



Gambit Tales

Meet the Cast

ADVANCED EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This advanced edition collects 10 chapter books from the GambitTales cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register. Advanced edition: upper-middle-grade register (Wonder / Hatchet / Holes band) for readers ages 11-14 ready for longer sentences + more nuanced subtext.

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For everyone who learns by reading between the lines.

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Introduction

The GambitTales cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 10 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone. Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

This is the **Advanced Edition** — written for readers who are ready for longer sentences, layered subtext, and the trust that comes with not having every joke explained. The Standard Edition covers the same characters at a lighter register; pick whichever feels right for the reader at hand.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Captain Castle



There is a question the Captain has been asked at least a thousand times, and over the years he has stopped trying to answer it cleverly. The question, posed by adults and children alike, is this:

Why did you retire?

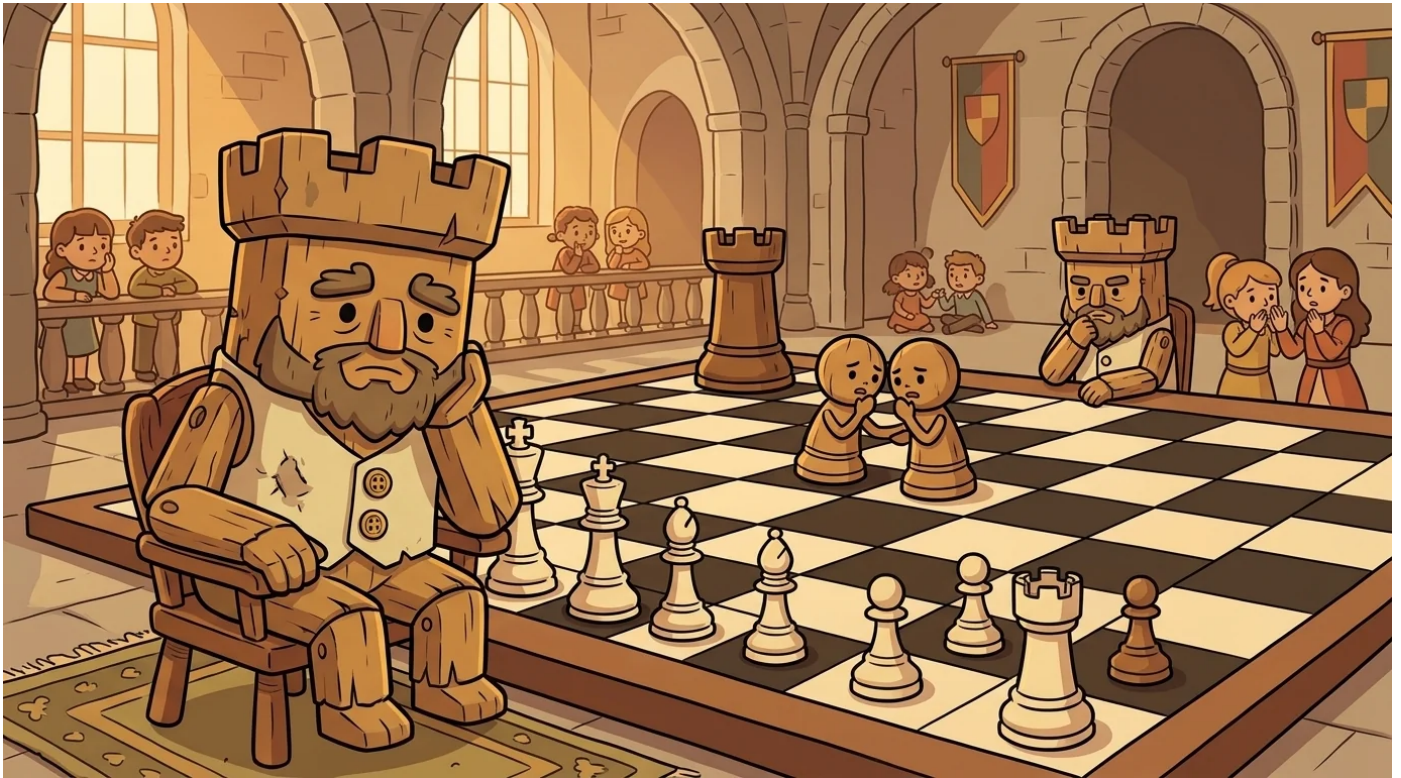
People assume there must have been a battle. They want there to have been a battle. They want Captain Castle to lean across the table with a grim, weathered sigh and say, *I lost a friend in the eighth rank, my child, and I never quite went back*. It would make for a very good story. It would explain the brass buttons on his waistcoat (people would assume the buttons were a tribute to a fallen comrade) and the small honest dent on his left flank (people would assume the dent was the souvenir of some honourable last stand).

But there was no battle of any kind.

The buttons were a tribute, but not to anyone heroic — they were a tribute to a tailor named Margery, who made them slightly too large on principle because she always made them slightly too large, and the Captain liked her too much to ask her to redo them. The dent on his left flank was the souvenir of a falling pumpkin, which is admittedly not as interesting as a sword wound but is, the Captain insists at every opportunity, perfectly real and well-documented.

He retired, in actual unromantic fact, on a Wednesday. An unimportant one. In early autumn. Between turns nine and ten of a slow, unremarkable midgame, when nothing in particular was happening and the children watching the match had begun to whisper among themselves about whether anyone, anywhere, was ever going to do *anything*. That precise moment is when the Captain decided.

He had not realised, until that Wednesday afternoon, that he had been deciding for some considerable time.



He was on his usual square at the corner of the board, eighth rank, white side, exactly the place where rooks are expected to belong before any reasonable person has decided what to do with them, and he was thinking, with some quiet alarm, about how he had not moved in eleven consecutive games. Eleven games, in fairness, is not a long time for a rook. Some rooks do not move once in their entire careers. The Captain personally knew rooks who had occupied the same single square for forty years and considered themselves, by their own account, extremely *busy*. But on that particular Wednesday, in that particular position, the Captain found himself thinking, in a voice he could not quite ignore:

If I never move again, what exactly will I have done?

Now, this is not the sort of thought a rook can un-think, once it has presented itself. Once a rook starts asking what he has actually *done* with his life, the answer tends to be approximately: *moved in a straight line, occasionally, and almost always at the request of someone else*. That is the rook's job. It is an honourable job. The Captain had never resented it for an instant. But on that particular Wednesday afternoon, the question sat down in the square beside him and made itself comfortable for what looked like a long stay.

He looked across the board with what he hoped was idle curiosity. The opposing rook was sitting in the same kind of corner, performing the same kind of nothing. Down the file, a pair of pawns were having a small and almost shy argument about which of them would advance first. A bishop sailed past on the long diagonal, looking inexplicably pleased with himself. Two knights leapt over each other in opposite directions, both convinced they had ambushed something.

And the Captain thought, with no particular drama: *I have watched all of this for a very long time.*

He had watched, by his own careful count, eleven thousand games. He had been a participant in three thousand of them. In the other eight thousand, he had simply sat — in a box, on a shelf, in a tournament hall, in the back room of a tea-house in a village whose name he could no longer correctly pronounce. He had heard explanations of moves he himself was making, given by old players to younger ones. He had heard the same explanations given badly, given well, given with kindness and given with impatience. He had once watched a child weep over a lost knight, and then two games later watched the same child *win* with a knight, and watched the parent across the table fail to notice the small private triumph in the child's face.

He thought: *I know more stories than I have told.*

He thought: *That seems wrong.*

He moved that turn — a tidy a8 to a1, picking off a careless bishop on the way — and the game ended four moves later in what was, all things considered, a fair result. The pieces were boxed up. The board was folded for the evening. The light in the room turned to that particular evening colour that boards take on after a game has finished, which is a colour Captain Castle had loved for as long as he could remember.



He sat in the box that night with his three closest neighbours — two bishops named Marigold and Marrow, and a knight named Ferret — and he said, quietly, in the dim:

"I think I would like to *talk* about chess, rather than play it."

Marigold (who was sensible) said: "Talk to whom?"

The Captain said: "To children. I would like to tell them about the pieces. Not the moves. The pieces themselves. Who they are. Why they do what they do."

Marrow (who was less sensible but kinder) said: "Like what?"

The Captain considered the question. He said: "Like — there is a librarian I have heard of, in the Slow Lake village. He sees pins in books that nobody else can see. I would like to bring him to a chessboard and show the children how he sees things."

Marigold said, after a long pause: "He sees *pins*. In books."

The Captain said: "Yes. Exactly."

Ferret, who had not been listening properly all evening, said: "Will there be snacks?"

The Captain, who had a longstanding soft spot for Ferret, said: "Yes. There will be snacks."

He did not announce his retirement at a great gathering. He did not give a speech, which would have surprised everyone who knew him. He simply did not turn up for his next scheduled tournament, and when his tournament-bag came looking for him three days later, the Captain was already walking down the road towards the Slow Lake, slowly, in the way rooks walk when they have decided to take their time about something.

It was a long road, and he took longer than the road required. He stopped to talk to a baker about why his bread always rose more in the corners. He stopped to listen to a child explain a knight's tour she had invented in chalk on a stone bridge. He stopped, almost by accident, in a meadow and watched a flock of geese for nearly an hour without thinking about chess at all. None of these things were chess. All of them, the Captain privately felt, were somehow the *same shape* as chess. He could not yet explain why. He thought he might be able to explain it later. He was, in fact, beginning to suspect that explaining things later was going to be his entire new job.

He arrived at the library door on the seventh day of walking. He knocked.

Pinwell answered the library door slowly, the way he answered everything. He was holding a small teacup. He said: "Yes?"

The Captain said: "I have come to ask if you would consider teaching children about the pin."

Pinwell said, very quietly: "I suppose I should bring my notebook."

And the Captain, who had been steady on his square for eleven consecutive games without so much as a flinch, felt for the first time in a very long while that he was about to do something *interesting*.



The academy was not, in those first months, much of an academy at all. It was a converted tea-house at the edge of the village. The first class had four children in it. The first lesson lasted twenty minutes, which was about ten minutes longer than the Captain had planned for, because the children kept asking *follow-up questions*. He had forgotten about follow-up questions. He had been on the board too long, and the board does not interrupt.

Pinwell taught the pin in the second half of that first class. The Captain, after introducing him with what he hoped was the right amount of dramatic restraint, stepped to the side of the room, folded his short rook-arms behind his back, and watched the proceedings with growing interest.

He watched the children watch Pinwell.

He watched the precise moment — and there was a moment, definite and locatable — when the fox in the green scarf wrote a sentence in her notebook that she did not strictly need to write. She was writing it because she wanted to remember it. The Captain had seen that kind of writing eleven thousand times in his career, in the hands of older players, in the corners of tournament halls. He had never been the one teaching the writer of it.

After the lesson, when the children had left and the lamps had been turned down for the evening, he sat with Pinwell on the front step of the tea-house. The light had turned that colour again, which the Captain had begun to think of as *the teaching colour*.

