm?”

“Miss, I—” He swallowed hard, his face flushed from exertion and embarrassment. “I beg your pardon! I wasn’t trying to— We weren’t—”

“Are there only two of you?”

Roland tilted his head, confused.

She nodded toward the seven sets of pins behind her, five of which were occupied by other festivalgoers. “Together or separate?”

“Uh, to-together. Thank you.”

Satisfied with his answer, she popped the wooden ball into the air. He caught it easily in both hands, but she had already turned her back to him. She strolled to the end of the lane and crouched to realign the nearest set of fallen pins, a bright copper braid slipping over her shoulder as she rolled another ball back to the starting line. Roland stared after her, his mouth slightly agape.

“You’ll catch flies if you keep that up,” Liesel teased, sneaking up beside him.

“Wha— I’m not—” He paused, scowled, then planted the ball in her hands. “Just roll.”

Liesel wiggled excitedly in place before lining up to the first unoccupied set of pins.

Seeing the crowds disperse now that the chaos was coming to a close, Cassandra and her brother rejoined their friends.

“That was...something!” Gustav said. Noticing Roland’s glare, he gestured between the four of them. “Brothers against sisters?”

“Not so loud,” Cassandra hissed, fighting the urge to elbow him in the ribs. She ducked her head and glanced around to see if any bystanders noticed his mistake. An older couple in the lane beside them didn’t seem to hear him, or perhaps they didn’t care. The girl they had bowled over was busy resetting pins for a group of children at the opposite end of her booth.

Gustav held up his hands in self-defense as Liesel knocked down four of the nine pins, followed by two more. “Drat! No points.”

She handed the ball to Cassandra next, but she picked off even fewer than her teammate. Gustav, on the other hand, somehow managed to kill all eight pins surrounding the one in the center, earning him a “ringer” score of nine.

“How was Father when you left him earlier?” Cassandra asked him between hands.

“Are you asking because you want to know or because you don’t want him tracking us down today?”

“Why not both?”

He paused to roll again—destroying all nine pins for a “ringer twelve”—and return the ball to Roland. When he finally circled back to Cassandra’s question, he swung an arm around her shoulder and leaned in close to her ear. “I reorganized Father’s workshop last night.”

Cassandra shook her head, unsure what to think. “Without his knowledge?”

“A surprise from his most *thoughtful, loving* son to make up for his—my—absence today.” The way he exaggerated his words made her briefly question his sanity. “He’ll be so busy trying to find all the right tools that he won’t have the time or energy to come looking for me...for whatever reason he might come up with.”

“Are you certain?” Cassandra asked. “If Father has so much work that this *surprise* would slow him down, then who’s to say he wouldn’t seek you out to help carry that burden?”

“Please. I *am* the burden,” Gustav said, taking a bow.

“Don’t be smug.”

“He deserves worse after what he did to you.” He shook his head, then offered another lopsided grin. “Cass—Xander, trust me. Everything will be fine.”

Cassandra scoffed. He and Roland shared one mind. It was so like them to feign enthusiasm to ease her fears, or to have already gone out of their way to try to prevent the worst from happening. In any other circumstances, they might have succeeded. Here and now, she felt less than certain that her brother’s master plan would play out the way he intended. Then again, their father rarely left the house except to negotiate prices with the ironmaster—the only menial task he didn’t delegate to his children. If he was willing to spare Gustav for a few hours, however begrudgingly, then perhaps she had little to fear. Perhaps she *could* have a little fun.

It didn’t take her long to test the idea. While Gustav secured the first game of ninepins for himself and Roland with ninety points to the girls’ sixty, the next two rounds reversed their fortunes as Cassandra directed more and more attention to the pins than her surroundings. Her scores weren’t perfect by any means, but she managed to secure a couple ringers that pushed her team ahead.

Roland held up his hands for Liesel to toss the ball to him. “Best of five?”

Liesel eagerly obliged, but Gustav cut off whatever she was going to reply. “Wait, do you hear that?”

They all paused to listen. At first, Cassandra only heard the clicks of falling pins, the squeals of children chasing each other around the yard, and the fading notes of a flute shifting from one song to the next. There was nothing that might have raised any alarm.

Then she heard it, a gravelly voice echoing across the list. Though distorted by distance and the surrounding noise, it was unmistakably the voice of her father.

Cassandra froze as Gustav and their friends turned to locate the source of the voice. “Do you see him?”

“Not yet,” the boys said together.

The voice grew steadily louder but no clearer, his words sounding horse and garbled between coughing fits.

“There,” Liesel said, pointing directly ahead of her. “By the second Gluckhaus table.”

“It looks like he’s searching for someone,” Roland mumbled. He and his sister turned to Gustav for a new plan, and Cassandra sneaked a peek at his face. It twisted into something between anger and indecision, then sagged in defeat.

Liesel looked back toward the festival and gasped.

“What is it?” Cassandra whispered.

Roland pinched the bridge of his nose. “Our parents. They’re with your father.”

Hearing those six little words made all the blood in Cassandra’s body run cold. So that was it. Her father wasn’t upset about the workshop; their parents discovered that Gustav and Roland had lied to them about Cassandra’s whereabouts. They wanted answers.

“*Gustav Ferron!*” The intentionality of his voice told Cassandra that he had finally located his son—and stood no more than fifteen or twenty feet away from them now.

