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One Writer, Two Genres: Composing and Analyzing Creative Nonfiction and Fantasy

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J. N. Andrews Honors Program

Andrews University

HONS 497

Honors Thesis

One Writer, Two Genres: Composing and Analyzing Creative Nonfiction and Fantasy

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Apr. 05, 2021

Advisor: Dr. Beverly Matiko

Primary Advisor Signature: *B. Matiko*

Department: English

Abstract

Creative writers face a wide range of options when they sit down to craft art out of words. Available to them are many genres, each with their own characteristics or traits. Additionally, many writers have accomplished self-reflection in interviews, Q&A sessions, and in print. It is not unusual to find writers taking their craft and turning it into their subject matter. This project aims for the same. In order to analyze the similarities and differences in the writing process across genres, a “writing about writing” essay is included along with four creative nonfiction essays and a young adult fantasy novel draft.

One Writer, Two Genres: Composing and
Analyzing Creative Nonfiction and Fantasy

Dedications

To Dr. Beverly Matiko, both encouraging mentor and gracious editor.

To Abbi and Joelle, my very first proofreaders.

To my friends outside the English Department, my most invested audience.

To my parents and my little sister, who've inspired each piece.

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The Reaper and Me

Sometimes, I think about my parents. I remember high school and getting a phone call from my mother, telling me that Dad was in the hospital. I remember her giving me the basic information: Dad had had some chest pain, it was an emergency, he's seeing the doctor now, tell your sister, don't tell grandma. I remember taking my sister into the back room and telling her about Dad.

Instinctively, we kept what we knew between the two of us. Our church was a festering pool of gossiping homebodies, male and female, young and old. We didn't want to be the center of everyone's conversation. At some level, I think we also believed that everything was normal. We went through the motions of acting like it was an ordinary day, and on some level we believed it was. The information we had gotten was through Mom, and we weren't directly there to observe or see what had happened. It could still exist in the nebulous metaphysical realm, away from the reality of our everyday life. Until it reached us in the real world, we chose not to engage with whatever consecutive emotions would rise from the unexpectedly bad event that had happened to our family. We didn't want to poke the bear.

The next few days passed by, and by increments, I compartmentalized everything. It was like my mind saw it as an emergency drill. Dad had had a heart attack, and needed an emergency bypass, he was recovering in the hospital, but he wouldn't be home for a few weeks. Mom took over driving duties and my sister and I went about our lives.

Nobody in our friend circle knew. Mom had only told a few close friends and family members. My sister and I, on the other hand, refrained from even telling our best friends what had happened. We hadn't engaged enough to feel sorry for ourselves, and we weren't ready for others to feel sorry for us. I don't think I told any of my friends about what had happened until

several years later when I was graduating. I guess it took a long time to feel sorry for myself. Maybe I never did.

Fortunately for all of us, my father recovered. Afterwards, death started to haunt my mind. In my head, he has a visible form. The Reaper has now become my constant companion. It took me a while to notice him. A tall, cartoonish-looking skeleton, like from *Billy and Mandy*. Less animated when he speaks. He's quiet, reserved, but he has good advice. Intelligent, and practical, a present reality that joined me in my day-to-day life. It wasn't an unfriendly presence, having him there by my side while I walked about in the daylight, but it was a presence nevertheless. In some ways, he took over my life. He changed how I saw, felt, and acted around my Dad. In the beginning, it was all in the subconscious. I didn't notice the Reaper and I didn't notice how my behavior changed. Now that the Reaper speaks to me every day, I can pinpoint the time when my affection for my Dad became all-consuming. The last time I was ever truly angry at my father was before his heart attack. With the onset of that crisis, however, the fragility of his body and his age was made real to me. His insurmountable strength and untippable stance were things of the past, girlish dreams of a child. He was an old man, and he was vulnerable. That's what the Reaper said, and sometimes he was right. The Reaper can be a little pessimistic, I now realize.

Dad wasn't just fragile in his body, but there was a fragility of the mind and emotions that I had never accounted for before. When he was still recovering, my sister and I were allowed to see him one day. We played "Heads Up" with him. I think we wanted to do something fun with him, like we did when we were kids. We *were* kids. Unused to standing and chatting about inane things with our Dad, we instead were used to action and games with peppy and engaged parents. The next day Mom confided in me: Dad was sad in the hospital, he missed seeing and playing

games with us. The Reaper told me, my dad's heart was soft and his mind was unguarded. The Reaper's right. Dad's always so unguarded, so easy to hurt. I know that he cries easily. He cries whenever I say I love him, and I know he cries whenever he's worried about me. He cried when I was put in the hospital as an infant and they had to manually pass my stool. Dad cries whenever I say anything that shows him how much I'm growing up. Dad cries a lot. He cries more than Mom. He's also the one to have gotten a heart attack before fifty, the one who has diabetes, and the one who's out of breath when we're hiking.

I think about it a lot. Him dying. The Reaper always reminds me. I'm grateful, I don't want it to surprise me. What will my mother do? What will I need to do for my sister? I know my Mom cries in the car, on drives late at night when she's alone. Not too many things have made her cry— her father passing, our house foreclosing. She's a different breed than Dad. But I know she would drive off in the car and cry once Dad died. I can't let her carry all the burdens it'll leave behind. She already takes care of earning and spending money, staying on top of my school and raising my sister. Once Dad's gone, the Reaper says, I need to take on some of her burdens. The Reaper has some good advice. He always can see the worst-case-scenarios and he always knows what I should do once they happen. It's comforting having him around. I worry about my sister and what I will do with her once Dad dies.

One day I sit with my family to eat. We're at an Indian buffet, right after Church. The Reaper tells me that I could have never had a father my whole life. If my Dad hadn't chosen to stay, to raise me, he would have been gone before I even knew him. So I thank him. My sister is weirded out. Dad says he'll always offer his friendship to my sister, whether she accepts it or not. My sister gets even more weirded out. Mom explains to my sister why Dad always has to get serious. Dad's bond with his father wasn't the same as the relationship he's trying to foster with

us. He wants something different. That's why he says all those things. My sister is still a teenager; she doesn't know the difference right now between her good friends and Mom and Dad. The difference between what they would give, and how much they would love, how much Mom and Dad feel. Once she gets older that will change. As Dad will age, so will her perspective on his fragility. I hope so. It would be nice if she would be really affectionate now when he's still alive.

The Reaper reminds me that once Dad dies, I'll need to take care of my sister. She's always so angry these days. Hormones, she says. Sometimes I have a hard time understanding her. It's different from when we were both kids. Now, our personalities clash and fights are common. I like to understand and to discover, with little regard for the consequences; she prefers to take time for herself and reflect and meditate, which can make her volatile if she's pushed too far. Once Dad dies, she'll lock herself in her room. She'll be cranky all the time, and she won't even notice. What am I going to do? How can I fill in the hole that my Dad will leave behind? How can I help her, when sometimes I barely understand her? For once, the Reaper has no good advice.

After last Christmas break, driving to the airport, it was a surreal experience once again. It always is. I'm always half-asleep. I prefer to sleep throughout my flight since I don't really like flying. When I get to the airport, in front of the escalators leading to the TSA check, I say goodbye to my parents. Sometimes my sister is there too. The Reaper tells me each time that this may be the last time I see my parents alive. He's right. You never know when someone will die. I've already lost four of my classmates. Too young. My parents are too young. But one day they *will* die. I pray every night that it doesn't happen until my sister's in college, but you never know. I hug them goodbye and tell them I love them (my Dad always cries) and I step onto the

escalator without looking back. I'll probably forget to text my Mom when I safely arrive in Chicago. Now that I'm away from my parents and my misunderstood sister, I settle for the comfort of that ever present companion. From here on out it's just the Reaper and me.

Mama, Mystery, Madness, and The Ties That Bind

I don't understand who my grandmother is. I know that she is my mother's mother, that she gave birth to three children, that she has seven grandchildren, that she's almost 90 years old, that she was born in the Philippines and that now she lives in Loma Linda, California. But these are just the surface-level facts. I still don't feel confident that I understand her as a person, as an individual. I've often heard that actions speak louder than words, but I wonder whether her actions can really untangle the knotted web of thoughts that I have about her.

I know that her beloved—my grandpa, or Papa, as we still call him—died when I was little more than a toddler. He was survived by a wife, three children, and four grandchildren, including me. I also know that grandma, who I call Mama, spent a whole day wrestling in prayer with God, begging for Papa's life, before acquiescing and saying that God's will be done, even if that meant Papa dying. As the years have gone by and my memories have become clearer, it's become obvious to all of us, and confirmed by doctors, that Mama has gone through various mini-strokes which have hindered her sight and hearing, amongst other things. Issues of survival and suffering have become more real than ever to her.

I wonder if, by writing this essay, I can gain more sympathy than I already have for my grandma. Obviously she has been through a great deal. Personality-wise, she's nice enough, a good Adventist lady who loves me along with the rest of her family. She's not perfect, of course. She's an old lady who still doesn't understand that the two of us don't wear the same sized clothes, or that no, I really don't need a bottle of rose-scented lotion from Bath and Body Works,

thank you. Maybe these failures to connect are normal grandparent-grandchild woes. I can't be sure. What I do know, however, is that Mama herself is a confusing person and I don't understand her, or my feelings towards her. Her lifelong job has been as an English teacher, so she is steeped in the ideologies and behaviors of academics. But sometimes, she says and does things that have more justification in tradition, rather than logic and progress. I wonder how many of these things I should hold against her, how much I should acknowledge as wrong, how much energy I should invest in pushing back.

I remember coming home from college during one of my school vacations. Mama was going on one of her spiels about my dating life and what she was expecting from it. These talks usually fall under the category of topics that she raises and I ignore. While going on and on, she told me not to become like one of my friends. This friend in question was another Filipino who, unlike me, had made the grave mistake of dating outside of the *Pinoy* circle. Immediately offended, I proceeded to express my dissatisfaction with Mama. I'm proud to say that I did not yell, but I was a little short as I expressed my offense. As I was responding to her jab, I aimed where it would hurt, asking her if the way she was talking was very Christ-like. Perhaps I went too far? She quickly backtracked and recanted, explaining that it was just a joke. Neither of us laughed.

My sister is even less sympathetic towards Mama than I am. I'm sure she loves Mama just as much as she cares for any of her other extended relatives. My sister, however, has a habit of saying whatever pops into her head when she's with the family. An example of this occurred one day when Mama expressed her opposition to women's ordination in the church. Trufi began interrogating her. She was shocked and questioned how Mama could be a self-identified supporter of women's rights and still claim to be opposed to women's ordination. Trufi and I

have been raised to be able to argue our points. As youngsters, we frequently lobbied our parents for that Hershey bar we were so sure we needed and deserved. Unfortunately, Mama's counter argument began with her describing how ridiculous a pregnant woman would look attempting to get up to the pulpit. I can't say she didn't deserve Trufi's verbal scolding. My sister asked why Mama had acted as a deacon for the church then. Wasn't that an instance of a woman fulfilling a position of authority in the church? Mama said that it wasn't her choice, but the church board's. My sister then asked if Mama would jump off a cliff if the board asked her to as well. Mama couldn't come up with an answer.