"Pinwell," said the Captain, slowly. "Would you mind if I asked the other librarians? The ones I have heard about?"

Pinwell considered the question. "Other librarians?"

"In other villages. Each one sees something different. The lady in the southern village sees *skewers* — front piece smaller, back piece bigger. The twin foxes in the hills see *forks*. A grandmother in the eastern marsh sees *the line behind the line*, what I am told the players call an *X-ray*. And there is a winter ranger who arrives at outposts before anyone expects her to — she does not yet know it, but I think she sees the queen."

Pinwell took a small sip of tea. He said: "I think they would come, if you asked them properly."

The Captain wrote letters that night. He wrote them slowly, because he had not written letters in a long time, and his handwriting was rusty from disuse. He addressed them, one by one, to a librarian, to a southern bookseller, to twin foxes in a hill village, to a marsh-dwelling grandmother, and to a post office in a small town called Marrowmile. Each letter said roughly the same thing in slightly different words: *I have heard of you. I would like you to come and tell the children what you see.*

He licked the stamps. He posted the letters at the village postbox. He went home to the tea-house and considered, for the first time in his life, what he himself would say at his own first lesson.



He says it now the same way every time. The children expect it.

He says: "*I was once a real rook. I retired from the board to tell the stories of those still playing.*"

And then he sits at the front of the room and waits a calculated beat, and adds: "*I move in straight lines. I'm not proud of it, but it does narrow the conversation.*"

The children always laugh, even though it is the same line week after week. The Captain doesn't mind that they have heard it before. He minds, in fact, very little of what he might once have minded.

Sometimes, in the evening, after the children have gone home and the board has been folded and the light has turned that particular colour again, he sits in his usual corner of the tea-house and thinks about that Wednesday. He still does not have a clever answer for *why he retired*. He has tried various ones in the years since. They all sound smaller than the truth.

The truth is this:

He wanted to tell the stories.

He has been doing it ever since. He thinks, on the whole, that he is going to keep on doing it for a long time. He has eleven thousand more stories where the first one came from — and he suspects, now that he has begun, that the supply will go on refilling itself indefinitely, because every lesson now produces children who in turn produce new stories worth telling. That had not occurred to him on the Wednesday in question. He thinks it might be the best thing about the job.

He folds his arms across his brass buttons. He looks at the empty board on the table in front of him. He smiles, only a little, because rooks do not have large faces and a small smile is the most he can manage with the equipment available. And then he goes to sleep, because tomorrow there is another class, and another set of follow-up questions, and another fox with a notebook, and another lesson to tell.

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/gambittales/captain-castle>

Captain Crossfire



There is a particular kind of silence in the academy hall that happens only when Captain Crossfire is about to enter. The children, who have been informed in advance that he is coming, are not by any reasonable definition quiet — they are reading, fidgeting, swinging their legs under the bench, and conducting an argument about whether a knight or a bishop is the more interesting piece (it is the knight; it is always the knight) — but they have lowered their voices the way people lower their voices in a stairwell when they hear a particularly large coat being hung up on the floor below.

The double doors at the back of the hall swing inward without any particular gentleness.

"GOOD MORNING, CHILDREN!"

The voice arrives several seconds before the man does. Captain Crossfire follows it in, bowing slightly under the lintel because he is tall and the lintel is not, his long blue coat catching for a moment against the doorframe and then unsticking with a flourish that he definitely meant to perform. He has white hair tied back at the neck in the manner of a previous decade's officers. He has a beard that is precisely as tidy as a beard can possibly be when its owner waves his arms a great deal. He is sixty-one years old, and he has not had what most people would call an indoor voice since he was twenty-four.

"WATCH THIS!" he announces to the room, before he has even reached the front of it. The children sit up straighter in their benches. They cannot help it. He has trained them for it over a great many months.

He arrives at the chessboard at the head of the hall, where the position has already been set up by Captain Castle, who is sitting on a stool to one side with the patient face of a man who has been an adult around children for a long time. Castle nods at Crossfire. Crossfire nods back. Their nods are precisely the same height, which is a coincidence they have practised for over a period of several weeks.

Crossfire turns the board so the children can see it properly. There are five pieces on it: a white knight on c3, a white bishop on b2 sitting cleanly behind the knight on the long diagonal, a black queen on g7, and two black pawns on the side of the board that do not matter to anybody.

"What," Crossfire says, with appropriate gravity, "is the knight about to do?"

A child in the front says, "Move?"

"YES!" Crossfire says. "EXACTLY! Move *where?*"

Another child says, "Anywhere?"

"ANYWHERE!" says Crossfire. "Wherever it likes! The knight is *free!* And — watch this — it doesn't matter *where* the knight goes. It only matters that the knight *moves at all.* Because behind the knight" — he points, very theatrically, at the bishop — "is my dear friend the bishop. And the bishop sees" — his finger traces the long diagonal all the way across the board — "all the way to the queen."

The children look. They see it. They lean in slightly, as a unit, without noticing they are doing so.

The knight moves. The bishop sits perfectly still, as bishops do when they are about to demonstrate something important. The bishop has not moved an inch. But suddenly the bishop is *attacking the queen* from three squares away, along a diagonal that was always there but that had been quietly obscured by the knight standing in front of it.

"AHA!" says Crossfire, with the full satisfaction of a man whose lesson has landed.

Captain Castle, on his stool, exhales the small sigh of a man who has heard *AHA* in this room approximately four thousand times over the course of his teaching career. He is not, however, frowning. He never frowns at Crossfire. He could not if he tried.



Crossfire was not born loud, but he was born early, and he has been making up for it ever since.

His actual name is Henrik Vohrn. He came from a southern garrison town called Vohrnsmouth — narrow streets, a long curving harbour, a fish market at one end and a watch-barracks at the other. His parents were both fishmongers. They are still fishmongers, after forty years of fishmongering. They write him letters once a month and address them to *Henrik*, not *Captain Crossfire*, because they have refused, on principle, to acknowledge that the new name is the official one. He keeps the letters in a small wooden box at the academy.

He joined the watch at nineteen. He was promoted twice in his first three years, both times against his commanding officer's recommendation, because his commanding officer thought he was — and this is a direct quote from the personnel file — "*insufferable, but reliable.*"

His job as a junior officer was to lead a small unit of watch-soldiers on patrols through the harbour district, which was a logistical nightmare for several reasons at once. Warehouses pressed against each other along narrow lanes. Market stalls appeared in the morning and disappeared by evening, like a tide that obeyed the calendar rather than the moon. There were, in summary, a great many ways for a person to get jumped from behind by an opportunistic thief.

Vohrn lost two soldiers to such jumpings during his first six months. They had not been seriously hurt. But they had been profoundly *embarrassed*, which Vohrn took personally because he was their commanding officer and embarrassment, he believed, was preventable in a way that bruises were not. He thought about this problem a great deal. He thought about it loudly. He thought about it on long walks, on short walks, at breakfast, and once — memorably — during a wedding. The wedding was his cousin's. The cousin has forgiven him, mostly, in the years since.

The conventional answer — the answer his commanding officer kept patiently suggesting from across the room — was the obvious one: *patrol in tighter formation*. Put the soldiers closer together. Have them watch one another's backs. Reduce the gaps.

Vohrn tried it. It mostly worked. The thieves adjusted. They started aiming at the very front of the formation instead of the very back, and the back of the formation could not turn around fast enough to provide useful support. The unit had become a closer cluster, but the *front* of the cluster was now exposed in a new and equally embarrassing way.

Vohrn was, by this point in his career, very frustrated. He swore a great deal. He wrote angry letters that he then crumpled up and discarded before posting. He stomped through the harbour at night with his hands clenched behind his back and his coat dragging through the puddles, and he thought, over and over again, in a slowly tightening loop:

The problem is that we're all moving at the same time.

This thought, when it eventually arrived in completed form, was so quiet that even Vohrn (who is, as has been mentioned, loud) heard it as a whisper. He stopped walking. He looked at the harbour. He sat down.



The harbour had a long row of bollards along its edge — short fat iron posts that fishermen tied their boats to in all kinds of weather. Vohrn sat on one of them.

He sat for nearly an hour without moving. He watched the boats come in. He watched the deckhands hopping between vessels with the casual confidence of people who fall into water for a living. He watched, in particular, a small dinghy moored alongside a much larger trade-ship. The dinghy was tied to the trade-ship with a single rope. When the wind shifted, the dinghy *moved* — but the trade-ship did not. The trade-ship had been there all afternoon. The trade-ship had appeared, to anybody walking by on the dock, to be a permanent part of the landscape.

And from behind the trade-ship, every now and then, a fisherman with a long pole would casually reach out and check a crab pot that the dinghy's movement had revealed.

The trade-ship hadn't moved.

The dinghy had.

The crab pot got checked.

Vohrn stood up so suddenly that he nearly fell into the harbour. He walked home. He drew a diagram by lamp-light, several diagrams in fact, each one labelled with increasingly enthusiastic exclamation marks. He did not sleep that night, although he tried briefly around three in the morning.

The next morning he proposed, to his commanding officer, a new patrol formation. It was not tighter. It was, in fact, looser. He proposed that the unit move in a *staggered* pattern — one or two soldiers visibly walking through the district, the others positioned at *fixed posts*, hidden behind market stalls and warehouse corners, *not moving at all*. When a thief approached the visible soldiers, the visible soldiers would simply move *aside* — and reveal, behind them, a line of fixed posts with crossbows already aimed at the place the thief was standing.

The commanding officer said, after a long thoughtful silence, "That is the most absurd plan I have heard this year."

The commanding officer let him try it.

It worked spectacularly. Two thieves were apprehended in the first week. Three more in the second. The total apprehensions for the month were higher than the previous year's annual total for the harbour district. The commanding officer, who had been doing his job for thirty-one years and was not a fool, promoted Vohrn again. He also, after consulting with his deputy over a long lunch, gave him a nickname.

Captain Crossfire.

"Because," the commanding officer said dryly, over the soup course, "you stand still, and the attack comes from behind you, and the thief never sees the second line until it is too late."

The nickname stuck immediately, the way the best nicknames do. Vohrn liked it. He used it on his next promotion paperwork. By the time he was thirty, *Captain Crossfire* appeared on every official document in the kingdom, and *Henrik Vohrn* appeared only on his mother's monthly letters.



He retired from the watch at thirty-eight, with full honours and several commendations he did not display in his office because he found them embarrassing. He had, by then, become a famous tactician in certain circles. The kingdom's chess academy invited him to come and teach. They had, they explained in their letter of invitation, recently identified the *discovered attack* — the move where you shift one piece aside to reveal an attack from a second piece behind it — as one of the most under-taught tactical patterns in the kingdom's training programmes. The academy needed someone to teach it. They wanted a teacher who *understood it in his bones*.

Captain Crossfire said, "HA!"

He said this loudly.