Gustav never took his eyes off his father but spoke directly to her. “Don’t run. Don’t turn around. Just keep playing the game until we’re gone.”

As he passed the ball back to Liesel, Roland told her, “Stand behind us but away from Xander. Neither of you needs to be involved in this.”

Liesel scooted closer to her friend and pressed the ball into her hand, then trailed after the boys as they approached their parents. Cassandra pulled her cap lower over her face and lined up her next shot. She rolled, scattering six of the nine pins. The copper-haired girl quickly cleared the fallen pins and returned the ball.

“*Gustav,*” their father bellowed. He sounded even closer now. “You thought you could hide this forever? That we wouldn’t figure it out?”

“Father, let’s not do this here—”

“Don’t give me that! Don’t give me your sorry excuses neither.”

“Father, people are *staring*—”

“Let ‘em stare!”

Cassandra’s heart hammered against her chest, and she counted the beats to maintain her composure. After another failed ringer, she waited impatiently for the ninepins girl, who, like many of the players at that point, was transfixed by the spectacle taking place before her.

Mrs. Kraus’s voice pierced the air next, though she was likely speaking to Roland. “You told us that Cassandra went to live with her family in Beneheim!”

“While you,” the blacksmith continued, still raging at Gustav, “allowed me to believe she was still with the Krauses!”

Mrs. Kraus stamped her foot. “We’re not taking another step until someone explains!”

Gustav sighed, apparently giving up on his plan to move out of the public eye. “Mrs. Kraus, *I* told Roland that Cassandra was with family. He is not at fault here.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“He had no reason to doubt me and no proof to dispute the claim. Whatever he told you was, as far as he knew, the truth.”

The weaver huffed but didn’t push the issue. The same couldn’t be said of the blacksmith, who continued hounding his son for answers.

In the meantime, Cassandra offered a subtle wave for the ninepins girl to roll the ball back to her. Loath as she was to draw attention to herself, she couldn’t face away from the commotion without an apparent reason, and she’d rather remind a stranger of her presence than reset the pins herself and risk showing her face to those who might recognize her.

The young woman kept her eyes glued to the quarrel as she kneeled and felt blindly for the ball. When she glanced up to roll it back, their eyes met. Her brows knitted together in confusion, and she gestured between Cassandra and her friends as if to ask, “Aren’t you part of their group?”

Cassandra shook her head, praying a look of annoyance would ward off additional questions and hopefully mask her panic. Her knees trembled as she crouched to pick up the ball. Though no heavier than an average skillet, it felt like an anvil in her hand.

“Gustav, you tell me where she is! I won’t ask again.”

“Why do you care?”

“I—” His voice caught in his throat, but he moved on before Cassandra could be sure what it meant. “As her father, I have a right to know!”

“You surrendered that right when you fed her to the wolves.”

“Don’t test me, boy.”

“Why not? You’ve taken everything from her, you’ve withheld a future from me—what more have we to lose?”

Cassandra sucked in a sharp breath. This was getting out of hand. Someone had to intervene before her brother risked more than a tongue-lashing. As hard as he tried to convince their father that he had nothing to lose, he still had a roof over his head and food on the table. He had a job that he loved, even if he still could not advance beyond his apprenticeship. All of that could be taken away from him just as easily as it was from her.

She glanced to her left, where Liesel stood biting her nails. Even if there was something she could do, it wasn’t fair to involve her in this battle.

To her right was a line of strangers, mostly men, their faces drawn more in amusement than irritation. Two women held toddlers against their legs. No one seemed likely to step in of their own volition.

That left the ninepins girl.

Thinking quickly, Cassandra approached the woman and dropped her voice. “How is your aim?”

The woman raised a brow in surprise. “Depends on where you want it.”

“Close enough to send them home.”

“Pity. Just when this was getting interesting.”

She held out her hand for the ball, and Cassandra obliged before stepping out of her way. But the girl didn’t move. Instead of walking down the lane and bowling at the men like pins,

maybe popping someone in the leg, she took a step and launched the ball off the palm of one hand.

Forgetting herself, Cassandra spun to watch it arc through the air. When it came down, it landed directly between the men's feet, bouncing over the soft grass and rolling gently past them.

Silence descended over the fairgrounds as everyone stared first at the projectile and then in the direction it came from. Cassandra stood frozen as all eyes turned toward her, but then she realized they weren't looking at *her*. The ninepins girl was already scooping up another ball and marching into the fray.

"That's enough of *that*, ladies and gents."

The blacksmith growled and leveled a knobby finger at her. "You stay outta this, girlie."

"Can't do that when you're disrupting all the fun, now can I?"

"I'm warning you—"

"I'm warning *you*," she said, raising the second ball. "Take it on home or the next one lands on your head."

The man's lip curled under a ragged mustache, but the woman stood her ground.

Finally, he swung his finger around at Gustav. "Don't bother comin' home unless you got an answer I'm willing to hear."

With that, he stomped off the way he came.

"Well," Mrs. Kraus huffed, smoothing out her skirt. "That's about all the excitement I can manage in one morning. Roland, fetch your sister. Let's finish sorting all this back at the house before the banquet this evening."