Clearly, there are some aspects of Mama's personality that are more difficult for us to reconcile than others. But is that worth pushing back against? After all, you can choose your friends, but not your family. When should I let things go? I wonder at what point I should just be satisfied with the way Mama is, rather than condemning her and her actions. To further complicate things, sometimes she demonstrates an exceedingly high degree of wisdom.

One such time occurred when my parents, my sister and I were away on vacation. My mother received a phone call from Mama. There had been a fight in the house between my uncle and one of his sons. Yelling and screaming had occurred, and it had almost come to blows. Mama described how she had heard the noise from her own room and went to the living room in order to interfere, afraid Uncle would hit his son. She had grabbed ahold of Uncle's hands in order to prevent him from swinging, should he get angrier. There, in that position, she gave an impassioned speech about how she, her husband and Uncle, needed to emulate the character of God, as a way to set an example for their children, thus showing them who God really is. My eyes got a little watery as Mom relayed this story to us. Clearly she was very proud of Mama, and I could see why.

I don't know if I'll ever find an answer to the question of what I should think of Mama as a person. On one hand, continuous and willing ignorance should never fester unchallenged. Not everything has to turn into a battle, however. But wrongs need to be addressed or at the very least acknowledged. If Mama wasn't my grandmother, would my opinions of her change? I wish I knew.

I find it difficult to separate familial love from personal love. I don't know how to distinguish between the wise grandmother willing to put herself in danger to touch the heart of another and the old widow with no shortage of quirks and blindspots. I do think the love that I feel for her is real. I can't help but wonder though how it is possible to love someone who I understand only in part. A very, and a very, and a very, and a very, and a very small part at that. Tangled love, that knotted web of thoughts about Mama. That's real. Real love. I've heard that the people you love are the ones who drive you the craziest. Mama is still a mystery to me. But maybe love in all its forms is the biggest mystery of all—one that I will never fully be able to grasp but also one which I wish never to surrender.

Risking it for the English Room

I can't say that I've ever been a person who loves risks. To the contrary, I'm somewhat of a control freak. Many of us keep trying to convince ourselves that we have control over our lives; however, in actuality, there is very little that we can honestly say is under our control. But we like to try anyway. I've never liked to leave things up to chance. Just the thought of having someone or something else control any aspect of my life is still unacceptable, and making risky decisions always makes goosebumps rise on my arms. I'd rather be calm and collected. A stable rock in a turbulent sea.

But, I know, letting life become influenced by fear is just another form of losing control, I think. Some things in life require a certain "leap of faith." Can't fly unless you jump off the cliff. I'm sure I understand this concept, but living it is another matter entirely. Even in my head I keep things organized. Everything is separated into specific rooms. Emotions are catalogued and isolated. One room for anger, one for self-pity, and one for happiness. Everything has its place. I liked my life that way. Honestly, I still do.

My interests, they also have separate rooms in my head. Science, education, criminal justice, history, political science, psychology. My mind contains as many rooms as can be counted, each filled with artifacts and treasures. I could spend days in any one of these rooms, looking for space to renovate, secret codes to discover, and always on the lookout for additional doors to open. Getting older, however, and entering college meant picking one room to stay in, for the rest of my life. It meant choosing what I would spend the rest of my life doing. It's a bit

of a hassle, Mom always says. She's quick to remind me that I'm too much like my dad. Too many things I want to do.

There were so many rooms to choose from, but eventually I settled on biology. It seemed like the best choice. Always something new to learn, ever changing, something new to discover around the corner. The room was large, and not well-lit. There was lots to discover because I couldn't see very far. Basic elements and furniture pieces were hidden from view, and there seemed to be an infinite number of doors to open and look behind. Biology seemed like it could sustain me for the rest of my life, an endless well of discovery and new knowledge. I had gotten my own special room put together. I was all set to move forward.

My freshman year of college then took off. I got convinced to join Honors. I also told my parents I wouldn't join but changed my mind one week into the term. Surprise, classes were actually hard though. In some ways it was a welcome change. Different from my monotonous high school life. Instead of barely putting in any effort and still getting easy A's and praise from professors, things didn't come so easily anymore. I was happy for the shift. It was a little risky, to put grades and GPA on the line in exchange for a challenge, but it wasn't too bad, not yet at least.

Enter Dr. Pittman's Literature and the Arts class. It was the Honors equivalent to English Composition II. It was also the first English class I took in college. We set about analyzing texts as well as the visual and musical arts. *Paradise Lost*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. All these texts were excavated and explored, like a new treasure chest filled with information.

I remember reading Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*. Like the scholars in the play, we turned our classroom into a small community. Just like King Ferdinand had wished for when he said "Our court shall be a little academe" (1.1.13). In this highly interdisciplinary and engaging

course, Dr. Pittman never made anyone feel as if what they had to say was insignificant or off topic. She was adamant that nobody redact or silence themselves when they had a comment. Amongst all the fun and excitement, there was something that stood out. It was only the second semester of freshman year and the other freshmen in the class were all English majors or minors. It was a new experience to talk to Adair, Shannon, Hannah and others who had their own beloved English rooms. Rooms that no doubt had furniture and fully functioning coffee shops inside. I started to get used to exploring my English room again myself. I was always quick to dispel the notion that I was an English major though. I wasn't ready to jump off the humanities cliff.

In my own English room there were shelves and shelves of books. Pieces I had written myself along with collected pieces by others I had read. I had been writing for a long time, as long as I can recall, and I can't remember a time when I didn't love reading. Pieces created from the age of four filled up shelves. At that time, I was already pouring over the books in our home. As soon as I could write, I placed new material in the room, leather-bound stories and poems about our little family adventures, like the time we found a baby eagle on our front porch:

On our porch there was an Eagle,

It was better than a beagle

-Kara, age 8

Mom knew about the room, and she had pestered me about studying English since my senior year of high school. When I was still thinking about what to do for college, Mom urged me to resume exploring the dusty bookshelves of the English room. Most of the books there had only been read by her, Dad, and me. She had been privy to much I had stored there—elementary short

stories, my middle school emo poetry, and my high school essays, so it shouldn't have been a surprise that she settled on the idea that I was good at English.

I had told her over and over again that I didn't want that though. I was convinced I had explored each nook and cranny of the English room. Sure it was a fun room, full of nostalgia and bright, sunny memories. But it wasn't exciting, there was nothing in the dark, no hidden corner, no secret trap door. I didn't want to remember praises and "good jobs" from professors; I wanted discovery. Some critique, some new challenge. Something that would ensure that I wouldn't be bored. The English room, I was convinced, didn't hold that for me. That had been my experience in high school so far, and I put my foot down in opposition to Mom.

But then, I enrolled in Dr. Pittman's class. All of a sudden, the English room began to display a new magic. Books began to appear I had never before seen, and the barren walls encasing the room were suddenly becoming covered in paintings. All at once, there were more books in there than I could read. That was new. I wasn't sure what was happening, but I knew I was having fun. Cracking open old artifacts, amazed as the works of literature I had enjoyed as a high school student now revealed new ideas and themes I had never entertained before. Even though I had left them for so long, my books were all still waiting for me. I began to wonder if maybe I needed to spend more time there. I found myself walking towards the edge and peering down into the abyss. My last defenses finally came down when I went to Dr. Pittman's office for a conference. There she asked me if I had ever considered adding an English major or minor. I jumped.

I remember re-entering the English room, turning on all the lights and having a good look around. I gave English the bigger room because it was going to be my major. Biology, my minor, would move into the attractive but slightly smaller room. Later, I decided to tear down the wall

separating the English and biology rooms. Where once existed two separate rooms, now there was one large room. These disciplines, I was discovering, could play very well together. It's been four years now, and I don't regret my decision. I guess maybe I am a risk-taker after all. At least when it counts.

The Garage

My therapist said

I've heard it said that all parents ruin their kids. I'm sure that there are things I store in the recesses of my mind. Things I got from my parents. Childhood is long gone for me. I wonder what they gave me during it.

"Ooh, look what I found!" he says

My dad likes to hoard things. I'm sure many dads do. I remember on the weekends having to clean out the garage with him and my sister because it had gotten too full *again*. We never really could manage to get farther than one corner of the garage. Dad would always get distracted by the ancient treasure he managed to excavate everytime we dug through the remnants of our past. He would pick up something and show it to us, before he fiddled around with it for a good half-hour. We always got so annoyed with him. Why would he keep wasting time when we had work to do? When we had a goal to reach, a bigger picture to see? We had the rest of the whole garage! I wonder what I got from Dad.

Things we keep

An old clarinet, an old trumpet, baby pictures, loneliness, bitterness, pain. I wonder if we aren't as fond of our old rusty junk as my father is of his. Is nostalgia something that affects everyone

the same way, at the same age? I wonder when I will be hit by the same nostalgia that my dad feels whenever he looks at his old treasures. I wonder what I got from Dad.

I've definitely inherited his habit of hoarding things, My room is full of things I still have trouble throwing out. I wonder if the reason I can't throw them out is the same as the reason why Dad keeps his old junk. Sometimes I think it is, sometimes I think his reason is better than mine, more emotional, and more real.

A history to pass on

Dad has things to look back upon, I suppose: getting married, having two daughters. I don't have either of those experiences. Is that why my reason is different? I don't wish to be younger again. I don't wish for high school or middle school again either. I wonder if he feels the same. I wonder if when he brushes off the dust, he wishes to go back to that distant past he has uncovered. I wonder what I got from Dad.

Physical memories

Sometimes I think about the past, but I don't know if I would ever want to go back in time. My father sent me some of my baby pictures the other day. He gets emotional about these things, more so than me. It's not a bad thing, but it's different from Mom, my sister, and me.

Mom avoids the garage

Mom never stays long inside the garage. It was always too messy for her to deal with. She would rather go straight into the car and leave without addressing all the junk. Easier just to ignore it.

Maybe one day it will get addressed, when we're older, farther away from the mess. Easier to go through the motions of fixing something when you approach it from afar. I wonder what I got from Mom.

A different expression

I've never really been attached to our house. Memories, boxes, baggage, junk. Not really my cup of tea. I don't want to be tied down. It must be that the nostalgia I feel is different from Dad's. I'm sure our reasons for hoarding junk are different as well. Dad is better at emotionally attaching to others and anything than I am.

The house foreclosing

One of the pieces of junk from my own garage that I can dust off and look at. (No, I still don't want to go back). Mom normally keeps a cool head, unless my sister or I have done something especially aggravating. When we lost our house to foreclosure while I was still in middle school, she pulled out of the garage and went for a drive to get out her tears alone. Mom is less attached to things than Dad. She has no problem upgrading and buying more expensive stuff than Dad will even look at. It's always quality over affordability with her.

Inheriting their traits

Most of the time I live pretty frugally. I try to save as much money as possible, in terms of my day-to-day life. But it really is all for the purpose of being able to splurge on higher quality items when the time calls for it. A new computer, new clothes, good food. Like Mom's new Ipad, or her new mobile games. She spends most of her time playing them throughout the day. I wonder

what I got from my mom. Being alone, not wanting to engage with extreme emotions in public, I'm sure I got those traits from her.