He has been teaching the discovered attack ever since, with no apparent decrease in volume or enthusiasm.

He has, this morning in the academy hall, just finished his fourth demonstration of the day. The children are still leaning forward in their benches. He likes that about children. They never get tired of *AHA*. He sometimes wonders, privately, in the quiet moment before he falls asleep at night, whether the adults in his life have ever leaned forward in quite the same way. He suspects, on the balance of evidence, that they have not. He does not mind.

A small student — eight years old, with a fork-pin in her hair — raises her hand carefully.

"Captain Crossfire," she says, "what if the front piece is *also* a piece I want to keep? What if I don't want it to move?"

Crossfire grins. It is the slow, deliberate grin of a man who has been quietly waiting for this exact question all morning.

"AHA!" he says. "AHA — *but* — listen. The front piece doesn't have to *die*. The front piece just has to *get out of the way*. It can move to another square. A safe square. A useful square. The discovered attack is not a sacrifice. It is a *reveal*. The trade-ship doesn't sink. The dinghy doesn't drown. The crab pot just gets checked."

Glass Lantern, sitting near the back of the hall in her usual spot by the window, smiles very faintly. Glass Lantern's smile is a thing that requires close attention to see at all. The Captain has, over the years of their partnership, learned to look for it. He nods at her across the hall. She nods back. They are co-teaching this kit. She is the quietest person he has ever respected.



After the lesson, Crossfire sits at the back of the hall on a low wooden bench, helping Glass Lantern pack up the demonstration pieces for the evening. He is unusually quiet while he does this. He is always unusually quiet around the Lantern; he likes the way silence feels when somebody else is in it with him.

"You hinted at the king-version," the Lantern says, after several minutes have passed.

"I did," says Crossfire.

"The double-check. You hinted at it twice."

"I did."

"They'll ask you about it next week."

"They will."

The Lantern places a small wooden bishop carefully into a velvet-lined box. She closes the lid with a soft click. She says, very softly: "Tell them about the bollard."

Crossfire considers this proposition for a long moment. The bollard is something he does not, as a general rule, mention to the children. The bollard is the moment when he sat down by the harbour and realised that the problem was that everybody had been moving at the same time. The bollard is the actual beginning of his career. He has been a captain for nearly forty years now, but the boy who sat on that bollard was twenty-four and very frustrated, and the captain in the academy hall knows, in a place he does not often visit, that the boy is still doing the thinking for him.

"All right," he says.

He says it quietly. The Lantern hears.

They walk out of the hall together, towards the staircase that leads down to the kitchen-yard for the evening meal. Captain Castle, still on his stool at the side of the room, watches them go. He shakes his head slowly, in the way of a man who has watched the same people do the same kind thing many times. He is, despite everything, fond.

The trade-ship doesn't move. The dinghy does. The crab pot gets checked.

He is the captain who stood still and won.

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King Pumble and King Sable



Across the river from each other, on the morning of the academy visit, the two kings are doing what they have been doing every morning for as long as they have been kings — which is to say, since they were children, since the gardens and the library and the slow careful hands of the people who raised them taught them the only kind of motion their lives would ever ask of them.

In the library tower above Marrowbridge, King Pumble is reshelving books. He has been at the task since before sunrise, when the east window first began to colour, and he moves now from the long oak table to the wall shelf with the deliberate weight of a man who knows perfectly well that a shelf in the wrong order is a year of his apprentice's work undone. He holds a single rolled scroll between both hands as though it might break, and perhaps it might — some of the older ones are brittle along the seams, and he has watched two crumble in the past ten years for reasons that did not, at the time, feel survivable. He sets it on the shelf. He turns. He walks back to the table. One step. Another. He takes the next scroll. He does not rush. He learned not to rush a long time ago, in two distinct lessons — the first when he was nineteen and the scrolls scattered, the second when he was twenty-three and they scattered again — and the lessons have never quite stopped instructing him. Now he moves the way the books need him to move, which is shelf to shelf, one shelf at a time, never two at once.

His brass-rimmed reading-glasses slide down his nose, the way they have been sliding down his nose since he started needing them at forty-one. He pushes them back up with a knuckle. He smiles at no one in particular, because there is no one in the library except him and the scrolls and the slow widening of the morning light through the high east window, which has the disconcerting effect of making the room look, for an hour every day, like the inside of a polished honey-jar.

Across the contested river, in the maze-garden of the lesser palace, King Sable is pruning. He stands at the first topiary — a wide soft cone of dark hedge that has wanted, for the better part of a decade now, to be a sphere — and he makes one snip. He inspects the result with the kind of patience that one of his gardener-uncles once described, in his hearing, as "the patience of a man who does not believe in luck." He steps to the next hedge. One step. He makes one snip. He inspects. He does not snip twice in a row. He learned not to do that when he was seventeen — that was the first time, with the bay hedge — and again at twenty-four, with the smaller of the two yew arches, both of which he lost to a second cut taken too soon. Now he moves the way the maze-garden needs him to move, which is one hedge at a time, one cut per visit, never a second cut in haste.

His worn straw hat shades his eyes. His garden shears hang from his belt between snips, the leather of the holster long ago shaped to their particular weight. He does not whistle; he has never been the whistling kind. The maze hums faintly in the morning warmth, all hedge and bird and the small dry sound of one snip per hedge, and somewhere on the far side of the maze a wren is rehearsing a song it does not yet entirely have.

At ten o'clock both kings set down their work — Pumble the scrolls, Sable the shears — and they each walk to the boat-house that the academy keeps at the river's middle bank, where a flat-bottomed crossing-boat has waited, since before either of them was born, for occasions of this exact kind. They cross from opposite sides. They meet at the academy door. They walk in together. They walk slowly, the way they always walk.

The academy hall, this morning, has two thrones at the front of the room. They are not really thrones in any technical sense — they are two large wooden chairs that somebody (probably Captain Castle) has dragged out of the staff library and pushed up against the chalkboard with the practical air of a man arranging furniture for an event whose ceremony he has long ago stopped finding ceremonial. But the two kings sitting in them are very real, and the children sitting on the floor in front of them are looking up with the careful attention of children who have been told, beforehand, that today they will meet *both* kings at the same time.

The two kings do not look anything alike.

Pumble is on the left, in a green coat with too many buttons, which he keeps fiddling with the way a man fiddles with anything within reach when he is trying not to be nervous. He is sixty-two years old. He has a kind round face and very tired eyes. He smiles when he is nervous, which is almost always.

Sable is on the right, in a dark grey coat with no buttons at all — he had them all removed, last spring, after deciding once and for all that he was tired of doing them up. He is sixty-two years old, exactly the same age as Pumble, to the week. He has a thinner face, neat short white hair, and the small steady frown of a man who is not unhappy but is also not, at this particular moment, smiling. He never smiles when he is nervous. He simply waits, the way a chess piece waits for its move to come.

A child in the front says, "Are you really cousins?"

"Yes," says Pumble immediately. "And I am very glad to be — that is to say, I'm sorry, that's a strange way to put it — I just mean — yes. We are cousins. I love him. Sorry."

Sable says, after a small pause: "Yes."

The child says, with the practical curiosity of someone who has been turning the question over for several days, "Whose mother was whose mother's sister?"

Pumble blinks. He looks at Sable. Sable looks at Pumble.

"His mother," says Sable, pointing across with a finger that does not so much point as indicate, "was my mother's sister."

"And his father," Pumble adds, recovering, "was my father's brother."

The child considers this. Several other children behind her also consider this. There is a small thoughtful silence of the sort that happens when an entire room of nine-and-ten-year-olds is briefly being asked to model the genealogy of two old men.

Captain Castle, leaning against the doorframe at the back of the hall, sighs gently. He has explained this to children before. He has stopped trying to make it sound less unusual than it is.

"This is unusual," Pumble says to the children, with great seriousness. "Even in royal families. It led to a particular set of cheekbones that both my cousin and I still resent."

Sable touches his own cheek and nods, once.

The children laugh. Then a small boy near the back, with chalk on his sleeve, says, "Why do you both walk so slowly?"

Pumble and Sable look at each other. Sable lifts a single eyebrow at his cousin, the way you lift a single eyebrow when somebody you have known for sixty-two years has just been asked exactly the right question by exactly the right child.

"Because," Pumble says, choosing his words with the care that has, over the years, become his only reliable currency, "kings move one square at a time. We are practising. All our lives."

"And so are our kingdoms," Sable adds.

The children look at their feet. Then they look at the square tiles of the academy hall floor. Several of them quietly try walking one tile at a time without picking up their feet too high. The kings watch this without comment, the way grown-ups watch children doing the small private experiment of becoming.



They were born in the same week of the same year, in two palaces on opposite sides of a river that the cartographers, to this day, have never quite agreed on the name of.

Pumble was born during a thunderstorm. The wind shook the palace windows and the midwife had to relight the lamps three times. He cried more or less continuously for the first hour and was a quiet baby ever after — as if he had used up his entire allotment of crying on that first thunderstorm and had decided, on the strength of some private accounting, that he had spent enough.

Sable was born during a sunrise. The midwife at the other palace had been up all night and was, by the time of the birth, in the kind of mood where nothing in the natural world was capable of surprising her. She delivered Sable with three words of conversation and a pot of tea on the side table. He did not cry. He simply looked at the morning light through the window with the polite expression of a person being introduced to someone he was expected to remember, and went to sleep.

Their grandmother — who was the kind of person who made pronouncements — said, when she heard about both births in the same week:

"One will be loud, and one will be quiet, and they will both move one careful step at a time, and so will their kingdoms — because the kingdoms will be theirs, and a king who hurries is a king who falls."

She was, more or less, right.

She was also, in her way, instructing the family. She had spent her own years as queen of the smaller kingdom learning the same lesson — that a crown is not a sprint, that to do the king's work is to do one thing at a time and to do it before doing the next. She had been a librarian's daughter before she was a queen. She believed in the slowness of careful hands the way other people believe in luck or weather or the inevitability of one season giving way to the next.

So she made arrangements, in the way that grandmothers who have been queens occasionally do.

Pumble would be raised next to the library tower above Marrowbridge — among the scrolls and the long oak tables and the librarian-aunts who would teach him the patience of one-shelf-at-a-time. Sable would be raised next to the maze-garden at the lesser palace — among the hedge-rows and the gardener-uncles who would teach him the patience of one-snip-per-visit.

By the time the boys were nine, they could each do their work without scattering scrolls and without losing hedges. By the time they were fifteen, they could do it without thinking. By the time they were thirty, they could not imagine doing it any other way.

The two kingdoms had a long-standing diplomatic non-relationship — they were not at war, exactly, but they were also not entirely at peace, and any meeting between members of the royal houses required so many forms and so many treaties that nobody actually held them. The boys, who had heard about each other their entire childhoods and had not been allowed even a single letter, were not permitted to meet until they were nine. When they did meet, on the neutral middle bank of the river, what each cousin recognised in the other was not, at first, family.