Seemingly satisfied with the result of the dispute, she turned on her heel and started toward the gatehouse, her husband shuffling along behind her.

Roland made no move to follow. "You go. We'll stay."

The weaver whirled around again, her face burning red.

"It was good seeing you, Mother."

Chapter 10

The air was still warm as the sun dipped behind the towers of Castle Elhardt. Cassandra wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her wrist, then readjusted her cap. She and a few of the other competitors were already standing outside the fortress's large double doors, where they had been told to wait for the banquet to begin.

From her position, she had a good view of the festival down the slope, of the market booths forming a colorful wave along the inside of the castle wall to her left, and of the games overtaking the tournament list before her. Beyond that, she could see a group of young workmen setting up two rows of tall, narrow tents, each adorned in a unique color and repeating geometric pattern. Given their heraldry-like appearance and separation from the rest of the festival, Cassandra wondered if they were meant to house the qualifiers through the duration of the tournament. If so, they would certainly be more private than the barracks. Quieter, too.

Still, she wouldn't have minded a little more excitement if it meant she could spend a little more time with her friends. After the catastrophe that morning, the boys were none too keen on remaining in the public eye. Not as a group, anyway. Liesel argued that that they could simply play a different game or find a secluded spot for a picnic—even Cassandra consented to such compromises—but Roland ultimately dissuaded them. So, after saying their goodbyes, Liesel dragged her brother back through the market while Cassandra and Gustav tried their hand at archery on opposite sides of the range. But such an arrangement as that, being able to see him but not speak with him, was perhaps more painful than all their months apart. There was still so much she wanted to discuss, especially now that their father knew he lied to everyone concerning her whereabouts. Gustav did not appear to be too anxious, however. Either that, or he was an excellent showman.

At any rate, the two gave up on their new game after only a few rounds. The competition was not half as enjoyable to Cassandra as it could have been, had they been able to goad each other on as only siblings could. So, seeing as there was little else to do at such a distance from each other, she walked up the hill to the castle gates. Gustav trailed along behind her to ensure her safe arrival but quickly made himself scarce in case the Kraus family decided to appear early for the banquet as well.

Fortunately for him, there was a fair delay between his departure and their arrival—and their arrival was a lively one. Mrs. Kraus was still shrieking at her son, demanding answers she was certain he had, while Mr. Kraus tried unsuccessfully to calm her. Roland scowled but otherwise did not engage with them, and Liesel struck up a conversation with a family standing nearby as if she were not associated with her own. Neither acknowledged Cassandra at all, and she pretended not to acknowledge them. Even so, it was a relief when the castle doors finally creaked open.

At the threshold stood a gentlewoman, perhaps thirty-some years of age. She donned a fine linen dress of deep burgundy, the sleeves long and narrow with slitted puffs at the elbows, and the bodice embroidered with intricate gold flowers. Her hair was hidden beneath a white bell-shaped cap, and a dozen thick gold chains hung around her neck. Though expressionless when the doors first opened, she offered the faintest of smiles to welcome the competitors.

“Good evening to you all. I am Adelaide Waldemar, Duchess of Elhardt and your host for the evening. If you would please follow me, I shall direct you to the Great Hall.”

Without another word, the woman turned on her heel and began walking down the corridor to her left. Cassandra glanced around at the other competitors to gauge if they found the

duchess's welcome as brusque as she did, but, reading only confusion, fell in line behind them as they followed their host indoors.

Although the interior of the fortress was not nearly as glamorous as Liesel had imagined, with walls made of gold bricks and lined with jewel-encrusted weaponry, it was still something to behold. The ceilings were twice as tall as the average village home, and the corridor extended as far as Cassandra could see. An ornate mural or tapestry hung on the wall outside every door she passed, and long rugs muffled the group's many footsteps as they walked.

The duchess said nothing more of where they were going or which rooms they passed along the way, and she only stopped when they came upon another set of large double doors flanked by a set of smaller single doors.

“Wait here until you are summoned. We shall meet again shortly.”

Not waiting for a response, if indeed she expected one, she disappeared through one of the side doors. Two pages replaced her shortly thereafter. One held a quill and parchment and the other a washcloth and a bowl of water. The boy with the water immediately began to work his way down the line, allowing each person to wash their hands while the other page recited instructions.

“When I announce your name, you will approach the dais and bow or curtsy to your hosts. Then, you may take any available seat in the hall.” He paused to survey the group as if seeking some sign that they understood him, and, apparently satisfied, he called the first name on the list. Unsurprisingly, he began with Sir Valentin.

Following him, the page seemed to be asking the competitors for their names and then marking them off his list. At first Cassandra listened for names she recognized, particularly Roland and Matthias, but then it dawned on her that even if she heard when they were called into

the room, her position near the end of the line might not leave her with a choice of seat away from them.

She offered her false name to the page when it came her turn, but she was so focused on placing one foot in front of the other that she hardly heard it called. The room was more than twice as long as it was wide and at least three times as tall. Two rows of tables were lined up end-to-end along the length of the room, each with padded benches on both sides. Along the far wall, one table sat on a low dais overlooking the rest of the hall. The noble family was already seated there, the duke and duchess in the middle with Lord Elhardt and Lady Gisela at their sides.