Not just one place

My parents have always been travelers. Actually they met as missionaries on the island of Palau in the West Pacific. Two strangers from two different countries. Mom grew up in the Philippines; Dad's first home was Mexico. Married only for a year before I was born, they didn't let having me stop them from traveling all across Asia. China, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia. My parents tried to visit as many places as possible. Eventually we settled, after my sister was born. But the traveling never really stopped. By my count we had been to 40 states. I doubt we'll leave the others untouched. America is large after all, bigger than a lot of Asian countries.

What I got from my parents

I'm used to traveling, to picking up and leaving the house, to packing just what you need into the car trunk and driving days on end in a trunk-like back seat. Rest stops and motels with free Wi-fi littering the country. I never really felt as if I had a childhood home. I don't feel particularly attached to any of the houses that my family resided in. Childhood for me was traveling with the pack, hour-long sing-a-longs with my sister in the back seat, and chattering and chattering, eating at restaurant after restaurant. Now, I don't really feel as at home as I did as a child. Being a guest in my parents' home is different from living with them.

Maybe it is nostalgia

Wanting to chase that feeling of fun and togetherness from childhood, understanding my sister as if we were twins, being sick of my parents because I wasn't leaving to go back to school in a few months, not relaxing in the back seat because this would be my only real vacation all year.

Though not the same as those tangible objects Dad fiddled around with in the dusty ruins of our garage, I still fiddle around with those old experiences. And my childhood remnants are just as dusty.

LEGENDARY: A DRAFT

BY KARA HERRERA

PART ONE

PART 1

PROLOGUE

As he walked down the dark lane, it was hard to refrain from nervously looking around. Hugo was far from comfortable as he walked along, shadows rising and shrinking in the light of the street lanterns. The alleyways seemed to bleed darkness, and Hugo could only just make out the rough outlines resembling humanoid shapes. He swallowed nervously and continued to move deeper into Schyler.

Notorious for being filled with thieves, murderers, and other unsavory characters, Schyler was no place for a young man barely eighteen. Hugo himself was hyper-conscious of the sunken eyes and weathered faces of the people loitering on the sides of the street and how he did not look anything like them. From an outsider's perspective, he looked like a naive boy in these dark roads and alleyways. Flesh was desired, in more ways than one. The slums were notorious for housing all kinds of lurid acts, all kinds of abuse, to all kinds of people. A young man, barely out of boyhood was as desirable as a young woman, for all of the same reasons. In such an unseemly place, it was all too easy to retreat in his mind to thoughts of home, in mellow Baerholm, where the weather most days was fresh and comforting. All at once Hugo wished desperately that he was back there, lying in his bed, where terrifying news reports were easily put out of mind. Now, here in danger of becoming a news story himself, Hugo fought to keep from shivering.

Hugo didn't know if he was imagining the various gazes trained onto him or not. He wished he had dressed to blend into the dark background a bit more, but his shirt and trousers left his body a lot more exposed than he wanted them to be. His skin was so obviously scar-free that it made discomfort settle deep into his gut. Trying to ignore the faces around him, Hugo trained his eyes onto the mystic he was following. Alone, Hugo would have never considered entering the small town, no matter the rewards. His only saving grace was the female mystic who was

accompanying him. Already some paces ahead, the old mystic was completely cloaked in a black shawl and ankle-length robe, the dark color and faded material enough to make her seem like a resident of the dark alleys. She mostly resembled an old sack of bones and was clearly not worth the effort of attacking. She looked neither rich nor beautiful, hardly a prime victim—too rickety to be worth her flesh to sell, but with a cane in her hand that was too large and an expression on her face too weathered to be an easy kill, even for an old lady. She was the only thing standing between him and whatever haunted the dark streets and alleys. He hurried to catch up with her.

“Are we almost there?” he whispered when he reached her side.

“Be quiet boy,” she snapped in return. “A man’s destiny is often found whilst he isn’t looking for it.”

Frustrated, Hugo still kept close to her as she led the way to an old shack. It was small and looked like it was nearing its own demise. Set up near the corner of the street, it was clearly her home base. Hugo followed her as she entered through the side entrance, conscious of where his feet were falling as he kept her in sight past the clink of various knickknacks she shoved aside, somehow able to locate them in the darkness. While not grossly messy, the room was cluttered enough that it took them a few minutes of maneuvering until they reached an area with a circular table in the center. The old mystic gestured for him to take a seat while she did the same on the other side. Hugo waited as she dug around underneath the table and then brought out her own fortune ball, which was covered by a deep black velvet. Carefully, she set down the ball onto the center cushion on the table. Hugo watched and listened as she mumbled some jargon and waved her hands around before pulling off the covering.

Exquisitely crafted, the edges of the ball were tinged a light blue, with the center glowing a paler shade. The longer Hugo stared at it, the more he thought he could see twinkling stars

shining in the dark abyss of the crystal structure. At some angles, the ball looked as if it showed a clear river's reflection of the night sky. At other angles, it looked like it was glowing like the muted shine of a blue firefly. Hugo had to tear his eyes away from the fortune ball in order to return his attention to the old mystic's chants, her throaty tone rising in volume the longer she spoke.

She, however, was heedless of him, and had worked herself up to the climax of her chanting.

"I see it!"

Hugo leaned forward eagerly. Her gaze had moved to Hugo, and her eyes looked wild, almost possessed. "All the Earth will tremble before you!" She took a gasp of air, and began screaming, her words barely audible. Waving her hands even more frantically, she began to chant towards the sky, her eyes rolling into the back of her head.

"The Earth! The Earth!" she screamed, her words descending into gibberish.

Hugo tried unsuccessfully to tune her out. Eventually she would come back to her senses, he reasoned. In the meantime, he gazed deeper into the fortune ball, enthralled by what he saw. It was easy to get lost in the magical twinkle of the ball's reflection.

Once the mystic had become calmer, she pointed a bony finger at Hugo. "You," she stopped to catch her breath, "you will shape the future."

Hugo glanced up at her. "I know."

Hugo focused on one particular star he saw in the crystal reflection. It almost looked like it was moving, changing position slightly each time he blinked. Not taking his eyes off it, he addressed the old woman. "Tell me more."

If he stared hard enough, Hugo thought he could see himself reflected in the fortune ball. He just needed to look at it from the right angle.

CHAPTER ONE

Darryn awoke abruptly, her eyes flying open and then shutting immediately. The sunlight had practically burned her eyes. She blinked rapidly in succession, rubbing her face and trying to alleviate the sting. She managed to heave herself into an upright position and squinted. It was early morning. She had slept a little longer than desired, but judging from the location of the bright sun, the morning was still young enough to salvage. She stretched her arms above her head before moving the covers off of herself. She needed to get up and start getting ready before it became late morning. Everyone else in the house would be fast asleep until then.

Darryn maneuvered her legs off of the bed and stood up to head downstairs. Going down one step at a time, she attempted to shake off the residual sleepiness, yawning and relying on her hand on the wall to maneuver, rather than the blurry images through her half-closed eyes. As she approached the foot of the stairs, her hand brushed the rune carving and light appeared. She surveyed the kitchen. On the rune stove was the pot of porridge from yesterday. While the last of the sleepiness rolled off her shoulders, Darryn ignited the rune stove with her touch and began to reheat the day-old pot of porridge. She grabbed the book she had left on the dining table and leaned against the kitchen counter to wait. It was a book on creatures from the south: colorful frogs, feathered birds, and giant reptiles. She scooped some of the cold porridge into her bowl for breakfast. Leaning against the counter, Darryn spooned some into her mouth while she read the heavy volume.

Halfway through the chapter, Deni came sprinting down the stairs. Darryn's younger sister grabbed a bowl out of the cupboard and quickly scooped some of the porridge into it,

wolfing it down almost as soon as it hit the bowl. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she headed for the front door, grabbing her satchel off the hook. "Late again!" Bits of porridge were still visible on her front teeth as the young girl dashed out the door. No doubt she would be late for lessons again today, Darryn thought. She frowned. It seemed like forever since Deni had entered third school. She had always been chronically late getting up in the morning. Darryn understood not wanting to get up, but she struggled to understand why her sister couldn't force herself to do it like she did. *She* had never woken up late for her lessons. No matter what, she had made a point to always be on time. Learning was important, too important to miss because of sleep. Deni didn't seem to agree though, and hadn't responded well when Darryn had chided her. Quite the opposite.

Darryn winced at the memory. When she had broached the subject with her sister, Deni had exploded, and the advice Darryn had thought she was giving had escalated into a full-blown fight. It wasn't the first time this had happened. Deep in thought, Darryn frowned at her book.

With every passing year, Darryn was becoming more and more convinced that her sister was losing her mind. When Deni was younger, Darryn had frequently tried to give her sisterly advice. It had made sense for Deni to utilize her wisdom to help her sister better her life. Deni hadn't seen it that way, though. Ever since Deni had started to attend third school, it was like she had begun to detest her older sister's every word. She had been nothing but snappish, rude, and annoyed whenever Darryn would talk to her.

Darryn's mind continued to wander. Surely her sister's behavior couldn't be normal. Deni was responding with unnecessary amounts of hostility and anger. Darryn was only trying to help her, not harm her. Yes, her sister's resistance very clearly didn't make sense.

Just then, her mother walked down the stairs, yawning a good morning. Darryn offered up her own bowl of porridge.

“Mother,” she said, deciding to broach the subject. “What do you think is wrong with Deni?” Mother took her time spooning porridge into her own bowl before answering back.

“Nothing’s wrong with Deni, sweetheart.”

“But last week, when I tried to talk to her about being late for school she threw a book at my head. That’s not normal.”

“Well, dearest it’s normal for her.”

Darryn’s eyebrows rose in disbelief. Mother sighed, clearly exasperated. This was a subject that they had broached often since Deni had turned fourteen.

“Look, dearest,” Mother said. “Deni is adjusting to third school, and what she doesn’t need right now is her big sister listing her failings.”

“But if nobody ever talks to her about them, how will she improve?”

“Dearest, not everyone wants to improve right away.”

Darryn shrugged. “I did.”

“You and your sister are different. You are two *separate* people.” They were getting nowhere. Disappointed that her mother didn’t share her concerns, Darryn changed the subject.

“Where’s Father?”

“Still in bed.”

“He’s going to be late too.”

“Mmhm. Probably where your sister gets it from.”

As they were talking, Darryn's father bounded down the stairs, hair disheveled. "Sorry!" he shouted as he ate a mouthful of porridge right from the stove pot and bounded out the door. Darryn rolled her eyes. Sometimes this family acted more like a circus than a household.

Later on, once Darryn had finished some chores, she was ready to head out herself by midday. Ever since she had graduated third school, she had been helping out at her father's general store during the day's peak hours. The late morning rush would soon hit the shop, and Darryn needed to be there when it happened. She called to her mother that she was leaving, and then grabbed her bag off of the hook by the door and left.

With a population of about 500 people, Darthmouth was more of a village than a town. Her parents, both born and raised here, were well established in the community, with her father running the largest out of three general stores in town. Darthmouth was the only home both Darryn and Deni had ever known. Despite that, Darryn often found herself wondering about what lay beyond the tiny town, though she suspected that her sister was more attached to the town than she was. No surprise there.