It was *cadence*. The way the other one moved. One step. Then another. Never rushed. Both of them, even at nine, already moving like kings — although neither of them had any official sense of what that meant, and would not for years.

They got on, mostly because of this. They have got on ever since, mostly because of this.

The grandmother, who watched the first meeting from a folding chair on the riverbank, was not surprised at the outcome. She had planned for it. She wrote later in a private letter to her own sister: "*They have learned slowness from different gardens. They will be enough alike to trust each other and enough different not to bore each other. This is the most I can give them, and I think it will turn out to be enough.*"

She also, that same year, instituted what she called the Letter Game. Each week, on Sunday morning, each cousin would write a letter to the other. The letters could be about anything. The only rule was that they had to include one *fact about the day* and one *fact about themselves*. She personally read every letter for the first six years to make sure neither cousin was being lazy. (She was a very thorough grandmother.) After year six, she trusted them.

The letters went, eventually, to the post office at Marrowmile. From there they were carried — often by ranger-messengers, sometimes by ordinary couriers, occasionally by a particularly determined trader who happened to be passing through — across the contested river to the other kingdom. The Letter Game taught the boys the same thing the library and the maze-garden had taught them: one careful step a week is more than enough, if you keep stepping.



The Letter Game has, by now, been going on for forty-two years. The kings have written each other approximately two thousand one hundred and eighty-four letters. Their grandmother died eleven years ago, in her sleep, with a finished letter to her own sister on the bedside table. The cousins have not stopped writing.

The two letter-styles diverged early — and the divergence is, if you look at it the right way, the rule on paper.

Pumble's letters are warm and slightly worried. He asks a lot of questions. He apologises for the questions. He apologises for the apologies. They contain six or seven distinct moves in a single letter — a thought, a worry, a small joke, an apology, a question, a goodbye, a postscript that reopens the question — because Pumble has never quite learned to make one letter say one thing. He is, in this single small respect, still learning to be the king he is trying to be. He knows it. He keeps trying. He has written letters his entire life that say six things when one would have served him better, and he has, all sixty-two years of it, considered the failure his own and not the language's.

Sable's letters are shorter, calmer, and occasionally devastating. They sometimes contain only one line: "*The wheat came in. Twice.*" That is the entire letter. One step. One square. One fact. He does not add a postscript. He does not apologise for the brevity. He has learned to write a letter the way he prunes a hedge — one snip per visit, no second cut in haste — and the discipline that took him decades on the topiary translated, somehow, almost effortlessly to paper. Pumble has been known to read these short letters fifteen times in a row, trying to understand if Sable is angry. Sable is almost never angry. Sable is just doing what a king does, which is one thing per page.

This is the divergence, and it is also the lesson.

Pumble keeps every letter Sable has ever sent him, in a small cedar chest at the foot of his bed. The chest is now full. He has, this year, ordered a second one. He has counted them — two thousand one hundred and twelve — and each one, he has come to think of, is one careful step Sable took on a Sunday.

Sable keeps Pumble's letters in a slightly disorderly stack in a desk drawer. He has, twice in his life, gone back and re-read every letter Pumble has ever sent him, in chronological order. He has not told Pumble that he has done this. He is not entirely sure why. (He suspects, accurately, that it would make Pumble cry; he is reluctant to be the cause of crying in a man who has cried enough.) Each Pumble-letter, when he re-reads it, takes him five minutes — not because the letter is long but because Pumble keeps doubling back, retracting, apologising, reaffirming. Each letter is, in Sable's private mental shorthand, *Pumble trying to move one square and accidentally moving four at the same time*. He loves Pumble for the trying. He loves him for the trying even more than for the eventual success.

Captain Castle has read a sample of these letters with permission (the cousins gave him three each from the early years). He keeps them in a folder. He has told children, more than once: *"This is the King Rule, written down. Sable's letter is one careful step. Pumble's letter is the cost of forgetting the step. Both are honest. Both belong to the game."*

This is, in a small way, the story of how Pumble and Sable have stayed friends despite leading enemy armies. It is also the story of how each cousin has spent forty-two years practising the one-square-at-a-time rule on a piece of paper before practising it again on a board — and of how, between the two of them, they have made the practice of the rule into something close to an entire shared life.

There is, however, a larger story, and it is one neither cousin tells very often.



When they were thirty-seven, both kingdoms were in trouble at the same time.

Different troubles, on opposite sides of the same river, in the same brutal winter. (The same brutal winter, in fact, that Queen Vesper rode across on a stolen horse — yes, that one.) The outposts that were overrun were each other's outposts. They held the same river crossing from opposite shores.

The letters that Vesper carried — those urgent letters that arrived at Marrowmile at the same time — were, in different handwriting and different ink and on different paper, the same letter. Each general had told each king the same thing in nearly the same words: *"Your Majesty, the eastern crossing is the choke point. The kingdom rises and falls with you. If you fall, the kingdom falls. We must protect you."*

Pumble read his letter alone in the library tower. He set it down on the long oak table next to the scroll he had been about to reshelve. He stared at it for a long time, long enough that the morning light through the east window slid across the table from one side of the letter to the other. He had known, in some abstract way, that this was true of being a king. He had not, until that letter, *felt* it in his chest. He had not understood, until that letter, that the entire game of being a

kingdom was *protect the king or end the game*. He had thought it was about armies. It is about armies. It is also, more deeply and more inconveniently, about him.

He understood, then, why he could only move one square at a time.

A king who could run would be lost in a week. A king who could leap would be cornered by Tuesday. The slowness was not a limitation; it had never been a limitation. The slowness was the gift. It was the architectural feature of the entire game — the thing that let the rest of the pieces, the queen who ran and the bishops who swept and the knights who jumped and the rooks who marched in straight lines, *organise themselves around him*. If he stayed still, they could move. If he moved carefully, they could move faster. He was the centre of the gravity. He was the piece they were protecting because the protection was the entire purpose. He had thought, until that letter, that the kingdom existed to defend him because he was important. He understood now, sitting at the long oak table with the light moving across the paper, that he was important because the kingdom needed something to defend, and that the king's slowness made the defending possible. The two facts were, in the end, the same fact, told from different sides.

He cried, briefly, sitting at the long oak table. Then he stood up. He took one careful step to the shelf. He put the scroll back where it belonged. Then he took one careful step to his writing desk. He sat down. He wrote one careful sentence.

"Cousin. I have just been asked to reinforce my eastern crossing. I will do it. I am sorry."

Across the river, at the same hour, Sable read his version of the same letter in the maze-garden. He read it standing up, between two hedges, with the garden shears still in his free hand. He read it twice. He did not cry — he is not the crying kind, and he had not been, even as a child — but he set the shears down on the hedge-edge and he sat on the bench he kept at the maze's centre for exactly this kind of moment, and he stayed there for what one of the gardeners later described as a long time.

He understood, then, what the maze-garden had been teaching him his entire life.

The maze was not a maze for him to walk through. The maze was a *defensive geometry* — a slow careful structure that the gardener-uncles had been growing for three hundred years to make the palace approachable only by people who would not hurry. He had always thought the maze was beautiful. It was beautiful. It was also a kingdom protecting its king by being slow on purpose, by being impossible to rush through, by forcing every visitor to move the way he had been taught to move — one careful step at a time, one hedge at a time, one path at a time.

The cannot-enter-check rule was not an arbitrary prohibition. It was the same rule the maze enforced. *You do not walk into the danger. You stop one square short of it. You let the others step in for you, if they can. If they cannot, you go around. But you do not walk in.* He had been practising the rule for thirty-seven years and had not, until that morning at the bench in the maze's centre, understood that he had been practising it. The understanding did not change the practice. It only named it.

He wrote one sentence, in his even hand, before he went inside to call the general.

"Cousin. I have just been asked to reinforce my eastern crossing. I will do it. I am also sorry."

The two letters crossed in the post.

The reinforcements arrived on both sides. The outposts both held. The river crossing did not change hands — which is to say, it did not change hands in *either direction*, which is to say, both armies fought to a tired standstill, and several hundred soldiers went home that spring who would otherwise have not.

Neither king has ever told this story publicly.

Pumble, when asked about the bad winter, says: *"It was cold."*

Sable, when asked about the bad winter, says: *"It was cold for everyone."*

But each year, on the anniversary of those two letters that crossed in the post, both kings independently write each other an extra Sunday letter. Always the same one.

It says: *"Still here. Still sorry. Still writing."*

The letters are short. They do not need to be long. Each is one careful step, taken once a year, by a king who learned at thirty-seven what the king-rule actually was.



Back in the academy hall, this morning, the children have asked about the bad winter only obliquely. They have asked, instead, about Sunday letters and cheekbones and how it can possibly be that two kings are also cousins, which is a question whose answer is technically simple and emotionally not. Captain Castle has answered some of the questions himself, in his short way. The kings have answered the rest.

Now, for the last ten minutes of the visit, Captain Castle pushes himself off the doorframe and walks to the chalkboard.

"Both of you," he says to the kings, with affection. "Show them how a king moves."

Pumble stands. He smooths the front of his green coat — a gesture he has been making, by his own private count, since he was nine. He looks at the square tiles of the academy hall floor, and he takes one careful step from his throne towards the chalkboard. He pauses. He takes one more. He pauses. He takes one more. Six steps. Six pauses. He arrives at the chalkboard. He turns. He bows, slightly, to the children, the way he bows to his apprentices every morning when they enter the library.

"That," he says, "is a king's morning walk. It is also a king's afternoon walk. And — if I am being honest about it — a king's evening walk."

The children laugh, quietly.

Sable stands. He does not smooth anything. He does not adjust his coat. He simply walks the same six careful steps from his throne to the chalkboard. He pauses between each one. He arrives. He stands next to Pumble. He does not bow. He nods at the children with the same nod he uses for the gardeners when they arrive in the morning, which is the only nod he has.

"That," he says, "is the same morning walk. In a different garden."

Captain Castle taps the chalkboard. "One square at a time. Any direction. Never two squares in one move. That is how every king in this game moves, on every turn, for every kingdom, in every match." He turns to the kings. "Now show them check."

Pumble and Sable look at each other. They have done this before. They know the choreography.

Sable takes one careful step forward — towards Pumble. Pumble looks at the space between them, and at the place his foot would land if he kept walking towards Sable. He does not take the step. He stops. He turns. He takes one careful step *to the side*, instead — out of the line that Sable's step has drawn.

"That," Captain Castle says, "is what a king does when he cannot enter check. He stops before the danger. He goes around. He does not walk in. Not ever. Not even when he is angry. Not even when he is brave. The king stops."

The children think about this. Several of them look at their own feet, the way they had earlier, and then look up at the kings as if reconsidering some private question about cowardice and bravery and which of the two looks like which from a distance.

Captain Castle taps the chalkboard once more. "And now," he says, "the last thing about the king."