Before she knew it, she was standing before them. The duke was centered left, wearing a shiny black doublet with hundreds of vertical slashes revealing a dark green tunic underneath. He also wore a green and yellow striped cap positioned at an angle behind one ear, and heavy gold chains hung from his neck. If the situation were not nearly so formal, Cassandra might have laughed. Lord Elhardt sat at his right hand, clothed in a similar style but in bright crimson and amber, a look even more elaborate than his father's. The duchess sat to their left, and beside her, a young woman who could only be Lady Gisela. She too donned a gown similar in style to her mother but in the elaborate colors of her brother.

Cassandra did not have time to think beyond that, as the four of them were staring at her with serious and unblinking expressions. Remembering herself, she quickly dipped into a bow.

“Good evening, your grace. Many thanks for your hospitality.”

There was a pause, but she did not dare raise her eyes yet.

“Are you dining alone, Mr. Neumann?” the duke asked. His voice was stern but not accusatory.

“Yes, sir,” she said, standing upright again. “My family resides in Beneheim and were not able to join me today.”

“Your wife and children? Or the relations of your father’s house?”

“My father’s house, sir.”

Though brief, Cassandra could have sworn she saw a slight lift in his brow. “Very well. You may sit.”

She nodded firmly, then turned to seek out an empty seat. Immediately, she noticed that everyone had chosen to sit as close to the dais as possible. Sir Valentin and company were seated nearest the duke, of course, and Roland’s family managed to sit reasonably close to the noblewomen. This left only the back half of the room available, a prospect that made Cassandra feel somewhat relieved. The only problem was that she still did not see Matthias.

Just then movement caught her eye. Lorencz waved to her from his seat about halfway down the table to her right, his back facing the wall. Cassandra returned the gesture before taking a seat across from him. As she drew near, she realized the woman beside him must be his wife. She was a thin woman with young features and medium-brown hair braided tightly around the back of her head. Her skin was ashen, and she offered a faint but pleasant smile.

While they waited for the last of the competitors’ names to be called, Cassandra took in the rest of the room. The ceiling towered over her, even more so than that of the corridor leading to the Great Hall. The wooden support beams were apparently well-maintained with a fresh coat of linseed oil, judging by the strong nutty smell, and held up four wheel-shaped fixtures each supporting a dozen softly glowing candles. Most notably, however, were the heads of large game animals lining the walls along the length of the room: a variety of elk and deer, a few boars, and two bears.

Once the last of the competitors were finally seated, dozens of attendants rushed in and out of the room to prepare for the meal. The first wave brought in white bread trenchers and silver spoons. The next, an assortment of pottage and meat pies. A small roasted fowl was placed in front of every guest, probably quail or chicken, given the size, followed by one large roasted boar on each table. Served with the meal was a choice of mead or wine. The smell alone was intoxicating, but watching the servers move with such speed and efficiency was starting to make Cassandra dizzy.

A short blast from a buisine trumpet turned her attention to the front of the room. All four nobles stood, and the duke finally addressed his guests.

“Good evening to you all. I am Friedrich Waldemar, Duke of Elhardt and your host for the evening. Please enjoy the meal, enjoy the dancing to follow, and know that there is no need to retire early. Tomorrow’s event begins not until midday.”

He made a sweeping gesture with one hand as he leaned into a polite bow, then he and his family took their seats again. As if on cue, a soft string melody floated upward from the far corner of the room and expanded to fill the space. The banquet had begun.

Lorencz scratched the back of his head in thought. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much food in one place. Odd that they’d serve it all at once, though. There’s enough here for at least four or five courses. Then again, not like I’d know all that much about fancy dinners.”

Cassandra had thought the same. There was hardly any space left on the table. She couldn’t fathom a reasonable explanation for such a display as it was—for strangers, and mostly commoners at that—but to display it all at once seemed excessive. Were the nobles illustrating, intentionally or otherwise, the divide between their stations? Were they trying to hasten the meal

so as to sooner be rid of their guests? Or was the exhibition precisely what they claimed, a celebration of the qualifiers' achievements and a literal taste of the victors' reward?

"Anyway, I don't guess it matters much right now. Xander, allow me to introduce you to my wife, Helene."

"Lena' is fine," she corrected him gently. She leaned forward when she spoke, her voice soft and airy. "It is a pleasure, Mr. Neumann. I have heard much about you."

"It's Xander, please, though you cannot have heard so much in one day."

"All praise, I assure you."

"Then your husband has been less than truthful about me."

Lorencz interrupted, smiling incredulously, "And disparage my own reputation? Hardly!"

He and Cassandra laughed, but Lena sat upright again, her expression pensive. "Forgive me if I cause any offense, but...have you no family?"

Cassandra tensed. She had answered the question half a dozen times since she began training, and the story she had invented for herself was not terribly far from the truth, yet for some reason it never became any easier to share. "Not one of my own. My parents both passed some years ago, and my siblings are in the care of a friend until my return."

"Oh, my apologies."

"Why do you ask?"

"You must be very worried for them," she answered slowly, "and lonely without them."

"Loneliness is a small price to pay for their safety, though I cannot say I am terribly lonely with the likes of these." Cassandra gestured first to Lorencz, then vaguely to the rest of the hall. "Is the same not true for you? After all, Lorencz could not compete if not for you looking after the business."