While Deni was content with her ruffian ways, Darryn sensed that there was more to achieve outside of Darthmouth. She dreamed of attending a magic school in the big city, or apprenticing under a warrior or scholar. Anything to challenge her beyond shopkeeping. Surely there would be many things to discover outside, things she had only seen or heard from books. Maybe there would even be things *to* discover out there. It was not very productive, but sometimes late at night, Darryn would run her fingers across the colorful illustrations in her books and wonder why she had ended up in a tiny town instead of anywhere else out there, in the great beyond.

She shook her head, willing the thought cobwebs away. *No more daydreaming*, she scolded herself. She looked about at the people rushing by. Whatever the case, she was here in the present, and she needed to stay here if she wanted to be of any help to her father in the store. Focused once again, she passed the local well as some of the middle-aged women were filling their pitchers. Darryn hurried by before they noticed her.

DARVIN'S was a fairly large shop. Though there was considerable room inside, with the recent boom in the town's population, the older building was frequently unable to comfortably accommodate all the customers that entered it. Peak hour on the weekdays especially saw a line running outside the front door. As soon as Darryn had the shop in her sights, she immediately began greeting the people already in line, exchanging the usual pleasantries while making note of what each customer was planning to buy. Once she got inside, she used the spare rune stick to move the objects off of the shelf, focusing on each of the items in order to make the inscription glow on the wooden stick. Darryn concentrated and imagined the roll of fabric floating off of the shelf. She channeled her energy and directed the fabric down into Mrs. Foster's hands. Smiling at their long-time neighbor, Darryn tallied her purchases.

"Five silver coins, Mrs. Foster."

"Thank you dear," she said smiling. "It's always nice to see you working in the shop with your father. He needs all the help you can give him!"

Darryn had to agree. It wasn't even afternoon, and she had lost count of how many times her father had dropped objects and tripped over his own two feet. He tended to think faster than his body could move, so it was not any surprise to Darryn that both her mother and the regular

customers were relieved and grateful when she had finished school and could then help out in the store. Even with the large rune stick to better focus his energy, Darryn's father still often dropped objects in midair instead of putting them in the hands of the customers. Perhaps her mother was right. Deni's habits had to have come from somewhere.

Darryn sighed and looked out the window. In the distance, she could see the Artuza mountain range. It was nearing late spring and they were a deeper green than they had been earlier in the year. Darryn had read from her books about the creatures that lived on those mountains: mountain cats and wolves, forest birds and squirrels. Maybe even tarrins lived up there, where only Artara lived and traded. All sorts of creatures, never seen before by anyone in this town, lived up there. Darryn herself had only seen a handful of Artara in person. Darthmouth was a predominantly human village, with some resident mystic families. Nanys hunters had to travel a ways to get to their feeding grounds. Darryn, however, had never ventured outside of the town before.

"Dear! Could you help me find a present for Bill?"

"Coming Mrs. Suarez!"

The Artuza would have to wait. "What is it Mrs. Suarez? Are you going to get him *another* pearl-white vase this year?"

"Oh no dear, I was thinking more of, well, maybe, a sword would be more appropriate this time?"

Darryn's eyebrows rose, surprised. "A sword?"

"Yes dear." Mrs. Suarez lowered her gaze, her teeth gnawing on her bottom lip slightly. "You know, with all those reported tarrin attacks over in Thurlor, I...I thought maybe Bill might appreciate the extra protection."

“Mrs. Suarez,” Darryn began patiently, though inside she was exasperated. “Those ‘reports’ are all rumors. Tarrin attacks are ‘reported’ seventy times a day. If it’s not in Thurlor, it’s in Schyler. If it’s not in Greenbrough, it’s in Markorium. Everyone’s distant cousin has seen a tarrin attack in every human town. You don’t need to worry about this one.”

“Oh, sure dear. It’s just, well, it couldn’t hurt now could it?”

“If you say so, Mrs. Suarez.”

#

Being a general store, swords and weaponry were nowhere near the family’s specialty. Nevertheless, Darryn knew her father always kept a small handful of weapons in the back as part of their emergency stock. A wooden rune shield, a short rune dagger, and a common short rune sword. Hardly anything that would win any duels, but they were enough to keep the store’s stock above zero.

Here in Darthmouth, there was hardly any cause or reason for anyone to buy a sword. Few people in town knew how to handle them correctly, most preferring to use the metal rune clubs or rune sticks that functioned as crude weapons. In a town as small as this, there wasn’t much need for anything more than that.

Nevertheless, a few residents who preferred rune swords, so, DARVIN’S naturally, elected to carry them. In the back of the store’s basement, of course. It wasn’t too much of an inconvenience, but Darryn still wondered at having such a large room situated below the store. Sometimes she thought that her father was simply using it as a junk room, rather than backup storage.

As Darryn squeezed past boxes on top of boxes, picking her way to the very back of the room, she pondered over the reports that Mrs. Suarez had mentioned. Because tarrins preyed on

humans, it was normal to hear rumors about attacks from cities all around. Mrs. Suarez was stirred up because this was the first rumor from such a close city. Thurlor was only a half day's journey away, so a report of a tarrin there meant that Darthmouth was just as at risk. Regardless, the odds of these reports being true were slim to none. Tarrins almost never went into the cities, instead picking off random humans who ventured into the mountains. People loved to spread local legends though, and Darryn had heard tall tales ranging from a 10-foot tarrin tearing apart a train station to ones of tarrins eating disobedient children as punishment. With stories like that circulating, it was hard to drum up any sort of belief. Darryn herself didn't believe any of it. Obviously Mrs. Suarez did. So, tall tale or no, a sword she would find to appease their middle-aged neighbor.

As she was hunting around, Darryn noticed that some of the vases were missing from the basement's stock. In fact, the very same pearl-white vases that Mrs. Suarez typically asked for were gone. Usually there were two or three extras down here, but now they were gone. There were normally two standing on top of the box containing the spare glassware, but though Darryn could have sworn she had seen them when she had come down yesterday, now they were gone.

Frowning in confusion, Darryn set down the small sword, moving closer to investigate. As she pushed aside boxes and items, searching around for the missing vases, suddenly a man jumped up and barreled past Darryn, knocking her to the ground. Not before she noticed, however, that the man was holding two pear-white vases.

Before Darryn could recover her bearings, the man leapt up and dove towards the window in the back, trying to make a getaway. Mrs. Suarez's sword was laying right next to Darryn's arm on the floor, so without a second thought, she picked it up and flew after the thief.

He had climbed up some of the storage boxes to get to the basement window so Darryn dove after him, tearing across the public courtyard.

Shoving people left and right, she quickly dove after him and tackled him to the ground, piercing his arm with the sword. She felt no remorse as she gathered the vases from the ground while the robber screamed in pain.

Panting from the sprint, Darryn backed up slowly from him, turning towards the nearest bystander.

“Sorry Mr. Lee, could you call the sheriff?”

Satisfied, Darryn turned back in the direction of the store.

#

Once afternoon hit, the number of customers gradually dwindled until the shop was empty for a good twenty minutes at a time. Darryn was left to her own devices. This was her favorite time of the day, since it meant that she could have time to read on her own. Though her family did not share the same devout interest that Darryn had in books, her parents had always bought her three or four for every birthday and holiday. Her sister regularly received dresses and fancy hair pins. Even though they shared the same hair color, eye color, and face shape, sometimes it seemed like Darryn and Deni had been born into separate families.

Once again Darryn frowned down at the book she was reading. Deni’s sister’s state of mind troubled her. What worried Darryn more though was how her parents always brushed off her input about Deni. This morning at breakfast was hardly the first and would most definitely not be the last time she had reached an impasse with one or both of her parents. They seemed

oblivious to Darryn's concerns and at times downright dismissive. It was a conundrum that Darryn intended to fix.

She looked down at the book and noticed an anatomical drawing of a tiny multi-colored sparrow. It reminded Darryn of her sister, aesthetic appeal without any real meat underneath. Whereas Darryn preferred practicality over attention, Deni's closet was home to a rainbow of colors, and they were all in the form of delicate dresses or cute skirts. She was like the rainbow sparrow, all decked out in colors and attracted to shiny things, but with no real sense in that pretty little head.

As Darryn pondered over her dilemma, her father returned to the front of the store, where she was stationed. He had been in the back, taking longer than he should have reorganizing the stock after the attempted robbery. When he noticed that Darryn was not paying close attention, he tried to sneak up on her, to her exasperation. It was something that he particularly liked to do, but not once had he ever succeeded. Even when she seemed not to be paying attention, Darryn always had a sixth sense for people sneaking up on her. Once she had gone hunting with the local club, and Thomas, the head of the hunting party came back looking as if Darryn was his own daughter who had gone on a hunt with him. Darryn had brought back a fully grown stag. She had not carried it herself, but Thomas spent the rest of the night bragging how Darryn had spotted and cornered the animal before anyone else in the party.

Theirs was a fairly large town, housing several hundred people. But was that enough for her? Darryn's father couldn't deny that he often felt that his daughter was being wasted here helping him with the store. Even when it came to magic, Darryn seemed exceedingly capable. More capable than her father, who was the only one in the household to really use much magic.

Utilities aside, the only magical objects they had in the house included a standard large wooden staff intended for getting objects off of the high shelf in the living room, or pots on and off the high-set shelf in the cupboard, but besides that, Deni and Father never really used magic. Instead, it was Darryn who used it the most in the store. In contrast to her father though, Darryn seemed greatly talented. The tiny rod they used as a backup rune-encrusted floater was more than sufficient for her needs. She never looked like she was straining either. When he saw her using the rod to transport items to customers with ease, those were the times where he really thought that Darryn would be better off in a bigger city, going to advanced school, maybe even studying magic. He had never really voiced those thoughts out loud, however, preferring to stew over them until he had the energy to talk it over with Darryn's mother. Once he did he would address Darryn about perhaps pursuing further schooling. Who knew? Maybe she would even become famous, the star of their little town.

But right now, she was his eldest daughter, and it was his responsibility as her father to try and scare her, at least once in her life, before she left home to spread her wings and fly. He crept up closer to her. She looked up and locked eyes with him. Her lips moved slightly.

Right as she opened her mouth to talk, the front door burst open. It was Mr. Kouri, her father's childhood friend. "Darvin!" Mr. Kouri shouted. "A tarrin! It got into the village, and..." Here he stopped, his gaze moving to Darryn. Mr. Kouri's face turned pale, and his lower lip trembled. Someone must have been hurt. A tarrin attack, here in the town? Tarrins had fangs and ferocity, but they were also solo hunters, disadvantaged in a group of humans. They were carnivorous by nature, and ripped apart human flesh as easily as wolves ripped apart deer meat. Usually tarrins preyed on slums and lone households. Although they were frightening, one was no match for a whole village of humans.