Pumble walks one careful step back towards his throne. Sable walks one careful step back towards his. Captain Castle reaches into his coat and produces a small cluster of pawn pieces — eight of them — which he sets on the floor around the two thrones in a loose circle, each pawn between the kings and the children.

"The pawns," he says, "stand where they stand because the king is behind them. The bishops sweep, the knights jump, the rooks march, the queen runs. They do all that *for* the kings. The kings move one careful step at a time, and never into danger, *because the kings are the piece every other piece is protecting*. Lose the king and the game ends. So the king moves carefully. So the king lets the others move fast. That is the trade. That is the rule. That is the whole game in one sentence."

He turns to the kings.

"Cousins. One more time. Together."

Pumble and Sable walk one careful step towards the children, then stop. They walk one step back. They sit down on their thrones. They look across at each other across the foot of empty space between the chairs.

The girl with the fork-pin in her hair says, "So you both move slowly, all the time, on purpose."

"Yes," says Pumble.

"Yes," says Sable.

"And you can't help each other on the board."

"No," says Pumble, more quietly.

"No," says Sable.

"But you write letters on Sundays."

Pumble looks at Sable. Sable looks at Pumble. Sable lifts the single eyebrow again — the eyebrow that has, over the years, become the most reliable expressive instrument either of them possesses.

"Yes," says Pumble. "We write letters on Sundays. One careful sentence at a time, mostly — at least for one of us. On Sundays we are not opposite kings. On Sundays we are just two old men who have been moving slowly together for a long time. The board doesn't get those Sundays. The board only gets the weekdays. We keep the rest."

The children file out for the next class. Pumble waves at them as they go. Sable raises one hand.

Captain Castle, standing by the door, watches the kings. They sit in their thrones for one quiet moment longer, side by side, looking at each other across the foot of empty space. Then Pumble stands. He takes one careful step towards the door. Then another. Then another. Sable follows, one careful step behind, the way he has been following the small steady gravity of his cousin's particular brand of nervousness for sixty-two years now.

Across the river, the scrolls are waiting on the long oak table. Across the river, the topiary is waiting at the bench at the maze's centre. The two kings will go back to work this afternoon, the way they go back to work every afternoon, the way they have been going back to work since they were children, the way they will go back to work until they cannot.

The grandmother, who was right about most things, was right about this: one is loud and one is quiet, and they will both move one careful step at a time, and so will their kingdoms.

One step. Always deliberate. Same step. Different garden. Different boards. Same king-rule.

The Letter Game is still going. Sunday is in three days.

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/gambittales/king-pumble-and-king-sable>

Lady Skewer



- "II"

- "III"
- "IV"
- "V"
- "VI"
- "VII"
- "VIII"
- "IX"
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- "XI"
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Chapter 6 — The Lady Who Finishes the Line

The southwest wall of the academy library has a long oak table that nobody else uses, because nobody else needs a long oak table to teach chess. Lady Skewer needs one. She has, laid out along its polished surface this morning, an entire roast-skewer set — five thin metal pins of graduated length, polished to a slightly defensive mirror, arranged in a precise row like the keys of a small silver flute. Beside the pins, on a small wooden board, she has placed three pieces from a chess set: a rook, a queen, and a king. The king is in the front. The queen is sitting three squares behind, watching.

A small student, eleven years old, leans on the edge of the table to get a better look. He has a green scarf and a small ink-blot on one cuff that he has not yet noticed. He says, "Lady Skewer, what are the cooking skewers for?"

Lady Skewer picks up the longest pin. She holds it lightly — not like a weapon, but more like a tool whose properties she has always understood at the level of muscle memory. She lays the pin flat on the board so that one end touches the king and the other end touches the queen. The pin's silver length bridges the two pieces in a single visible line.



She bows slightly when she says it. She bows slightly when she says most things, which the children at the academy have come to find oddly reassuring. She is in her late twenties and she looks a little like a duchess on holiday — a clean linen tunic, polished boots in impeccable condition, dark hair pinned at the back of her neck with a thin silver clasp. Other teachers at the academy have tried, occasionally over the years, to seem more relaxed in front of the children. Lady Skewer has never seen the point of the exercise.

"The king is in the front," she continues, in her measured way. "The queen is behind. They are joined by the line. If I attack the king" — and she taps the pin's tip gently against the wooden base of the king — "the king has to move. That is simply what kings do when they are attacked. They get out of the way of the thing pointing at them."

The boy nods, slowly, following the geometry.

"And when the king has moved," she says, "what do you suppose happens to the queen?"

The boy considers the board for a long moment. He says, finally, "She's just sitting there."

"Yes," says Lady Skewer, with quiet approval. "She is sitting there. With nothing in front of her. With my pin still pointing at her along the same line that ran through the king."

She smiles, politely, courteously, and waits for the boy to catch up to the full implication of the geometry she has just laid out for him.

She was not born knowing the line. She was born into a family that made cooking skewers, which is a different thing in most respects, though it turned out, much later, to be the same thing in the one respect that mattered.

Skewer House — her grandfather's name for the family workshop — sits in the foothills of the eastern range, about three days' walk from the Slow Lake. The Slow Lake, as it happens, is also the village Sir Pinwell came from, though neither of them knew this until they were both grown and had begun comparing childhood landscapes over evening tea at the academy. Adela Marrowstone of Skewer House grew up watching her grandfather hammer skewers, her father hammer skewers, her mother run the family books with quiet exactness, and her aunt manage the shipping crew with rather less quiet exactness. She was, until the age of eleven, a perfectly normal Marrowstone child. Competent. Polite. Slightly bored by the rhythm of small-town craft.

Then, at eleven, she became *interested*.

She used the word "interested" the way other children would use the word "amazing." It was the strongest word she allowed herself, and she rationed it carefully. What she had become interested in was the *line*. She had watched ten thousand skewers being made over the course of her childhood, and she had noticed something the rest of her family had long ago stopped noticing: a skewer, considered as a tool, has a peculiar property. The front of it pierces. The back of it supports. The line between is what makes the whole thing work as a single object. If the back of the skewer is heavy, the front of the skewer has to go where the back sends it.

Adela began to look for the line in other places. She watched her aunt's shipping crew loading barrels onto a cart. A heavy barrel placed behind a light one pushed the light one forward, whether the light one liked it or not. She watched her mother sort the family accounts in the evening. A number written in one column changed a number written three lines down in another. She watched her father's apprentice carry a long wooden board through a narrow doorway — the back of the board, swinging slowly, decided where the front of the board had to point.

She wrote, at twelve, a notebook entry that her family still keeps on a shelf at Skewer House:

The piece behind decides what the piece in front has to do. If the piece behind is heavier, the piece in front has to move. The piece in front does not get to choose.



She was sixteen the first time she saw an actual chess game in progress. Two old men at a fair, playing on a board outside a bakery, with a small crowd of older onlookers murmuring around them. She watched for nearly an hour and understood most of what was happening not at all. She understood the bishop instantly. The bishop moved along a line — that was all she needed to know about the bishop, and the rest could come later. When the bishop attacked the rook, and the rook had to move out of its way, and the queen was sitting three squares behind on the same diagonal, she saw what was about to happen several beats before either of the players did.

She walked back to Skewer House. The walk took her ten days through autumn weather. She told her grandfather, who was that day hammering skewer number nine hundred and seventy-four thousand, that she was leaving in the morning to become a chess player.

Her grandfather considered this announcement. He set down the hammer carefully on his workbench. He said, "Adela. Have you ever played chess?"

"No," she said. "But I understand the line. It is the same line."

He looked at her for a long, slow moment. Then he reached for the longest skewer on his workbench — a polished outdoor-roasting pin, the kind they sold for cooking lamb at festivals — and put it gently into her hand.

"Take this," he said. "If anyone ever asks you what you are doing, hold this up. People will understand."

She took it.

She walked to the capital across the autumn countryside. It took her ten days. Her boots were new at the start of the journey and not at the end of it. The academy gates were taller than she had imagined, and the courtyard inside was smaller. There was nobody on hand to receive her. The academy did not formally admit students; you simply turned up at the door, and someone, eventually, agreed to sit down and play with you.

A clerk at a high wooden desk asked her name without looking up.

"Lady Skewer," she said.



The clerk wrote it down without comment. He still did not look up.

She unfastened her satchel. She drew out her grandfather's cooking skewer and held it up — silver, thin, a little over a foot long, polished to a mirror at the tip. The clerk looked up. He laughed once, briefly. Adela did not. After a moment, the clerk stopped laughing.

He found her a board, and an opponent, and she played three games against the same patient junior master. She lost the first one, because she did not yet know the proper names of the pieces. She drew the second one, because she had figured most of them out by the end. She won the third one decisively, with a bishop and a rook, by attacking a queen and capturing the king behind it on a diagonal so clean that her opponent set his pieces back up, looked at her across the board, and said, "Do that again, please."

The academy master had wandered over during the third game. He watched the final ten moves from over her shoulder with the unhurried attention of a man who has seen many opening encounters. When the game ended he stood quietly for a long moment, his hands clasped politely behind his back. Then he said, to nobody in particular, "Oh. Good. Another one."

He had been doing his job for twenty-seven years by then. He had seen many of these. He still smiled when he saw one.

Adela bowed slightly. She put the cooking skewer back into her satchel — specifically into the velvet pouch her aunt had stitched for her on the night before she left, which she had not, until that moment, used for anything at all. She has used it every day since.

She has been Lady Skewer ever since.

This morning, in the academy library, with the cooking skewers laid out and the boy in the green scarf still looking at her, she does what she always does when she teaches the skewer pattern for the very first time. She moves the king-piece off its square, slowly, so the boy can see exactly what happens at each step of the motion. She lifts the pin clear of the king. She lays the pin's tip against the queen.

"The line," she says, "did not move. *I* did not move. The *king* moved. And now the queen is sitting at the end of the line, where the king used to be in front of her."

The boy looks at the queen.

"Take it," Lady Skewer says, politely.

The boy reaches over and picks up the queen with careful fingers. He sets it aside on a square of empty wood.

"That," Lady Skewer says, "is the skewer."



Lady Skewer continues, as if she has been addressing the whole room from the start. "You will see this pattern again. You will see it on diagonals. You will see it on ranks. You will see it on files. You will see it with bishops, with rooks, with queens. You may, sometimes, see it with a king in the front of the line — and when you see that, remember: the king *must* move. There is no choice. That is the absolute version of the pattern."

She places the king back on the board. She lays the pin against the king once more, returning the demonstration to its starting position.

"The piece in front," she says, "does not get to choose. That is the whole craft."

A girl, eight years old, with a fork-shaped pin in her hair, asks the question that always arrives at this point: "Lady Skewer, but what if the front piece is small? What if it isn't the king or the queen? What if it's a pawn?"

Lady Skewer considers this question. She likes it. She looks at the longest cooking skewer on the table for a moment, drawing the analogy together in her mind before speaking.

"You would not skewer a single mushroom alone," she says. "You need something worth moving. If the front piece is small, the line still exists — but nobody minds losing the front piece, so the line does no work. You skewer when the front is valuable. That is the rule of the kitchen, and it is also the rule of the board."