Lena's eyes widened. "Y-yes, of course. I did not mean—"

Cassandra shook her head to excuse her from answering.

Thankfully, Lorencz interjected again. "She does well with the skills she has, picked up from all those years watching her father. He was an inventor as well. Put enough faith and resources in me to help me get my idea off the ground. Keeping it off the ground is another matter, though."

"Understandably so," Cassandra agreed. "Is that how you and your wife met, then? Through your connection to her father?"

"Sure is. I came from a small ranching family, so I was surprised when he introduced us. Even more so when consented to our marriage before we even began courting."

"Oh, so it was an arrangement?"

"I wouldn't go that far, but it wasn't like I was against the idea. She was pretty, and kind, and we got along well enough. Wasn't until later I realized she had some decent business sense, too."

He smiled at Lena and wrapped his arm around her shoulder while she ducked her head, her face turning bright red. Cassandra wasn't sure how to respond to that. The way Lorencz had talked about his wife in the past, it sounded as if they were an honest-to-goodness love match. Now it appeared as though he was indifferent to marriage, and to her, until they were long settled in their new life. For them, marriage was the natural course of action and love a happy consequence. To Cassandra, that sounded a little sad—and all too familiar. That was the sort of arrangement that Roland hoped, even expected, to develop between them. It was also the sort of arrangement Matthias demanded, regardless of her feelings. She could imagine neither with a satisfactory outcome.

Still, everything worked out for the Vogels in the end. She could be happy for them, at least.

If her friends noticed her hesitation at all, they did not mention it. Instead, Lorencz clapped his hands together and suggested they actually enjoy the meal they were invited to partake in. So they did.

Not knowing where else to begin, Cassandra began carefully picking apart the roasted bird before her. The meat, which she decided was quail, was pleasantly dry. The spices used to season it were unfamiliar, however. She was certain she tasted black pepper, but there was more to it than that. It was woody and sweet, like fennel but stronger, and had a smoky aftertaste. Even after a few bites, she couldn't decide whether she particularly liked it or not. Next she tried the pottage, spooning a little of each type onto her trencher. One was thick and earthy green, likely peas. Another looked like it had a potato base. The third was closer to soup than pottage, with garden vegetables floating in a thin broth. All were still more pungent than she was used to, but this time the spices agreed more with each other and the dish itself. The potato-based stew was undoubtedly her favorite of the three, and after tasting a bit of every dish within reach, she helped herself to more.

Once everyone had eaten their fill, the attendants returned to clear the tables. After that, the tables were pushed against the walls and the guests lined up on either side of the room.

Steady drumbeats began to slowly fill the hall, followed by two flutes playing a deep, resonant melody. The duke and duchess stepped down from the dais with their hands clasped between them. They bowed and curtsied to each other, swayed side-to-side as if finding rhythm with the music and each other, they began a slow tip-toed walk forward. When they reached the center of the room, they turned away from each other and made a slow circle until they met again

in the middle. From there, they began a series of steps toward and away from each other, making half circles and turning back, but not always at the same time. It was almost as if they were dancing separately, yet the deliberate nature of their movements indicated a clear link between them. Then, with a little hop and twist from them both, they faced each other again, and the last notes of the song faded away.

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Adams, Shane, et al. *Medieval Warfare*, vol. 7, no. 3, July 2017, *JSTOR*.

Medieval Warfare addresses a range of topics relating to 15th and 16th century European warfare: a summarized history of tournaments, the rules and rewards of competitive jousts, the expectations for theatrical jousts, and so on. This volume compiles the work of at least fifteen authors, most of whom have backgrounds in medieval literature, teaching, publishing, or jousting. Several are founders or contributors to Medievalists.net, a blog for history, news, book reviews, and other media relating to the Middle Ages. I have used some of this information when structuring the tournament in my novel, and the sections on pageantry and honors might help me develop future chapters.

Bancroft, Tony and Barry Cook, directors. *Mulan*. Walt Disney Feature Animation, 1998.

Mulan is an animated Disney film based loosely on the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan. In the film, the titular character disguises herself as a man to take her father's place as a conscripted soldier but ultimately saves China from the Hun invasion. This was one of the first narratives that I noticed did not align well with the traditional Positive Change character arc because, while Mulan *did* grow as a person, her influence had a much greater impact on the characters around her than theirs had on her. This observation began the search that led me to Flat Arcs.

Additionally, while this story did not directly influence my novel, there are some key similarities between the protagonists in that both are torn between duty and desire, and both disguise themselves as men to participate in some form of combat.

Bradley, Dan, producer. "MMA with Medieval Armor and Blunt Weapons." *YouTube*, hosted by

Fernando Perez, uploaded by VICE Sports, 17 Oct. 2016.

Every year, the International Medieval Combat Federation (IMCF) hosts a medieval-style combat tournament at a castle in Europe. Perez traveled to Portugal to watch the American team compete in full-armor, blunt-weapon melees. In each round, teams faced off in five-on-five, 16-on-16, or 30-on-30 battles until one was crowned world champion. Armor and weapons must match historical examples in material and style (with some modifications for safety reasons). This is one of the few sources I've found that portrays melees at length and the first to highlight a female competitor. Women were not permitted to compete in medieval times, so this clip gives me an idea of how a woman (like my protagonist) might fare in a full-contact, male-dominated sport.