A wailing cry interrupted Darryn's thoughts. She and her father hurried outside, and Darryn made her way to the front of the crowd. There on the ground was Mrs. Flores, and in her arms was the severed head of her eldest daughter, Darryn's schoolmate. Darryn took in Ayris's curly brown hair, now stringy with blood. Her chocolate eyes, which to Darryn had always seemed to sparkle with mischief, were now unseeing. Darryn peered at her classmate's neck. She had never seen the remains of a tarrin attack. In the books she had read, there were no pictures of human remains.

Mrs. Flores was still weeping and moaning as she clutched the head to her chest. Darryn gazed down at the scene, curious, despite herself, about the ragged body left behind. She had never before seen a body that saw such a violent end, and she knew that it was probably somewhat cruel to skip mourning for the loss of her friend. Everyone else around her was murmuring and there were a few sobbing women and wails coming from the crowd. But at this point, this body was no longer her friend. It was nothing more than a husk, empty of the personality and consciousness that had made up Ayris. A body wasn't a human being, and it didn't feel pain, once it was devoid of life, so Darryn felt no empathy towards the corpse. It couldn't feel anything, unlike the woman sobbing over it. Darryn looked towards the mountains. The tarrin must have come from the Appalachian hills. The tarrin and the rest of Ayris' body must be up there.

#

The loss of Ayris reduced all of Darthmouth to a frenzy. It wasn't quite widespread panic, but no children were seen on the streets for the rest of the week, adults even refrained from walking

outside their homes at night. Rune torches were set up outside every home, flanking the doors and four corners of each house, shed, barn, and building. Anything to scare off the dreaded tarrin.

In Darryn's own family, she had been tasked to walk her sister to school each day, and either she or her father picked up Deni in the evening, walking her back home with a rune stick in hand. The whole town collectively had decided to try to wait out the tarrin. The hope was clearly that eventually the creature would tire and move on to another village, where perhaps there would be warriors or hunters who could then kill the dreaded predator. Already word had been sent out to the neighboring towns to alert the residents of the attack. During the day, parents and older siblings looked around nervously as they walked the younger children to school. It was a natural reaction, Darryn thought, as she walked beside Deni. The townspeople avoided any dark corners, and kept their eyes on the entrances and exits to the town, especially on the west side, closest to the mountain range.

As Darryn dropped off Deni at school one day, she let her guard down slightly, now only worried about herself, rather than for two people. Though a tarrin was faster, more powerful, and more agile than a human, it could hardly sneak into a town. Adults ranged anywhere from six to eight feet, so Darryn was only paying attention, like everyone else, to the dark corners along the path, ignoring the fearful glances of other chaperones walking the children, as they were avoiding hers. Because of that, Darryn didn't see the mystic until he had already bumped into her, and she was stumbling backwards.

"Sorry!" she blurted, "I didn't mean to—"

Once she saw that it was a mystic, she backed up a few steps and composed herself. "I'm sorry for bumping into you. I wasn't looking where I was going." She eyed him warily. Darthmouth had a fairly large mystic population. About 6% of the town were mystics. But they

usually kept to their own, not attending the human schools. At the most, they shopped at human stores and bought property from other humans. Lots of human residents of Darthmouth avoided renting or engaging too heavily with the mystics, except for the few who were interested in sideshow fortune-telling. There was also very little literature published about mystics, only briefly describing how their ancestors resided in caves, which is why their hair and eyes were snow-white, and their eyesight was much poorer than humans. Even now the mystic was looking at the area where her voice was coming from, but not meeting her eyes. Carefully sidestepping him, Darryn apologized again and announced her departure.

To her surprise, he grabbed hold of her arm before she could move fully away. Alarmed, she pulled free of the mystic, backing away. The man held no hostile countenance, however, and once she was far enough away from him, Darryn consciously relaxed her shoulders. Tall tales and fictional foresight aside, mystics were harmless, unaggressive and docile. To her knowledge, they had never attacked a human unprompted. Besides, mystics were generally not a threat. This mystic gazed at her face, not in an unkind manner. "Darryn Malik," he began, "your destiny lies outside of this town." Darryn raised her eyebrows. The mystic turned his gaze to the far-off distance. "Two men," he continued, "with them lies your destiny and all that you have ever dreamed to be."

Apparently done with his prophecy, the male mystic turned back around and walked away. Somewhat disgruntled, Darryn headed off in the direction of her father's shop, mind roiling, despite her attempts to refocus. Her father needed her at work and the sun was steadily getting higher. She had no time to entertain old wives' tales! But, this 'prophecy' aligned so closely with what she herself had always thought. Of course, fortune-telling was always a game of probability, Darryn reminded herself. No doubt the mystic would have told the same thing to

any young woman he came across. A woman her age, who wouldn't want to be off on an adventure, rather than stuck in this town? And predicting that she would meet two men, statistically speaking, that was highly likely to happen, and if her mind was already primed to see two men as influential in her life, she would see it.

Still, maybe it was time to raise the topic with her family.

#

Darryn had taken out a book on tarrins from the local library and had been poring over it since last week. She had attended the services for Ayris the previous weekend, and she hadn't put the book down since. Tarrins were fairly populous in North Frasner it seemed, but none had visited her town since Darryn had been born. Tarrins always avoided large groups of people, picking instead lone humans to feed on. She wanted to learn as much as she could about them. She could tell that her parents were concerned, but this wasn't the first time that she has invested her time in fairly unpopular topics. She remembered when she first saw an animal get killed. She had borrowed a hunting book from the library that night and read it completely by the next morning. Her father, noting her interest, arranged for to join the local hunting club. Now was not much different than that time.

Working at the shop had always been only a temporary stop, and Darryn had always known that. Now, there would be an opportunity to see and learn things she had never had the opportunity to before. There was a whole world that Darryn wanted to explore, and now there

wasn't anything keeping her here in town. Deni didn't need her, and her father and mother would be able to handle the store without her.

Finally, it looked like her life was about to change.

CHAPTER TWO

“Samuel! Samuel! Samuel! *Samuel!*”

The world was shaking, and Samuel's pallet was the fault line. A great shouting and thundering shook him out of his sleep.

“I'm awake, I'm awake.” Samuel pushed the cover away and opened his bleary eyes. Adam and Christian were grinning down at him.

“We're hungry!” they announced in unison. “Food!”

The two boys scampered over to the table where their older sister sat with their baby brother. Samuel pulled himself up, already half of the way there. The sun had barely risen, yet the boys looked like they had been awake for hours already, even though Samuel knew for a fact that they hadn't gone to sleep until well past midnight. Tucking them into bed and telling them a bedtime tale had done nothing by way of tiring the two boys out, and Samuel had heard suspicious whispers and muffled laughter coming from their direction late into the night, long after Kela and Eli had fallen asleep. Yet no exhaustion was apparent in either of the two boys. In fact, Samuel could already hear the telltale signs of their bickering.

“I grabbed it first!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“You’re gonna drop it!”

“No, you are!”

“You are!”

Samuel got up and hurried over to his brothers. “Just wait!” Thankfully, he managed to get there in time to grab the pot of still-hot porridge out of the hands of the two boys, setting it back on the table. “Be quiet and let me feed the little one. I’ll give Kela and Eli their portions.” The two boys grumbled and scowled at each other, still cranky from their argument, and already Adam was fanning the flames for round two.

“I could have done it if Christian hadn’t gotten in my way.” Christian opened his mouth to retaliate, but Samuel was faster. “That’s enough. One more word about the porridge and no bacon for either of you.” Both boys’ mouths quickly shut and they petulantly averted their gazes from each other, clearly still angry. Samuel sighed as he got out the bowls and began spooning a portion of oatmeal into each. Throughout the argument, Kela had been sitting quietly next to Eli, scribbling in her notebook. Eli entertained himself with his hand-stitched doll, shaking it furiously while he gurgled and cooed. “Morning Kela, wha’cha reading?” She instantly snapped her notebook closed and muttered a quick “nothing” in return, accepting her bowl of porridge without a fuss. Samuel kept his face neutrally friendly, despite his frustration with her indifference. Since turning 11, Kela had begun to spend time away from the family, writing and drawing in her one precious notebook, a gift from [name] insisting that no one was allowed to see them. To be honest, she probably spoke more to Eli than she did to anyone else in the family.

It was mainly her job to care for their baby brother while Adam and Christian took care of the animals. Samuel normally took care of the rest. Mother and Father were usually away, delivering or procuring supplies, so more often than not, the household was only inhabited by the five children. Currently the parents were over in Mardad, making deliveries to their regular clients.

“Did you two look at Nissa’s litter already?” Samuel asked. “Pick out a pup for the McCormicks yet?” he continued. The two boys gave matching grins, porridge argument clearly forgotten already.

“Yup!” said Adam. “We picked out the—”

“The brown one! The boy!” Christian interrupted, smiling widely. “He’s the strongest. He’s always the first one to suckle.” Samuel nodded in agreement. The brown male was the second puppy in Nissa’s litter and so far looked like the top performer. He would be worth every coin the McCormicks would pay for him. It was a good choice. He smiled as he looked at the twins. Already they had devoured the bacon and porridge, asking for seconds. Samuel complied and asked Kela if she wanted seconds; the girl had barely eaten anything off of her plate, gnawing on one of the bacon pieces while she focused on her notebook. Halfway done with the bacon piece, without looking up, she began to spoon feed Eli as he laughed. Still sketching with her left hand, Kela moved the spoonful of porridge in a circle, delighting him before directing the spoon into his mouth. Eli clapped and laughed, clearly eager for more.

“Kela, do you think Eli could come out into the fields with us today? I really need your help.”

“Mm.”

Samuel frowned. “Is that a yes?”

“*Mm.*”

Samuel gritted his teeth, "*Kela*. Answer me." His sister rolled her eyes at him, but acquiesced. "Yes" she over-enunciated, mockingly smiling at him before turning back to her notebook. Samuel bit his tongue to keep from reprimanding her. "*Get him fed and cleaned then. And then take him out to the tomato plants today and try to finish bringing in the crop.*"

"Says the guy who hasn't gotten dressed yet."

Samuel's "what was that?" was met with silence. Eli then chose that time to throw both his bowl and cloth doll onto the floor. Kela finally looked up from her sketch, but the twins had turned their interest to their baby brother. They lurched out of their chairs simultaneously, diving for the toy.

"I got it!" Both of them had gotten a grip on the doll and began to bicker and squabble over who had picked it up first. The argument quickly became physical as the boys shoved each other into the table. The milk jug wobbled dangerously. Alarmed, Kela snatched her notebook off of the table and careened backwards, out of her chair. She picked herself off of the ground, then pulled before Eli out of his chair, backing away from the tussle.

Samuel moved to stop the two when the boys slipped on Eli's spilled porridge, tumbling to the ground themselves. The table was covered in milk, and now the baby's porridge was smeared all over the floor. Samuel twisted his mouth in annoyance, but all he let out was an all-suffering sigh. "Get dressed everyone. The day's just started."

#

The day was already stretching out longer than he had envisioned. Somehow, Kela had calmed down Eli enough to brave the tomato fields, and the boys had actually gone through most of their daily tasks with the animals. Nissa's pup would be given to the McCormicks tomorrow,

the cow was milked, the pigs and chickens were fed, and Arnold and Walter were already put in the stable. Samuel, meanwhile, was busy working out in the field, picking from the far corners of the plot.