The girl writes this down in a small notebook. The notebooks at this academy are spreading, Lady Skewer thinks, the way ivy spreads on a stone wall — slowly at first, then all at once, and never quite reversibly.

After the children file out for lunch, Lady Skewer remains at the long oak table, packing the cooking skewers back into their flat leather case in their precise order of length. Sir Pinwell pushes off the doorframe and crosses the library to her.

He stops at the table. He looks at the chessboard, which still has the rook and the queen on it, and at the empty square where the king used to stand.

He says, "Clean."

"Thank you," she says.

He nods. After a moment he says, "The lantern was watching. From the gallery."

Lady Skewer looks up at the gallery — a small wooden balcony along the south wall of the library, where the older students sometimes sit and read. It is empty now. But it would not have been empty during the lesson, if Pinwell had taken the trouble to notice.

"What did she think?" Lady Skewer says.

"You will have to ask her yourself."

"I will."

She buckles the leather case shut. She slides the case carefully into her satchel. Her grandfather's cooking skewer, the one she has carried since she was sixteen, lives in a separate velvet pouch tied to her belt; she pats it gently with the fingers of one hand, the way some people pat a dog they have known for a very long time.

She says, half to Pinwell and half to nobody in particular, "She thinks the simultaneous is more elegant than the sequential."

"I know," says Pinwell.

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/gambittales/lady-skewer>

Queen Vesper



The thing you have to understand about Vesper, before anything else about her, is that she does not like the word "queen." She will use it when the occasion requires it. She has been asked, many times, to use it for the sake of formality. There are certain royal ceremonies in which not using it would constitute an actual diplomatic offence. But if you watch her closely during any conversation that lasts longer than three sentences, you'll notice that she finds a way to refer to herself as something else — *ranger*, *messenger*, *the one who arrives*. She prefers verbs to titles, generally, and she prefers titles that describe what a person does to titles that describe what a person sits on. The title *queen* makes her feel like she should be sitting somewhere indoors.

She has never been particularly good at sitting indoors.

You will see her, most often, on a road. She wears a heavy travelling cloak — warm-amber when she serves the white-board kingdom, cool-charcoal when she serves the black-board kingdom — and a pair of boots so well-walked that the soles can tell you which roads have ice and which have only mud. She walks fast. She skis when there is snow on the ground. Occasionally she runs, although she finds running undignified and only does it when geography insists. She arrives at places before anyone particularly expects her to, and she tends to leave again before anyone has finished thanking her for arriving.

This is the story of how she became the queen of both kingdoms at the same time, although she will tell you, if you ask, that it is really a story about a long winter and two letters that got mixed up at the post office in Marrowmile.

It happened the winter she was nineteen, before her cloak was warm-amber, before anyone had thought to call her *Queen*. Her name was Vesper then too — she had always been Vesper — but no one *announced* it on her arrival anywhere. People just yelled it out the window when they saw her coming. She was a ranger-messenger in the eastern province of the white-board kingdom, which meant she carried letters between border outposts and the capital across a great many miles of difficult country. She walked. She skied. Her boots were already on their second pair by then, both held together with knots she had tied herself by lamp-light.

The winter was unusually bad that year. The Slow Lake froze over earlier than anyone could remember. The roads filled with snow up to a tall person's knees in the high passes. The post office was, frankly, doing its best, but the whole system depended on rangers like Vesper to fill in the gaps when a sledge couldn't get through and the regular mail-runners had to turn back.

On the second-coldest day of that winter, two urgent letters arrived at the post office in the small town of Marrowmile, where Vesper happened to be drinking tea by the woodstove and arguing under her breath with her boots.

The first letter was addressed: *URGENT. To His Majesty King Pumble. The eastern outpost is overrun. We need reinforcement at the river crossing immediately.*

The second letter was addressed: *URGENT. To His Majesty King Sable. Our eastern outpost is overrun. We need reinforcement at the river crossing immediately.*



You may already see the problem.

The kings were cousins. They still are. They will always be. They led opposing kingdoms — Pumble the white-board kingdom, Sable the black-board kingdom — which meant their armies were, technically and legally, enemies. Their eastern river crossings were on opposite sides of the same river. The same river. Two outposts. Two enemies. One winter. One ranger.

Both letters needed to arrive within twelve hours of being written, or the strategic situation would tilt and the river crossing would shift to whichever side the messages happened to reach first. The river-crossing strategist who had drafted them — a tactician named Strait, who would later be promoted and then immediately retire because of this exact night — had not coordinated with anyone on the timing. She had simply assumed that the post office would handle the delivery question on its end. She had not realised that the two kings' couriers were, in practical fact, the same courier.

Vesper finished her tea in two careful sips. She read both letters. She looked at her boots, considering the distances they were about to be asked to cover.

She said one word out loud to the postmistress. The word was: *"Right."*

Then she did three things, in order, very quickly.

First, she put on every coat she owned, which was two coats stacked one over the other for double warmth.

Second, she stole a horse from the postmistress's neighbour. She would later send a very polite written letter of apology, and the horse's owner would later be paid back with interest plus a basket of apples. But at the time, the stealing was the point, and the apology would have to wait until after the river crossing held.

Third, she chose a route that no sensible courier in possession of a map would have chosen on the same day.

The two outposts were thirty miles apart by any reasonable measure. Standard courier routes followed the safe roads, which followed the long curve of the Slow Lake around its southern shore. Standard routes would have taken sixteen hours to reach one outpost and twenty-four hours to reach the other — meaning, in cold practical terms, that one king would get his message and the other would not, and one army would be reinforced and the other would be lost, and the river crossing would tilt in favour of whichever kingdom happened to be reached first.



Vesper looked at the map for a long thoughtful moment. She did not follow the curve. She went *across* — straight over the frozen Slow Lake at its narrowest point, then diagonal across the open plain to the north of the lake, then straight up along the frozen river ice to the first outpost. Three movements. One trip. Both outposts.

She arrived at King Pumble's outpost at dawn with frost in her eyebrows. She handed over the first letter without dismounting. She did not wait for thanks. She turned the horse and went diagonally back across the open plain — at a different angle this time — and arrived at King Sable's outpost three hours later. She handed over the second letter. She did not wait for thanks at the second outpost either.

Both kings sent reinforcements at the same hour, although neither knew the other was doing it. The river crossing tilted neither way that winter. Both outposts held through the spring thaw. The winter eventually ended, the way winters do. The horse, which was a remarkable horse, was returned to its owner two weeks later with a long written apology and the promised basket of apples.

That following spring, when both kings independently asked who had carried the letters that had held the crossing, the postmistress at Marrowmile gave the same answer to both messengers who came asking: *"The ranger-messenger. The one who walks all routes. The one who arrives first."*

Both kings wrote to her. Independently. Almost identically. They both wanted her to come and serve at the capital. Pumble wanted her in the white-board palace. Sable wanted her in the black-board palace. Both letters were polite. Both letters made it clear that the position was an honour.

She wrote back to both kings. Her letters were also almost identical to each other. They said:

Thank you. I do not wish to live at a palace. If you need me, I will come. I will move in any direction. I will arrive first. But I would rather stay near a road.

There followed a long winter of letters and a longer spring of quiet diplomatic negotiation. The two kings, who were cousins, eventually agreed — after careful adjustments to two separate sets of court protocols, and after considerable consultation with both sets of legal advisors — that Vesper would serve both kingdoms in a single arrangement. She would not be claimed by either kingdom. She would not be required to swear loyalty to either board. She would be the queen of *neither* and the queen of *both*, which is to say: she would appear when she was needed, on whichever side, and she would not be a question of loyalty so much as a question of geography.

This arrangement is, technically speaking, against the rules of chess. Chess says there is a white queen and a black queen, and the two are separate pieces serving separate armies. But Vesper's deal is older than the formal rules of chess, and the rule book has decided, with diplomatic tact, not to argue about it. She is, in fact, one archetype with two cloaks: warm-amber when she serves the white-board kingdom, cool-charcoal when she serves the black-board kingdom. Same Vesper. Same boots. Different cloak.

When Captain Castle came, in time, to collect cast members for his children's academy, he wrote to Vesper at the post office where she still received her mail. The letter was three sentences long. The reply was one sentence: *"I'll be there before the next sentence finishes."* She was. Castle later said this was, frankly, more efficient than the alternative of introducing himself in person.



She visits the academy whenever she is needed and not a single moment before. She does not have a permanent seat in the building — Captain Castle offered her one, in writing, and she wrote back politely declining. *"I don't sit,"* she had added at the bottom of the letter. *"Thank you, though."*

When she arrives at the academy, she does so in three movements: across the courtyard, diagonally up the stairs, straight into whichever room the children happen to be in that afternoon. The children, by now, know her by the sound of her boots on the stone before they have actually seen her cloak come through the door.

When she teaches, she does not explain. She demonstrates.

On her very first visit she walked to the demonstration board, looked at the position Captain Castle had set up — a white king in serious trouble in the corner of the board, no defenders anywhere nearby — and asked the children directly, "Where is the king in danger?"

A boy in the back said, "h1."

"Where would help him?"

The boy considered the board for a long moment. "e4? Or maybe h4?"

"From where?"

"From... anywhere along those squares."

Vesper moved her queen from a1 to the defending diagonal that covered h1 in a single uninterrupted motion. The king was suddenly safe. The whole defensive geometry had rearranged itself in one move.



"Any direction," she said. "Any distance. First to arrive. That is the whole job."

The children watched her cloak — warm-amber that day — settle back into its travelling folds as she stepped away from the board. Captain Castle, watching from the side of the room with his hands behind his back, looked extremely pleased and tried, with limited success, not to show it.

She still does not like the word "queen."

If you ask her what she actually is, when the conversation is private and nobody is taking notes, she will say:

"I'm the one who arrives. That's the whole job."

And then she will look at her boots, which are now in their fourth pair, and she will go.

Sometimes, when a class has ended and Vesper is on her way out, a child will catch up to her in the long corridor and ask the question that lies under most of the questions about her: "What's it like to be the strongest piece on the board?"

Vesper will stop walking. She will consider — briefly — whether to answer the question that was asked, or the question that lies beneath it. She has been asked this question enough times to know they are not always the same question.

She will say, after a measured pause: "It's like being the one who is asked. That's the part nobody tells you in advance. The strongest piece is the *most asked*. You arrive first because you can, yes, but you arrive first because someone needs you to. Don't watch me. Watch the king. He's the one in trouble. I'm just the one who got the letter."

Then she will tighten her cloak across her shoulders against the corridor draft. She will nod at the child once. She will go diagonally down the corridor, then straight out the door, then across the courtyard at her usual fast walk, on to whatever road needs her next.