Bretel, Jacques and Sarrasin. *The Tournaments at Le Hem and Chauvency*. Translated by Nigel Bryant, Boydell & Brewer, 2020. PDF.

This is the English translation of two eye-witness accounts of tournaments that took place in France in 1278 and 1285. Sarrasin's *The Romance of Le Hem* describes the theater and sport of a joust modeled after King Arthur's court. Bretel's *The Tournament at Chauvency* recounts a similar event that included jousts, mêlées, feasts, and gossip. Bryant is an associate lecturer in intercultural communication at Oxford Brookes University and the editor or translator of 14 books on medieval literature. Nothing is known about either Sarrasin or Bretel outside of these texts, but Bryant attests that these accounts were likely recorded accurately and within weeks of the events described. While these events took place well outside the general setting of my novel, these records offer unique insights about competitive versus theatrical jousts as well as the fanfare around them.

Dickerson, Melanie. *The Captive Maiden*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2013.

The Captive Maiden is a Christian retelling of Cinderella, set in the 14th century of what is now Germany. The heroine attends a ball against the wishes of her stepfamily and catches the eye of the duke's son, who invites her to watch him compete in a tournament. The two slowly fall in love but must face increasingly dangerous obstacles to be together. Dickerson has published 24 historical fiction and fantasy novels, including the 11-book Hagenheim series of which *The Captive Maiden* is the fourth installment. She strives for accuracy but acknowledges that primary sources are difficult to find, and thus she has made mistakes or filled in the gaps herself. This series is a key inspiration for my novel, written in the same genre and set in a similar environment to the one I want to depict.

Fawkes, September C. "Debunking 6 Myths About Steadfast, Flat-Arc Characters." *September C. Fawkes - Editor & Writer*, 2021.

Fawkes has won awards for writing fantasy and science fiction novels, freelance editing, and blogging on the craft of writing. In this article, she chronicled her struggle to understand why so much of the writing instruction she received did not seem to apply to her stories or those she drew inspiration from. The answer rested with Flat or "Steadfast" Arcs. She went on to define the term, identify six common misconceptions about it, and then challenge each of those arguments according to her definition. Her writing journey and subsequent research into Flat Arcs mirrored my experience almost exactly, not only validating my seemingly unique personal struggle but supporting my theory that this battle was not as uncommon as it appeared.

Freytag, Gustav. "Pictures of German Life in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries." *Project Gutenberg*, 2010.

This book covers at least 300 years of German history, including chapters on war and politics, peasant and noble life, gender roles and marriage, religion, and so on. Each of these

sections is then followed by a discussion about the changes each subject experienced within the established timeframes. Freytag was better known as a playwright and novelist than historian, and his introduction indicated a distinct bias for the political and social “superiority” of the modern day (the mid-1800s). However, the volume itself presents as a meticulous textbook-like compilation of primary sources with a fairly balanced perspective of each era, and Freytag is frequently cited in other secondary sources as a legitimate authority. I take an interest in this piece because it contains some of the most detailed descriptions of daily life and courting traditions of this period that I’ve read, which are central to the plot of my novel.

Helgeland, Brian, director. *A Knight's Tale*. Sony Pictures Releasing, 2001.

The plot revolves around peasant-born William Thatcher (Heath Ledger), the young squire of a wandering knight. When his master dies, William takes his place in jousting tournaments to win the fame, the prize money, and the heart of the noble Jocelyn (Shannyn Sossamon). The film is known for its anachronisms, but most of these “mistakes” were intentional and accurate to the eras they were derived from. For instance, the film is set in 1372, but the armor depicted is accurate to the 1400s and 1500s. This movie is also a great source of inspiration for my novel, seeing as both leads must don a new identity to compete in tournaments and secure a better life for him- or herself.

Jorstad, Lewis. *Mastering Character Arcs: How Fifteen Universal Journeys Can Power Up Your Novel's Cast*. 1st ed., Book Two, The Novel Smithy, LLC, 2022.

This book outlines the three Primary Arcs (Positive, Negative, and Flat) and twelve common Secondary Arcs (Hero, Coming-of-Age, Rogue, and so on). It also describes how each of these arcs might appear within eight major plot points (Beginning, Catalyst, Reactive Phase, Turning Point, Active Phase, Regression, Choice, and The End), and how these two major paths

can be combined to create Foundational, Supplemental, and Hybrid Arcs. Jorstad is a developmental editor, author of six writing craft books, and founder of *The Novel Smithy* blog on the craft of writing. Although Weiland's *Creating Character Arcs* discusses the Primary Arcs in greater depth, Jorstad's *Mastering Character Arcs* looks at the bigger picture, examining character arc trends in popular media and creating a sort of hierarchy for classifying them. This hierarchy supports the central argument of my critical paper in that it explains which criteria cannot be used to define Primary Arcs.

Kingsley, Jason and Guy Windsor. "Medieval Fighting Techniques." *YouTube*, uploaded by Modern History TV, 24 Oct. 2019.