The sun was hot, and the rays sapped his energy as the day grew long. As the sun began to set, Samuel leaned into the side of the fence. He decided to take a short break before finishing the task. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Samuel noticed in the far distance a figure walking towards the farm. It looked like a lone traveler, no wagon, no crops, no animals. Samuel's eyebrows rose. The next town over was far more than a day's journey away on foot, and the traveler would either need to walk all night, or sleep in the grassy wilderness in between towns. There was no need for that, though. Samuel leaped over the fence, landing on the dirt path and made haste towards the stranger. It had been hard to see any distinguishing features from so far, but as he got closer, it became clear that the stranger was not human. White hair tied up in a bun, and pale, pupiless eyes, there was no mistaking him as anything other than a mystic. Wary, Samuel spoke to the stranger all the same. "Greetings traveler," he began. "What brings you through this place so late into the day?"

Mystics were unpredictable. Though human-looking, they were not human, and Samuel had never interacted with one before. Who knows what they thought or felt, or whether they shared any of the same human emotions or capabilities? Humans almost never spoke directly to mystics unless it involved trade. Even in the early years of settlement, when mystics had traveled with human caravans from their ancestral cave homes in the west, they kept to their own kind, procuring their own food, and trading with their human neighbors only when necessary. However, it would be wrong to banish the stranger to the elements simply because he wasn't human. The Rymers would house a barn mouse in their home if it meant sparing it from harm for

the night. It was the right thing to do. If a farm animal could seek shelter in Samuel's home, then a mystic could as well. Even though he remained eerily silent, showing no intention of responding to Samuel's question. Still, Samuel tried to keep a friendly face. "If you need a place to sleep tonight, our home is open to any passing travelers," he said. Samuel pointed his thumb to the farmhouse behind them, one of the few buildings in the small town with its lights still on. Samuel slowly started to walk in the direction of home, and the mystic followed. All the while, Samuel made sure to walk between the mystic and his home.

As they approached the farmhouse, Samuel could hear muffled shouting, an unwelcome familiarity. Maintaining a serene expression, he knocked loudly three times on the door. Immediately the muffled voices ceased, and instead there began a frantic scraping noise. A few seconds later, the door flew open and Adam grinned out at them, looking like a perfect picture of innocence. His grin faltered as his eyes landed on the white eyes of their guest. Samuel cleared his throat, and the grin returned, however more strained than before.

"Welcome! Come in please."

Inside, Christian and Kela glanced up at the stranger and began setting the table. They set up their one candle that they reserved for special occasions. Samuel was impressed. Surely this is what their parents would want them to do....

CHAPTER THREE

Leopold awoke to see his mother in her nightgown. She had already been back, having worked the night before. He shifted in his bed uncomfortably, unwilling to wake up. He didn't want to see her. He was old enough to know where she had been last night and what she had been doing. He had been old enough to know for as long as he could remember. There wasn't a time he could recall when she hadn't been with strange men.

When Leopold had been younger, his mother had brought the men into their house. There were a few instances where he had woken up in the middle of the night, thirsty, and had gotten frightened by the sounds behind his mother's door. Parched, he would hurry back to his bed, too fearful to get the glass of water he had wanted. He would go to sleep fitfully, and his nightmares would be riddled with visions of the men she had brought inside. Men she brought inside and into her bed. One night though, one of the men she had introduced to him had stumbled across Leopold when he had been searching for a drink. Angry and belligerent, he had hit Leopold when he had literally bumped into him and spilled the glass of juice all over his shirt. Mom had been in the bathroom. When she returned and saw Leopold's face, and his watery eyes and trembling lip, her own mouth had trembled and her face had shifted. That was the end of the

stream of men into their house. Mom never brought another man back home after that. But Leopold wasn't stupid. Once he was old enough to leave the house alone, he knew why men wanted to spend time alone with women. He saw it happen in the street, sometimes violently. He knew that was what his mother did five days out of the seven-day week. He never brought it up with her, though. He was afraid to ask. Many nights she returned with her own bruises. Before, when he was still too young to feel his stomach roil when she returned home, disheveled and exhausted, he would stay up to get a glimpse of her. He missed her presence keenly in the wee hours of the night and early morning. But now he understood that the reason the shopkeeper and the tailor and the grocer and the butcher all avoided his mother. He knew what they called her.

Sometimes the shame would consume him.

He never spoke of these things with his mother.

Today, though, she came home with no fresh bruises, and the bags underneath her eyes were from the sleepless night and not because of any violence. There was a time back when Leopold was young when he would have waited to see her get home, but now he stretched out of bed, barely waking up in the face of his exhausted mother. Desensitized to her state, he grunted as he got out of bed.

“Leo honey, . . . breakfast, did you get it?”

Somehow or other, Leopold had become the cook and caretaker of the house. A meek and eternally apologetic woman, his mother could barely take care of herself, awake all night, and fitfully sleeping during the day. As soon as Leopold was old enough, he had taken over collecting the food from the grocer and butcher and cooking meals in the house. His mother probably thought it was due to some sort of kindness or pity from her only son, but Leopold feared that it was mostly due to the shame he felt when he was out with his mother. Occasionally,

men had approached the two in broad daylight. His mother had put her foot down, but a scene had broken out and mother, customer, and son had gotten kicked out of the store. Leopold was glad he was the only one getting groceries now.

“The tapestry maker is coming into town today,” his mother remarked.

A spoonful of porridge. A gaze raised. A wane smile.

“Why don’t we go out tonight?” she continued.

#

Leopold smiled, savoring this rare treat. The night was dark, only lighted by a few magic street lanterns. As they continued walking, Leopold reached over for the bags that his mother was carrying. She smiled and surrendered her load. Leopold smiled back. It had been a long time since the two of them had done anything together, even something as simple as shopping. An even longer time since Leopold felt anything other than exhausted tolerance in the presence of his mother. But now, seeing her smile in the glow of the lanterns, he remembered how she used to play with him in front of the house, or inside, swinging him around and laughing as she threw him up in the air, making whooshing sounds as he giggled. Today was a good day.

Leopold jumped forward onto the cobblestones, playing the game he used to play when he was little, trying not to step in the cracks. He laughed and turned to his mother, who grinned back at him. Her face seemed to lift with youth and joy, and Leopold was ecstatic when she joined him in play. The grocery bags were getting violently shaken with every hop and skip, but neither Leopold nor his mother cared.

They approached their street, both out of breath from the game. Leopold still hadn’t stopped smiling. Today had been a good day, one of the best, in fact. The slums weren’t a safe

place to live, but for years he and his mother had survived. Leopold felt a stab of guilt as he looked over to his smiling and sweating mother. She had worked hard to put food on their table. She didn't want to leave him at home alone while she spent the night with strangers. These regular absences left Leopold feeling empty too. All of a sudden the shame and embarrassment he felt whenever he was with her seemed childish and petty. Leopold smiled back at his mother, feeling an old, forgotten affection for this gaunt woman. While the glow of the street lanterns lit up his mother's face, the rest of the alleyways and streets were lost to the pitch black darkness.

From this pitch black darkness, a figure darted out. Afterwards, whenever Leopold tried to remember this day and its horrific events, he could never quite formulate an exact image of what the tarrin did. Right in front of him, Leopold watched as, in an instant, long fangs sunk into his mother's throat. There was no time to do anything. All he could do was watch as her eyes widened and her hands moved up to her throat instinctively. Leopold stared in disbelief, frozen as his mother choked. Blood spurted from her mouth as she made a strange, wet sound. When her body began to convulse, she clawed in vain at her throat, hands slipping on her own blood and only managing to brush the smooth surface of the fangs piercing her body.

Eventually she body fell limp. The wet choking stopped, and her arms fell to her sides. Once she stopped moving, the mouth around her neck squeezed harder and Leopold heard her neck give a sickening crack. Suspended in time, Leopold's gut clenched and his throat clicked as the tarrin looked at him, a soft growl rumbling from its throat. Slowly, Leopold took a step back while the tarrin did the same. It slunk back into the shadows, its eyes watching Leopold warily as it pulled its prey by the throat, trailing blood onto the cobblestones.

Instinctively, Leopold chased after him.

#

The Picket Range mountains bordered the Eastern side of the village. Of course, Leopold had always heard never to venture into the mountain range, for fear of tarrins. These creatures of nightmares were said to prey on disobedient children. Leopold had never thought he would encounter one.

As he looked up, noting the seemingly endless miles ahead, Leopold felt a deep, cold discouragement take hold of him. Despair coated his mouth, the taste bitter and vile. An unconscious shiver alerted him to the thinning air. The mountain would only get colder and colder, he knew. Perhaps there would even be snow at the top. Leopold might even die before he caught sight of the tarrin—if he could find the tarrin.

But Leopold still had to try. He had no father, no siblings, no friends, no other family but his mother. And now, now she was gone. The tarrin had taken her from him. Leopold would climb the tallest peak in the Picket Range, if only to tear his mother's body back from the monster's fangs.

Despite his determination, Leopold's body was less willing to hold up against the elements. He had wasted no time starting off on the mountain trail—if one could even call the rocky ledges a path. While Leopold had seen traders use the trails with their goods strapped to their pack animals, his own legs were thin and bony, and he had no hooves with which to grip the terrain. In contrast to the fire he still felt in his chest—the desire for revenge still burned, he could feel it—about two hours into his self-imposed quest, Leopold had to rest.

A half-hour later, the boy forced his body to rise and plough on. At the rate he was going, it would take many more hours, if not the whole day to reach the top of the mountain. At this

point Leopold was panting hard. Distracted, he stumbled on one of the larger rocks and almost landed on his face. While shaking himself to try and gain some energy back, Leopold saw what he no doubt would have missed without the almost-fall. There was a small crag in the side of the mountain he was approaching. The “path” he had been trying to follow wound around the mountain, and this upcoming turn passed a large crevice. He had been so focused on not collapsing, his tired eyes probably would not have noticed the crag even while he passed it. Getting closer, Leopold saw it was a cave.

As he approached the cave, he heard the sound of heavy breathing. Clearly, something or someone was alive. Leopold could make out in the light of the rune lanterns, lying on a large, ornate bed frame, the monster.

The old tarrin snapped upwards into a sitting position so abruptly that Leopold stumbled backward. In two swift strides, the tarrin towered over him, his dark eyes boring into Leo. Leo shivered, returning the old one’s gaze.

“You killed my mother! Now, I’ve come to kill you!” Leo announced.

The old one lay back down on his cave bed, disregarding Leopold. Enraged, the young boy leaped onto the tarrin, swinging at him with both fists, only to be promptly shoved backwards off the bed. The tarrin loomed over him, 6 feet tall, slitted eyes glinting as the low light cast the beast’s face into darkness, obscuring any other facial features. Pulse racing, Leo tried to scramble to his feet. Before he could grab his bearings, however, he was lifted by the neck of his shirt, dragged out to the mouth of the cave, and unceremoniously tossed out. In the span of fifteen seconds, Leo found himself falling backwards, down the way he had come, feet slipping on the loose rock and gravel. Frantic and flailing, he stuck his hands into the ground, hoping to create enough friction to stop his descent. He could feel the rocks digging into his skin,

piercing it and letting blood seep out. Eventually though, Leopold managed to slow his body's movement to a standstill.