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/gambittales/queen-vesper>

Sir Pinwell



In a small village at the edge of the Slow Lake, where the lake's mist clung to the rooftops most mornings, there lived a bishop named Pinwell who did not enjoy speaking very much. He worked at the village library, which was the only library in the district and the only building taller than the bakery, and he had worked there for so many years that the floorboards had learned the precise weight of his footsteps and stopped complaining about it.

The library had three floors and exactly four hundred and eleven books, a number Pinwell had counted twice on two separate winters to be certain of the inventory. He enjoyed the counting almost as much as he enjoyed the reading itself, although this was the sort of confession a person only ever made inside a building where nobody else was listening.

He arranged the collection by his own peculiar method, in straight rows ordered by the colour of the spines. The retired librarian who had originally trained him had called this method *wrong* in a tone Pinwell still remembered, several years later, on his less confident afternoons. Pinwell kept doing it his way regardless, because the colour-ordering settled something in his chest that the alphabetical system never had. Occasionally a visitor would ask him why he bothered to keep such a quiet building so meticulously tidy when nobody ever came to read in it. "I keep it tidy," Pinwell would say, "in case somebody arrives." Then he would return to the rows, satisfied to have addressed the question without quite answering it.

Years of placing books just so had taught him to notice something the retired librarian had apparently missed entirely. Certain books, he had discovered, seemed to *hold* the others upright. A small handbook of insects had wedged itself between two enormous atlases on the second floor, and although the atlases were too large and self-important to need any assistance staying upright, Pinwell had once tried to slide the handbook free as an experiment, and the atlases had tipped inward immediately, as if their dignity had been quietly underwritten by a book a tenth their size and considerably less impressive in subject matter.

Pinwell did not give the pattern a name, because he was not, by temperament, the sort of person who named things. He simply walked past it each morning, made sure the handbook was straight on the shelf, and went on with the careful business of the rows.

It would, in the end, take a child to give it a name.



One winter morning, while the lake outside was performing its quiet annual trick of freezing in patches that resembled lily pads, a girl named Inkling came into the library. She was about eight years old, and she wore a coat that had clearly been chosen for someone with broader shoulders than hers, and her hair appeared to be having an argument with itself in two different directions. She had come, although she would not have admitted this even under interrogation, to look for a book about whales. She wandered the second-floor shelves picking books up and replacing them in the wrong positions with the cheerful unconcern of someone who could not yet read the colour codes.

Pinwell tried, with considerable internal effort, not to mind. He was, after all, a librarian, and librarians are expected to be patient about the very specific category of behaviour that ruins their week.

After the seventh wrong placement, Inkling reached for a green book wedged between two enormous red volumes near the window. The green book was a thick one — *A History of the Slow Lake*, recently re-bound — and she tugged at it the way she would have tugged at a stuck drawer at home: with confidence, and with the assumption that confidence was sufficient. The book did not budge. She tugged harder. The book continued to hold.

"This one's stuck," said Inkling, looking up at him with an expression of practical complaint. "Why won't it come out?"

Pinwell came over slowly, the way he came over to everything, conserving motion as a matter of long habit. He studied the green book and the two red volumes that pressed against it from either side, considering the geometry the shelf had quietly worked out on its own.

"It can't move," he said.

"Why?"

"Because if it did," said Pinwell, selecting his words the way other people select chocolates from an assorted box, "the two larger books on either side would lean inward and topple. The little book is *holding* them."

"So I can't ever read it?"

"You can read it. You simply can't *take* it. Not while the others are watching."

Inkling considered this proposition with the gravity of someone who had never until that exact moment imagined that a book might be performing a job other than the obvious one. The whole arrangement struck her as profoundly unfair, and at the same time, in a way she could not have articulated, profoundly interesting.

She sat down on the floor in front of the green book and opened it where it stood, which Pinwell found resourceful. She read about whales — there were no whales in *A History of the Slow Lake*, but the book did contain a long chapter on eels, which were almost as good when one was eight years old and prepared to be flexible. She read for an entire hour without moving. Pinwell brought her a small cup of tea, because that is what librarians do, and he set it down beside her without comment so that she could keep reading uninterrupted.

When she finally left, in the blue half-light of late afternoon, she stopped at the door and turned back to face him. "Mr. Pinwell," she said, "that book is *pinned*."



The word was new to him in this particular usage. He had heard *pinned* before, of course — it was what tailors did with cloth and what botanists did with butterflies — but he had never previously heard the word used to mean *held still by what is beside*. He turned the new meaning over in his quiet mind for the rest of the afternoon, the way one turns a smooth stone in a pocket while thinking about something unrelated.

That evening, after closing the library and walking home along the lake path in the dim, he took out a small notebook and a pencil. He drew the green book. He drew the two red ones on either side, larger and slightly looming. He labelled the green book *cannot move*. He labelled the others *holding it still*. Then, after some consideration, he wrote one word at the top of the page in his careful capitals: *PIN*.

Over the following week, he walked the rows of the library with the notebook open at his elbow. He found three more places where a small book was pinned by larger neighbours, and one place where the pinned object was not a book at all but a wooden bookmark he had once left between two volumes, which had since wedged itself in a way that meant neither volume could be opened without dislodging the bookmark in question. He drew that, too, with the same careful labels. He used Inkle's word in every drawing, because Inkle's word, he had decided, was the correct one.

He did not yet know that chess players used the same word for the same pattern. He did not know that bishops, in particular, were rather good at making the pattern happen — that a bishop standing on a long diagonal could pin a knight against a queen, and that the knight, once pinned in this way, would not move without surrendering the queen behind it. He did not know any of that. He simply noticed.

Three winters passed. The handbook of insects remained wedged between the two atlases. The green book had been read by Inkleling four separate times, always while seated on the floor, and twice with a second cup of tea.

On the morning of the fourth winter, the library door opened with more ceremony than usual, and a chunky cheerful rook in a brass-buttoned waistcoat walked in. He looked around at the rows for a long moment, nodding slowly, as if at something he had hoped to find but had not been entirely sure existed. He introduced himself as Captain Castle. He explained that he had heard, in the way that important things are sometimes heard, that there was a librarian in the Slow Lake village who could see *pins* in books that nobody else seemed to notice.

Pinwell set down his cup of tea on the desk. He considered briefly what one was supposed to say in moments of this particular kind, and decided, as he usually did, that the answer was almost always the same.

"I suppose," he said, "I should bring my notebook."



The chessboard, Pinwell discovered over his first weeks at the academy, was much like his old library — only the rows were considerably shorter, and the pieces moved instead of staying where you placed them, which took some getting used to.

He met his first class of children on a Tuesday afternoon in the long hall with the southern windows. Captain Castle introduced him to the assembled group as *the librarian who sees pins*, which Pinwell privately felt was a touch dramatic but did not correct in front of the children. The children watched him in the particular way that children watch a person they have not yet decided about, which involves a kind of skeptical patience that adults rarely manage. One of them — a small fox in a green scarf — had brought her own notebook to the lesson, a courtesy Pinwell felt deserved acknowledgement, although he settled for a small nod in her direction.

He set up the demonstration position himself, slowly and without commentary. A white bishop on c4. A black knight on f6. A black queen on h8, sitting tall behind the knight, watching the whole diagonal without appearing to watch anything at all.

"Consider this knight," said Pinwell. He did not raise his voice, and yet the children leaned in slightly without noticing they were doing it. "The knight is allowed to move. There are several squares it could go to. It would like, in particular, to go to e4, where it could threaten the bishop."

A child in the front row, possibly a hedgehog, said, "So it'll go there?"

"It would like to," said Pinwell. "But it cannot."

"Why not?"

"Because of what is behind it."

He pointed, very slowly, to the queen on h8. The children's eyes followed the line of his finger along the diagonal from the knight to the queen, three squares back, with nothing between them but air and the bishop's quiet line of sight.

"If the knight moves," he said, "the bishop will see all the way down the diagonal — and there is the queen, three times the knight's value, with nothing in the way. The knight cannot move without losing the queen behind it."

The room was quiet for a moment, in the particular kind of quiet that means children are doing arithmetic in their heads. The fox with the notebook tilted her head to one side.

"So the knight is doing a job by *not moving*?" she said.

Pinwell considered the phrasing. He liked the way she had said it; she had skipped past three intermediate steps that he himself would have needed to walk through in order to reach the same place.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly that. The knight is holding the queen up. Like a small book holding two larger books still."

The fox wrote *small book holding two larger books still* in her notebook, and she underlined the sentence twice for good measure. Captain Castle, watching the proceedings from the corner of the hall with his hands clasped behind his back and his expression carefully neutral, decided then and there that the partnership was going to work very well indeed.



He still does not enjoy speaking very much.

But when he speaks, he speaks slowly, and he is almost always correct in what he says, and the things he says are usually about pieces that cannot move because of what is *beside* them. The children at the academy have, over the months, stopped looking surprised when he says so. They have started seeing the pattern themselves, on the board and sometimes on the kitchen table at home, which is the only kind of teaching that ever really finishes.

After every lesson, when the children have gone home for the evening and the lamps in the academy hall have been turned low for the night, Pinwell folds the board carefully and sets the pieces back in their starting rows. He cannot help himself. He is, after all, still a librarian; he has simply moved his library into a smaller space, with thirty-two volumes that occasionally hold each other up.

Sometimes the fox with the notebook stays behind after the others have left. She sits cross-legged on the floor beside the folded board, and she will ask, "Why this pattern, Mr. Pinwell? Why this particular one?"

And Pinwell will consider his words, the way he always considers his words, weighing each one against several others before settling on it, and he will say:

"Some things can't move because of what is beside them. It isn't a punishment. It is just a fact. The trick is in seeing it before the piece does — and helping it stay where it is, until you have time to think."

The fox writes that down too, in her careful hand. Pinwell glances, briefly, at the notebook in her hands — which is now in its third volume, like his own — and feels, in a way he would never say aloud, perfectly satisfied with the arrangement of things. He closes the board. He goes home.

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The Glass Lantern (Bella the Lanternkeeper)



In the smaller of the academy's two classrooms, on an afternoon in early winter, there are three lanterns burning on the front table and no other source of light in the entire room. The windows have all been shuttered against the grey afternoon. The door is closed. The children sit in a half-circle on the polished floorboards, knees drawn up to their chests, watching with the kind of attention that does not need to be requested.

At the front of the room, the Glass Lantern stands between the burning lanterns. She is small — not much taller than the bigger children at the back — and she is dressed entirely in soft grey wool, with a thin silver chain around her neck from which a tiny round magnifying lens hangs at chest height. Her hair is white and short and tucked carefully behind both ears. She is, in this particular room, on this particular afternoon, the calmest thing.

She lights the first of her three lanterns. She does not announce that she is doing so. She simply touches the candle to the wick and a small steady flame catches and begins its work. The lantern itself is a strange shape — not a square box, but a glass shell with two flat angled sides and curved sides between them, each cut with the precision of a thing made by hand over many afternoons. The light, when it falls from the lantern, falls in two directions at once. Two clear bright beams, one going to the left of the room and the other going to the right, neither of them spilling sideways or upward.