In this video, Dr. Guy Windsor translates a knightly combat technique from a late fifteenth-century manuscript by Philippo Vadi, and with the aid of Jason Kingsley, demonstrates that the technique would be physically plausible. Windsor is a swordsmanship instructor, researcher, writer, and entrepreneur. Kingsley, in addition to being the co-founder and CEO of Rebellion (a European multimedia studio), is a professional horse trainer and part-time joustier. He also runs Modern History TV, a YouTube channel dedicated to all things medieval. This interaction—two men experimenting with an unfamiliar combat technique—is and will continue to be an important aspect of my novel.

Nichols, Erin, reporter. "Texas Renaissance Festival Jousting Competition (Hanlon-Lee's Action Theater)." *YouTube*, performance by Sir Thomas and Phillipe, uploaded by Tony Stolfa, 6 Nov. 2012.

In this video, reporter Erin Nichols of Fox 4 News interviews two actors from the Texas Renaissance Festival's jousting competition. "Sir Thomas of England" and "Phillipe of France" explain that their jousts are choreographed theater productions (rather than competitive

tournaments) in which four knights fight for the glory of their monarch. They also describe how they rehearse and rally their audiences. The actors all have backgrounds in professional theater or horsemanship and conduct extensive research for their roles as medieval knights. While the show is staged, and the actors take additional safety precautions, the armor, costumes, and tournament structure are modeled after fourteenth-century jousts. Though both theatrical and competitive jousting have been practiced since medieval times, they served different purposes and followed different rules, giving me more material to incorporate into my novel.

Trottier, David. *The Screenwriter's Bible: A Complete Guide to Writing, Formatting, and Selling Your Script*. 7th ed., Silman-James Press, 2019.

The Screenwriter's Bible is an all-encompassing tome on screenwriting, instructing readers how to structure a plot, craft memorable characters, brainstorm witty dialogue, and format a manuscript for publication. This book was assigned to me for an elective course in screenwriting, a genre in which I had no previous experience, and it presented the material in a way that was as enjoyable to read as it was easy to digest. While I lament that Trottier failed to acknowledge Flat Arcs as a viable storytelling tool, I appreciate that he not only described a variety of plot endings but recognized that no particular ending is linked exclusively to any one Primary Arc.

Ventri, Adam, director. *Full Metal Jousting*. Hosted by Shane Adams, History and Pilgrim Studios, 12 Feb. 2012. *Pluto TV*.

This 10-episode reality show follows two teams of eight contestants each, all participating in full-contact jousting for a \$100,000 grand prize. Competitors are placed into single-elimination tournament brackets and either awarded or penalized points that determine who advances to the next round. Each team is coached by a professional joustier, and the show is

hosted by Shane Adams, who holds 17 international titles in competitive jousting. The contestants come from backgrounds in theatrical jousting, horse training, show jumping, and stunt work. The tournament set-up and armor are modeled after those of sixteenth-century Germany (with some modern upgrades for safety reasons). Some scenarios might have been contrived or dramatized, but for the most part, the sport and resulting injuries are real. I approached this series hoping to better describe similar action scenes in fiction, but the bracketing and point system were also helpful in fine-tuning the design my joust.

Von Aue, Hartmann and Wernher der Gartenaere. *Peasant Life in Old German Epics*. Translated by Clair Hayden Bell, vol. 8, Columbia University Press, 1931. PDF.

This is the English translation of two medieval German epics about peasant life. Wernher der Gartenaere's *Meier Helmbrecht* is about a farmer's son who takes advantage of his family to masquerade as a knight. His pride is met with fear and hostility, and he is ultimately hanged for his crimes. Hartmann von Aue's *Der arme Heinrich* is about a prideful knight who is stricken with leprosy by God, and his only known hope for a cure is the heart of a virgin who freely sacrifices herself, but he later prevents a woman from doing so and is cured. Though written some 60 years apart, these poems are recognized as the first character-driven stories in German history and two of the few about medieval peasantry. Bell, a professor of German at the University of California, acknowledged that perfect translations (particularly of poetry) are impossible but that he made it his priority to render the content faithfully. These poems take place several hundred years before the setting of my novel, but all three stories share similar elements: they illustrate the disparities between social classes, a protagonist who switches between them, and the potential consequences for dishonoring a knight's code of chivalry.

Weiland, K. M. “How to Write Archetypal Character Arcs.” *Helping Writers Become Authors*, 2023.

This blog series delves into the “life cycle” of archetypal character arcs. It describes twenty-four primary archetypes (six Positive, twelve Negative or “Shadow,” and six Flat or “Resting”), how each of these arcs can manifest (regarding worldview, goals, plot points, stakes, and antagonists), and how they might evolve into the next phase. This is an extensive study and one I have not yet fully explored, but there seems to be some overlap or at least congruency with the twelve Secondary Arcs discussed in Lewis Jorstad’s *Mastering Character Arcs* (e.g., the Maiden Arc versus the Coming-of-Age Arc, the Queen versus Mother, etc.). Weiland’s Maiden, Lover, and Hero Arcs have already been helpful in mapping out the journeys of the main cast of my novel.

Weiland, K. M. *Creating Character Arcs: The Masterful Author's Guide to Uniting Story Structure, Plot, and Character Development*. PenForASword Publishing, 2016.