Relieved, he let out a shaky breath, trying to calm himself. The ground where he stood still felt unstable, and it took a few seconds for Leopold to recover his balance and believe that he wouldn't be dragged down farther. Leo moved to make his way back to the mouth of cave, foolish determination overruling primal fear. Looking up, his heart sank as he saw that he had slid so far down from the cave, that he could no longer see it. It would take at least another hour to make his way there again.

Leo shivered. He had been lucky that the wind had stopped blowing, and the sun had come out today, but once it began to set, who knows how much snow would fall. It would make the climb up that much more difficult, not to mention the night would be that much more unwelcoming.

But he had to get back up there.

#

Deep breaths. Flickering lights. Light footsteps. One of these things did not fit in. The human cub had returned, and was moving closer and closer to his bed. His stalking was clumsy, and it was easy to roll out of the way of the trajectory, as the boy swung down something, hitting the imprint of where Matteo had lain.

#

CHAPTER FOUR

When Deni was very young, maybe four or five years old, she had suffered from sleep terrors. Days would pass where Deni, rather than fall asleep, would collapse in exhaustion from screaming and thrashing in her sleep. Everyone had thought that the young girl would soon collapse herself, her tiny body unable to withstand the prolonged ordeal. On the first day of the second consecutive week of Deni's sufferings, she had reached out for her older sister. Darryn had been bringing food to their mother, who had been sitting beside Deni's bed, holding the little girl's hand and murmuring to her, as she had everyday since the terrors came. Deni had moaned and reached her tiny hand out in Darryn's direction. In her tiny, cracked voice, she asked Darryn to tell her some stories. Darryn was only around seven, but she obediently took her mother's previous spot on the chair next to Deni and began to recite some of the stories she had memorized from the mage book they kept hidden under one of the floorboards. A mage book was more precious than gold. A real handwritten and handstitched book was impossible for anyone other than the extremely wealthy to obtain and while skilled magic users could conjure up permanent mage books for reference or recording events, it was generally frowned upon to allow them to fall into the hands of non-magic users. About a year ago, this particular mage book had entered the Malik shop and had exchanged hands with Darryn's father in place of gold coins.

It was only recently that Darryn was made aware of its existence and she had been sworn to secrecy. Deni had no idea of its existence still, so the story Darryn told her as she lay sweating and pale in bed was one she had heard from the other village women.

That had been nine years ago. Yet Darryn still remembered the story she had told Deni. It was a tale of an epic hero who traveled the world in search of people fit to join his band of adventurers. Deni had absolutely loved that story. There was a particular scene where the hero had entered a slum town, in search of supplies. While he was wandering, a young boy had bumped into him and unbeknownst to the hero, stolen his pouch of money. Deni had laughed every single time at Darryn's exaggerated portrait of the hero's face. That night had been the first in a week where Deni had slept throughout the whole night.

Darryn looked out of the alleyway onto the street. She was shivering and her stomach was pinched in hunger. The discomfort and dull misery reminded her of waking up in the morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

The boy had missed him completely.

It would have been more surprising, however, if he had actually been able to attack a mature tarrin. In their relationship as two separate species, it was the tarrins that had the upper hand physically. Indeed if they had not they would have all died from starvation long before.

With these thoughts in his head, the old tarrin watched somewhat distractedly as the boy cried out in surprise and frustration that he had missed killing his target for righteous vengeance. Somewhat absentmindedly, the tarrin used his superior speed and came up behind the boy, just to shove him to the ground. Because of the strength difference, the tarrin thought.

The boy was indignant.

“Count Matteo!”

“My name is not Count.”

“Count Matteo! I’ve come to kill you, as punishment for eating my mother!”

The tarrin raised his eyebrows in response. He waited a beat, and then turned away, a clear dismissal. As expected, the boy launched himself at the presented back.

Matteo easily sidestepped the attack. The boy was clumsy and could be heard by a deaf antelope. He was not stalking for the purpose of attacking but charging for the sake of madness.

“Go home boy, go home and fatten yourself up. One day I will return and give you the death you desire.” The old tarrin returned to his bed, uttering, “these are the roles we have been given at birth.”

“Then...!”

The old predator turned and looked questioningly at the boy.

“...then...will you teach me how to become a tarrin! How to become like *you*! If I can't kill you because-because I am too weak and my fate is to be killed by the strong, then I wish to be strong. Strong like you...Sir.”

The predator approached him, mouth open so the boy could witness the spit dripping off the fangs put on display. The child seemed to have an instinct for danger; however, he did not back up, though he could not keep his face from flinching. He knew that Matteo was only testing him. Matteo was a tarrin, a predator, a slayer and eater of humans, the natural enemy of this tiny boy who had come to avenge his mother through blood. Here was Matteo, who had never imagined that one day a human child would stumble on his cave and demand to be molded into what was to him, a monster.

As he approached the boy's throat, he waited until the last second to retreat. The child was shivering violently, but there were no tears. Matteo nodded, decision made.

The Count had a dead body on the ground....

Leopold approached consciousness slowly, feeling a swimming nausea take hold of his body. Groaning, he tried to change positions in order to alleviate the sick feeling. Turning over to his side, Leopold felt the tale-tell vomit rise up in his throat. Unable to keep it at bay, he leaned over to face the floor beside his bed and threw up the remains of yesterday's meal. By the time the sun was shining brightly, he was regularly retching and gagging, even after everything he consumed got thrown up. He didn't know how much time had passed, but the sun was still high when the Count came and picked up Leopold and dumped him in front of a large pail.

Feeling himself grow weaker and weaker, it was evening before Leopold stopped retching. Groaning, he tried to get up onto Matteo's bed, barely able to crawl on top. He felt like his stomach had shrunk to a fraction of its original size. He closed his eyes, a vain effort to ward off the remnants of the nausea. At some point he hears footsteps approaching. Leopold felt himself get picked up and moved. Opening his eyes groggily, Leopold tried to make sense of his surroundings. He realized that he was sitting down at the center table. The Count was standing menacingly in front of him.

Startled in wakefulness, Leopold sat up straight, unable to keep from grimacing at the lingering pain in his stomach. The Count turned his gaze to the table towards a plate that looked like a bloody mess to Leopold.

“Eat.”

“What?!”

Leopold felt stronger waves of nausea hit him looking at the bloody plate. Eating these disgusting meals were what made him sick in the first place. Sticking his tongue out, he turned up his nose haughtily at the plate. “I'm not gonna eat *that!*” Matteo narrowed his eyes, but said

nothing. The Count turned away and left Leopold with the bloody plate. Disgruntled, he wanted to yell for the Count to come and bring him back to the bed. But his pride limited him from doing so. Suddenly, Leopold noticed that there was a fork next to the plate. The Count had left this for him...and let him sleep in his bed. His arm still shaking, Leopold picked up the fork and pierced the bloody mess.

He brought the fork up to his mouth and began eating. Prepared to once again meet the unbearable tang of blood, he was surprised that it was not as bad as the first time. He swallowed his first bite down with only a slight grimace, and went in for another. The taste was still horrible, but it didn't bring tears to his eyes and make him want to gag anymore. Rather, the sharp taste was helping him get rid of the taste of bile in his throat....

The next day, more vomiting and retching, and this time the Count brought in yet more prey. He wasn't really eager to know its origins. Once again Matteo picked him up and sat him down at the table. More used to the taste, Leopold quickly ate everything on his plate. The fast meal made him more aware of the emptiness of his stomach and he looked at the Count expectantly. The Count narrowed his eyes and turned away and Leopold realized that there would be no more food for him today. Suddenly famished, and feeling a bit stronger, he followed the Count. Uncomfortable, but still hungry, he looked on as the Count began his meal. Emboldened, he walked towards the Count and demanded, "give me some." Curious eyes were turned to him, and without saying a word, the Count handed him a portion and walked away, heading toward the bed in the center of the room....

Leopold forced himself to focus on the reason for all these trials, all these disturbing actions he was now a part of. All of it was so that one day, he would be strong and not weak. One day he would be strong enough to take his revenge.

PART TWO

PART 2

CHAPTER SIX

Fleetskin hadn't changed at all, Darryn thought, from her perch. She was watching the sun rise and color the town a golden yellow as she watched the house on the corner. She narrowed her eyes as she saw a young boy exit the home and walk down the street. He was unused to sneaking around, which was made obvious by his spooked glancing around. Careful to keep to the shadows, Darryn didn't look away from him as she moved to keep him in her line of sight. As she moved from building to building, she saw the kid glance around nervously one more time before opening the sludge container behind his house and dropping something inside. He quickly dropped the lid back down on the container and practically ran out from behind his house and back onto the main street. Darryn let him go, she wasn't after him, not now anyways.

She waited a couple more minutes, before crawling down from the edge of the roof of the building across the street. Once she got to the ground, she crept up to the sludge container and opened it back up. Sure enough, there was the pouch she had been looking for. Picking it up, she quickly looked inside and confirmed that inside were, yes, the gold coins. Not wasting any more time, she jogged toward one of the other buildings and grabbed hold of one of the front pillars. There, she hoisted herself up to the rooftop and, utilizing the remaining edges of darkness as cover, she ran across the rooftops.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Samuel had thought that he would feel nervous when the time for battle had arrived. Before, he had mostly staved off any weakness in his soul by reminding himself that this was his duty, that if even he was not willing to face a great evil, to save the world, then no one would. When there was a job that needed to be done, someone needed to rise to the occasion. It was a necessity, not a choice.

All those kinds of justifications were ones Samuel was used to. Being born on a farm, eldest of four, with parents frequently gone, those were not choices he had made for himself. They were simply the facts of his life. Maybe that was why he didn't feel nervous at all. Somehow, someday, the three of them—Samuel, Darryn, and Hugo—would prevail against the Count. They would destroy the “great evil” and in doing so, would save their whole world and everyone in it.

It was these thoughts that Samuel had had when he and his two friends had entered the tower. Now, as they ascended the spiralling staircase, he felt his heartbeat move faster and faster, to the point that it was now at a gallop. Samuel knew though that it had more to do with anticipation than fear.

He remembered the recurring dream he had had for the past month. Right now he could not remember how the dream started but he did recall how it always ended. Some large black entity, the great evil, the old tarrin and his cursed offspring, who had targeted the four rune jewels of Sabyr were always slain. Darryn would wear the two tarrins down, sometimes mortally wounding the young one herself. Hugo would even sometimes land a blow from his sword as well, however, each time the dream ended with Samuel slaying both father and son.

The battle had turned against them. They were now the ones with the disadvantage. Samuel readjusted his grip on the swordhandle, breathing hard. He did not turn his head to look but he could see out of the corner of his eye that Darryn was slowly circling the two tarrins from the back, looking for an opening. Her eyes were flicking all over their two enemies but there was no opening. They had Hugo in their clutches.

Hugo was wisely staying limp in their grasp, Samuel noted, after the instinctive initial struggle, when the older tarrin had grabbed him by the throat. The younger one was standing a few feet behind, sword still drawn and stained red with the blood from Darryn's cheek.