This book outlines the five parts of a character arc (Lie, Truth, Want, Need, and Ghost), the three major types of character arc (Positive Change, Negative Change, and Flat), and how each type might appear within ten major plot points (Normal World, First Act, First Plot Point, First Half of the Second Act, Midpoint, Second Half of Second Act, Third Plot Point, Third Act, Climax, and Resolution). Weiland is an award-winning author of four fantasy novels, six craft books, and the extensive *Helping Writers Become Authors* blog on the craft of writing. She offers by far the most comprehensive analyses of Flat Arcs (if not character arcs) out of any author discovered throughout this research and is often cited as a primary source by other authors. This particular book of hers introduced me to Flat Arcs as something other than flat

characters, explained a key flaw in my own novel, sparked my interest in researching character arcs, and supports the central argument of my critical paper.

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GLOSSARY

Ambiguous Arc: Though defined as presenting readers with the opportunity to interpret whether a character arc is Positive, Negative, or Flat, it might actually allow readers to determine whether the arc's conclusion was subjectively satisfying.

Arc-less: A type of character arc in which the focal character does not change but expresses an exceptional quality or skillset allowing him to complete otherwise impossible tasks. Often presented as a subcategory of Flat Arcs but is more likely a type of Secondary Arc.

Bittersweet Arc: Though sometimes presented as a Negative Change Arc variant or a Primary Arc of its own, it is more likely a potential outcome for any character arc in which the characters achieve only partial results (e.g., a character embraces a new worldview but fails his plot objectives).

Character Arc: The growth or development a character experiences throughout a narrative.

Failed Arc: A type of outcome for character arcs in which the focal character fails to embrace a new worldview, fails the plot objectives, or both, and ultimately leaves the arc unresolved.

Flat Arc: A type of Primary Arc in which the supporting cast embraces the (focal character's) Truth.

Flat Character: A character that does not change throughout a plot or have much impact on it, which might be necessary for minor characters but could indicate a lack of development in major characters.

Focal Character: The character that is given the most focus at a particular moment. In the context of this paper, the focal character usually refers to the subject of the arc but not necessarily the protagonist or the subject of the change.

Foundational Arc: The combination of one Primary and one Secondary Arc that serves as a baseline for a character's internal and external journeys (e.g., Positive Rogue's Arc). All major characters will have a Primary Arc, but most should have a Foundational Arc.

Growth Arc: A character arc in which the focal character undergoes a (generally positive) internal change but has little impact on the world around him. Often presented as a milder version of the Transformational Arc but generally falls within the parameters of a Positive Change Arc.

Hero's Arc: A type of Secondary Arc, based on Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, in which the focal character ventures into a new world (literally or figuratively), overcomes a series of trials, and returns home to share the reward with his community.

Hero's Journey: Originally outlined in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), this is a type of plot structure in which a protagonist ventures into a new world, overcomes a series of trials, and returns home to share the reward with his community. This is generally accepted as the most common and most popular type of plot structure.

Hybrid Arc: A combination of one Foundational Arc and one or more Supplemental Arcs that outlines all the overlapping internal and external journeys of the focal character (e.g., Flat Coming-of-Age Arc + Positive Hero's Arc).

Lie: A deeply held misconception that a character believes about himself, the world, or both that prevents him from recognizing the Truth and completing the goals of the plot.

Negative Change Arc: A type of Primary Arc in which the focal character embraces the Lie.

Positive Change Arc: A type of Primary Arcs in which the focal character embraces the Truth.

Primary Arc: Outlines the overarching inner journey of the focal character and can appear in one of three forms: Positive Change, Negative Change, or Flat. The type is determined by the subject of the change and the new worldview embraced. Primary Arcs can be combined with Secondary Arcs to create Foundational, Supplemental, and Hybrid Arcs.

Protagonist: The main character, or a character given significant focus throughout a narrative. May be referred to as the focal character or subject of the change, but not always vice versa.

Secondary Arc: Focuses on the specific story beats and patterns that help characters fill specialized, often archetypal roles (e.g., Hero, Lover, Coming-of-Age, Redemption).

Shift Arc: A character arc in which the focal character undergoes only external changes (e.g., gaining a new perspective, learning new skills, or filling a new role). Presented as a variant of Growth Arcs and potentially as an alternative to the Flat Arc but contradicts the parameters of both categories.

Subject of the Arc: The character that the arc belongs to, usually referred to as the focal character. Often doubles as the subject of the change (as in a Positive Change or Negative Change Arc) but not always (as in a Flat Arc).

Subject of the Change: The character(s) that change throughout a Primary Arc as the result of embracing a new worldview. Can be the focal character (as in a Positive Change or Negative Change Arc) or the supporting cast (as in a Flat Arc).

Supplemental Arc: A combination of one Primary and one Secondary Arc that enhances or adds depth to the Foundational Arc, thereby creating a Hybrid Arc.

Surprising Arc: A Flat Arc, though it is often presented as a subcategory of Flat Arcs.

Transformational Arc: A character arc in which an unassuming focal character undergoes a radical change and pulls off an enormous feat of heroism. Often presented as a Primary Arc but would be more accurately defined as a Positive Hero (Foundational) Arc.

Truth: The theme or belief that counteracts the Lie, enabling characters to complete the goals of the plot.

Worldview: The opposing beliefs held by the focal character and supporting cast, at least one of which should be changed by the end of the narrative. Together with the subject of the change, the

type of worldview embraced (the Truth or the Lie) determines which character arc the focal character follows.