"Leopold," the giant tarrin said, his voice rough and deep, "you take out that one. If you need assistance I will join you after I have dispatched this one."

Samuel's body instantly coiled, preparing to shoot himself towards the creature and defend Hugo.

CHAPTER EIGHT

...The old tarrin sighed, looking...strangely...peaceful. “You have truly become a real tarrin. I’m happy this day has come.” The old man closed his eyes, and Leopold blinked. Rather than feeling vindicated, Leopold felt an empty curiosity fill him as he watched the paling of the old tarrin’s face as the blood began to cool and his eyes lose conscious thought and glaze over, all life gone from the body. Leopold had completed his lifetime goal of killing his mother’s murderer, but the resulting victory still felt unreal. A dream still. Yet here it had happened, right in front of his eyes.

The human boy started laughing.

Leopold was stunned. It felt like he was trapped in a dream, a nightmare. None of this felt real, surely it couldn’t be real. What had happened?

Like master and pupil. Like caretaker and charge. Like father and son.

Leopold stared at his sword. It was red with blood....

PART THREE

PART 3

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Darryn cried into her baby sister's shoulder. But it was too late, her childhood was gone. She had never wanted to be like Deni, but now, she cried because she never could. No longer was it an option for her. She would never forget the skinny, shivering husk of Leopold, or be able to unsee the singed corpse of her friend, stabbed through the heart by their leader. She cried for Samuel and his dull, lifeless eyes. Dead before he could live, his world destroyed before it had barely formed. She cried for the losses she suffered, for the losses he suffered, for Leopold's loss. This was the end, Hugo was dead, Samuel was as good as dead, and Leopold would soon be dead. She was the only one left.

Darryn really didn't know how much of herself *was* left. Maybe something inside of her had always been dead. Maybe all of it had burned up with Hugo along with what had been left of his heart. Maybe it had died with Leopold's hunger, his thirst for life snuffed out along with his father's last breath. Maybe it had died when the light in Samuel's eyes had dimmed while the blood of his best friend dried on his hands.

Whatever the case, whatever part of her was there before, it was gone now.

Donning the Critic's Hat: Writing about Writing

When composing in a chosen genre, a writer faces two tasks: how to fit their ideas within the framework of that genre while fulfilling their audience's desires and expectations. Avid readers of the horror genre, for example, generally open a book and expect to be shocked, frightened or disgusted (Cuddon). Adventure fiction typically offers a sense of overarching danger and will keep a fast pace throughout (D'Ammadda). Romance, as the name suggests, will focus primarily on the romantic relationship of the main characters and usually will have an "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending ("About the Romance Genre")." In the world of literary nonfiction, autobiography, for example, is defined as "retrospective prose narrative[s] produced by a real person concerning [that individual's] own existence, focusing on [this] individual life, in particular on the development of [the writer's] personality (Lejeune).

With so many genres and expectations, it is not surprising to find the writer grappling with a myriad of choices involving literary techniques and structure. A horror novelist will in all likelihood feel compelled to construct a scary atmosphere. Perhaps they might do this through the use of ominous diction and limited perspective, or through an omniscient narrator and nihilistic tone. A romance novelist, on the other hand, typically focuses on character exploration in order to establish and highlight the romantic relationship. They might do that through extensive flashback sequences, or through alternating points-of-view.

While mastery over any chosen genre may well take a lifetime, many authors continue to write across various genres and do so quite successfully. We all know William Shakespeare as a playwright, for example, but he wrote many sonnets as well, and within his plays we find song lyrics too. Contemporary authors including Neil Gaiman, Margaret Atwood, and Stephen King also write in a variety of genres. Gaiman is known primarily as a writer of fantasy (*American*

Gods and Good Omens), but he has also produced children’s literature and poetry. Margaret Atwood is known for her poetry and novels (*Life Before Man* and *Cat’s Eye*) and most recently has focused on dystopian fiction. Stephen King, undisputed master of the horror genre (*The Shining* and *Carrie*), also produced a very instructive and moving short book on the art and craft of writing, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. (Dr. Matiko’s favorite Stephen King novel is a surprisingly short and lesser known work, *The Colorado Kid* which she describes as “a gentle mystery.”) What techniques then can be traced back from the finished product—or products—of a particular author? In other words, what can be learned from studying a single author’s works across genres? In order to answer these questions, I have tried to don the critic’s hat and have looked at my own pieces, both my literary nonfiction essays, and my young adult fantasy novel draft. Through a close reading of my work, I sought to identify what I did similarly, and what I did differently in each genre in order to answer the question, “What is particularly distinctive about Kara Herrera’s prose?”

When it comes to literary nonfiction, it is hard to ignore the immense vulnerability and soul-searching that an author must go through in order to pen an acceptable nonfiction essay. By an “acceptable” nonfiction essay, I mean one that evokes a level of empathy, even strong emotion from the audience, without the author coming across as either pretentious or sentimental. In the essay “The Reaper and Me,” I intentionally thought of a particularly vulnerable and—for lack of a better word—*sad* moment. Deciding what specifically to share and when to share it, is the heart of the nonfiction genre. It isn’t necessarily about recreating hard fact upon hard fact, but rather accessing and reconstructing memory and all that emotional landscape entails, and then sharing that with the audience. When I was barely into my teens, my father suffered a heart attack. I chose to write about this incident because sufficient time had passed for me to look at it at least

somewhat objectively. The years had given me perspective that I couldn't have accessed earlier. By writing about something so very private, I felt confident I would be able to evoke in my readers sympathy, melancholy and yet even a laugh or two. The latter I deemed essential.

In *Legendary*, I opted to create a world that was fairly dark and grim, while keeping the necessary element of magic, essential to the genre. Fantasy is often seen as a way to explore binaries and frightening realities through the lens of a "secondary world" which may or may not look like the present world. Clearly, I was interested in reflecting on inner darkness in both genres. My novel's world reflects darkness not altogether unlike what my own family experienced. Having the novel's world reflect that darkness was a way to foreshadow the inevitable fall of the "heroes" in the story. In my novel, unlike my essays, I have greater control over the narrative. In fiction I can create my characters, their actions and their world. In nonfiction, I am bound by my lived experience and my recollections and reconstruction, to the best of my ability. In my novel, I deliberately chose to stay in a darker world and to make that fictional narrative reflect the less-than-sunny mood seen in my earlier essays.

Not everything in my pieces was dark and grim, however. There were moments of comic levity and humor as well. In "Mama, Mystery, and Madness and the Ties that Bind" there is a moment where I detail the verbal tennis match between my sister and my grandma—called Mama—about women in the church. When my grandma claimed that the church board asking her was the only reason she became a deacon, my sister asked if Mama would jump off a cliff if the board asked her to as well. This quip broke up the otherwise internal questioning tone I had established throughout the essay.

Another example of inserting moments of comedy and breaking up the serious mood in my writing can be seen in another one of my essays, "Risking it for the English Room." In this

essay, while I reflect on my own fears of taking risks, I also manage to find an appropriate instance to place a couplet from a poem I wrote at the age of eight:

On our porch there was an eagle,
It was better than a beagle.

By inserting these lighter moments, I hope the effect is to make the sadder moments of my pieces more poignant. Few lives are completely filled with misery. Most, thankfully, are punctuated by moments of humor. I want my reader to see and acknowledge this fact of existence. Creating both humor and pain was also done partly because it is what I myself want to encounter when I read nonfiction.

When approaching my keyboard to start writing a piece, I typically first think *what would I like to read?* Perhaps this approach seems self-centered, but I don't have much affinity for writing and editing a piece that I don't particularly enjoy, especially considering the amount of time that editing and writing actually entails. Both in *Legendary* and in "The Reaper and Me," I thought about what kind of pieces in each genre I would best like to consume. Though the goals may be lofty, they continue to serve me and my readers well.

When it comes to the more technical aspects of my writing, I notice that I favor a pattern of long sentence, long sentence, and then a slightly shorter sentence to end the paragraph.

Consider this passage in *Legendary*, the prologue: "As he walked down the dark lane, it was hard to refrain from nervously looking around. Hugo was far from comfortable as he walked along, shadows rising and shrinking in the light of the street lanterns. The alleyways seemed to bleed darkness, and Hugo could only just make out the rough outlines resembling humanoid shapes. He swallowed nervously and continued to move deeper into Schyler." The shorter sentence can

carry a punch that a longer sentence can rarely deliver. The longer sentences do provide a nice setup, however, for the impact of a shorter sentence.

A different technical element that I notice across both genres is the usage of adjectives that end with the suffix “-ly”: “completely,” “resolutely,” “obviously,” “easily.” These words I noticed were more frequent throughout the fantasy novel draft than the nonfiction essays. This is due in large part to the fact that the nonfiction essays are all written in the first-person point-of-view, while the fantasy novel draft is written in a limited third-person point of view. For third-person, I feel more pressure as an author to overtly describe actions each character takes. In an earlier draft of fantasy novel Hugo (the first main character introduced) did not merely hurry, he hurried “quickly.” (Upon revision, I realized “quickly” had to go, because there is no other way to hurry.) In first-person narratives, I feel more comfortable editing out the “-ly” adjectives and letting my thoughts (as both author and narrator) communicate the characteristics of my actions.

As for titles, I see that I prefer to use ones that mention one or two subjects that either my nonfiction essays or the fantasy novel draft covers. Many authors of best-selling books that I see in my visits to the bookstore favor short, “punchy” titles as well (*Later* by Stephen King, *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuro Ishiguro, *The Power* by Naomi Alderman); however, mine tend to involve nouns (the reaper in “The Reaper and Me” or the garage in “The Garage”) or adjectives, as in the case of the fantasy novel draft (note how “legendary” is also an adjective ending with “-y”), that allude to either a central image or central object (a legend, or legends) that is stated by the narrator or the characters throughout the piece.

The process of revisioning is already one that enables an author to better their writing skills, and there will always be one more mistake and one more change that needs to be made

every single time. That said, looking at my work across two genres has evidently given me insight into writing habits that I might like to curb, insights that I would not have otherwise. For example, the fact that I use adjectives ending with “-ly” so frequently is news to me, and something I will be conscious of the next time I write something, to avoid redundancy and wordiness. Having a tendency towards writing sad stories was not something I necessarily knew about myself as a writer before either, and I am glad I can now make a conscious decision to experiment with a wider emotional palette in the future.

This exercise of looking at one’s own work across two genres is surprisingly more enlightening than I first theorized. Writing and editing are already skills that are taught to all English majors, if not all students; however, finding out what is one’s own *style* of writing at first seems like an exercise only successful (meaning published) authors can accomplish through their superior amount of experience. In my case though, I found that it now gives me more to look out for in future assignments and self-editing endeavors. It genuinely has opened my eyes to more of my own habits and potential crutches and pitfalls as an author. It is with that in mind that I have come to the opinion that all young writers should at some point take some time to look for their own authorial style across genres, no matter if those genres are ones as simple as “school essays” and “journal entries.” Whatever the case, this exercise really does offer more than self-editing and peer-reviews do, and should be considered seriously by all writers.

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