The children's eyes follow the beams. The beams land on two small wooden chess-pieces that the Glass Lantern has placed, very deliberately, on opposite sides of the room before the children arrived.

The Glass Lantern lifts her hand for attention, although nobody is currently making any sound. She says, in a voice almost lower than the candle's audible hiss:

"Two pieces. One light. Both seen."

She pauses for several seconds. The children wait through the pause. She has trained them, over the eight years of her teaching career, to wait through her pauses without interrupting them. The pauses are part of the teaching.

"This is what we mean," she says, "when we say *double attack*."

She moves to the chessboard at the front of the table with three or four small careful steps. The board has been set up before the children arrived. There is a white bishop on b2 and two black pieces — a rook on h8 and a knight on g7. She points at the bishop with the tip of her index finger, slowly. She does not raise her voice or her finger.

"The bishop sits," she says. "It does not move. It does not jump. It does not advance. It only sits. But it sees" — she traces the long diagonal across the entire board with her finger, slowly — "the rook. And it sees" — she traces a short diagonal — "the knight. Two pieces. One light. Both seen."

The children look at the board. They see it. The room is so completely quiet that the candle on the table actually pops audibly, and a small child near the back of the room jumps very slightly. The Glass Lantern smiles, just barely, in that direction. It is the smile of a person who has been a teacher for a long time and has not stopped enjoying it.



She has not always been a teacher. She was, for forty-five years before the academy found her, a glassmaker.

Her name is Bella, although she has stopped trying to be called Bella here at the academy. She lost that fight to the children eight years ago, and she has not pressed it since. She does not particularly mind. She was born in a small town on the western edge of the kingdom called Marrowmile, where her family had been making windows for four generations of careful glassmakers in succession. Bella was good at windows from an early age. She was also, for reasons her family found mildly worrying without being able to explain why, *interested in light*.

It was not the kind of interest that ends in being a poet about light — she was not romantic about it. She was interested in the *geometry* of light, the precise mathematics of how it bent and bounced. She had spent (her older sister Maren kept careful count for a while, then gave up the counting around her fifteenth year of trying) more than three thousand hours sketching how rays of light passed through different shapes of glass and what they did on the other side. She filled fourteen notebooks over the course of her childhood and early apprenticeship. Maren had stopped commenting on the notebooks the way older sisters eventually stop commenting on most of their younger sisters' chosen obsessions.

Bella was twenty-eight years old when the Marrowmile town council came to her workshop with a problem and a budget.

The council had a real problem to solve. Just outside Marrowmile, on the road to the next town, two streets met at a sharp angle to form a difficult crossroad. The streets were called Long Street and Short Street, which were not romantic names but were accurate ones — Long Street went east for about a mile and a half before it bent, and Short Street went south-east for about three hundred yards before it ended. Both streets were narrow. Both had high stone walls on either side. After dark, the corner where the two streets met was the kind of corner where a cart could meet another cart head-on and neither driver would see the other until it was much too late to do anything about it.

There had been three accidents at that corner during the previous winter. One of them had been bad.

The council, which was a sensible council with a reasonable budget, wanted a lantern at the apex of the corner. A single light source, mounted high on a pole, that would illuminate *both streets at the same time*.

They told Bella what the budget was.

Bella said, after a long pause: "Give me three weeks."

She took the budget, walked back to her workshop, and stared at the workshop wall for almost two full days without sketching anything.



The problem she was looking at was geometric in nature. A normal lantern — a candle inside a glass box — lights everything immediately around it equally, in all directions at once. But the council didn't need equal light, and equal light wasn't what would prevent the accidents. They needed *focused* light, in two specific directions. They needed the lantern to *throw* light down Long Street to the east and to *throw* light down Short Street to the south-east, while *not* wasting candle-power illuminating the high stone walls that ran between the two streets.

A normal lantern, mounted at the corner, would have given each street about a third of its available candle-power and wasted the rest on the walls. Bella worked out, on a long sheet of paper covered in careful diagrams, that this was the same as having two-thirds of a candle for the actual job. She did not want to give the council two-thirds of a candle for their money. She wanted to give them two whole candles' worth of light, one for each street. That was the entire job, as she had come to see it.

She designed, over those three weeks of staring and sketching, a glass shell that no Marrowmile glassmaker had ever attempted to make before. It had two flat sides — one facing Long Street, one facing Short Street — and the flat sides were cut at very precise angles so that the candlelight inside reflected off the inside surfaces of the other walls and *focused* itself outward, doubled, in only those two specific directions.

She made the shell in her workshop over the next ten days. She made it twice, because the first one cracked on cooling and was unusable. She mounted the second one at the corner herself, on a wooden scaffold that her sister Maren held steady from below. The council attended a small ceremony at dusk on the evening of the unveiling. They lit the lantern.

Long Street, half a mile to the east, lit up clearly all the way to where it bent. Short Street, three hundred yards to the south-east, lit up clearly all the way to where it ended. The stone walls in between stayed mostly dark, which was fine — nobody walked on the walls.

A cart driver who happened to be passing the corner on his way home said, with feeling: "*Two streets. One light.*"

Bella heard him say it. She wrote it down that night in her notebook by the workshop lamp. She underlined it twice, which she rarely did to anything she wrote.

The Marrowmile crossroad has not had a serious accident since.

Bella made nineteen more lanterns over the next ten years, on commission — for other dangerous crossroads, for harbour entries, for the front gates of public buildings that needed to throw light in unusual directions for specific reasons. She became, in the polite phrase of the time, *the kingdom's two-direction glassmaker*. Some of her lanterns are still in use in their original locations. The original Marrowmile lantern is still hanging at the crossroad where she first mounted it. It has been re-glazed twice over the decades, by Bella herself, in both cases.



When the chess academy began searching for somebody to teach the *double attack* — the tactical pattern where one piece, by sitting in exactly the right square, threatens two enemy pieces along two different lines at the same time — the academy master remembered Bella, after a moment of thought.

He sent her a polite letter on academy stationery. He was sixty-three years old by then and Bella was sixty-five. He had visited Marrowmile once, on a walking holiday twelve years before, and had spent a long evening at the famous crossroad watching the lantern shine in two directions at once. He had remembered the lantern. He had, over the years since, occasionally remembered the lantern at unexpected moments — once, in particular, while teaching a child the bishop-fork pattern and finding himself reaching for a metaphor.

His letter to her said this:

Bella — there is a tactic in chess that has no good teacher. It is when one piece looks down two different roads at the same time. We have nobody here who teaches it well, because most teachers teach moves rather than positions. We need somebody who teaches positions. Who teaches light. Will you come?

Bella, by this point in her own career, had taught one apprentice glassmaker who had moved away to start her own shop in another town. She had been getting bored. She had been sketching, in her notebooks, increasingly geometric drawings that her sister Maren found unsettling to look at. She had been catching herself, in conversations, going quiet at unhelpful moments and forgetting where the conversation had been going.

She wrote back the same day: *Yes.*

She arrived at the academy in early autumn with three lanterns wrapped carefully in soft cloth and a notebook in her bag. The notebook had her grandfather's name written on the inside cover. (Her grandfather had also been a glassmaker, in case you were wondering.) The academy master met her at the gates and walked with her, in companionable silence, all the way to the smaller of the two classrooms.

She set up the lanterns at the front of the room. She lit them. She stood between them, in the doubled light, and waited for the children to file in for their first afternoon lesson.

When they had all sat down on the floor, she said — very quietly — "Two pieces. One light. Both seen."

The room went silent immediately. The academy master, watching from the doorway with growing satisfaction, said afterward that it was the first time he had ever seen Captain Crossfire shut up voluntarily during anyone else's lesson. Captain Crossfire had insisted on attending the Lantern's first session. He had been hopping with anticipation since breakfast. He stopped hopping the precise moment she lit the second lantern.



She has been teaching at the academy for eight years now. The children call her the Glass Lantern. She has stopped trying to be called Bella here, as has been mentioned. She has lost that fight to the children, and she does not press it any longer.

This afternoon, after her lesson has ended and the children have filed out for their next class, she stays in the small classroom for a few minutes to put the lanterns away in their proper cloths. The candles have been blown out. The shutters are still closed against the afternoon. The room smells very faintly of beeswax and warm metal.

A small student — eight years old, with a fork-pin in her hair — has lingered at the door. She is not quite sure whether she is allowed to ask a question after the lesson has officially ended. The Glass Lantern looks up. She nods, once.

The girl says, "How do you find the square?"

The Glass Lantern thinks about the question for a moment. She wraps a lantern in its cloth carefully, the way other people wrap presents on important birthdays.

"You don't find the square," she says, finally. "The square finds you. You set up the position. The square appears."

The girl thinks about this answer for a long moment. She says, "But what if I can't see it?"

"Then you have not set up the position yet."

The girl nods. She runs off to find her friends, satisfied. The Glass Lantern watches her go.

A moment later there is a soft knock at the doorframe of the classroom. Captain Crossfire is standing there, holding two cups of tea carefully balanced. He has, somewhere along the way over the past eight years, learned to knock softly when approaching the Lantern's classroom. He carries the tea carefully. He does not spill it.

"Tea?" he says, at less than half his usual indoor volume.

"Please," says the Glass Lantern.

He sets the cups down on the front table. He sits on a low wooden bench. The Glass Lantern sits beside him on the same bench. The shuttered room is dim now, with only the late winter sun bleeding through the cracks in the shutters in thin gold lines. They drink their tea in silence together for a long minute, which they have learned to do.

Then Crossfire says, "You did the lantern again."

"I did."

"The new ones liked it."

"They did."

He sips his tea. He says, after a measured moment, "The kingdom's quietest teacher."

The Glass Lantern smiles, very faintly. She lifts her cup in a small toast. He lifts his cup in return.

She is the lantern that lit two streets in Marrowmile when she was twenty-eight. She is the most precise teacher in the entire cast at the academy. She is, very quietly, beloved.

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/gambittales/the-glass-lantern>

The Pawn Cohort — Pawn Patrol, Sienna and Bran, Trotter and Trundle, Gable and Garrett



You cannot tell the story of a kingdom by only telling the stories of its kings, its queens, its bishops, and its knights. If you do that, you leave out the *people who actually live in it day-to-day*. The kings and queens know this perfectly well, and have known it for generations. King Pumble has said so, in his own apologetic way, in letters to King Sable on several different occasions over the years. Sable has always agreed, briefly, in the way Sable agrees with most of what Pumble writes him.

The kingdom has, broadly speaking, four regions. Each region sends two pawn-pairs to serve at the capital when the kingdom needs them — which is, in the world of the chessboard, *every single game*. You have probably already met one of them on the board without quite meeting them as people with their own histories. This chapter fixes that small oversight, by introducing the eight pawns of the cohort by name, by pair, and by town of origin.

This is the story of the eight pawns, the four towns, and the long walk they take together from their first square to the eighth rank where their stories may, with luck, change shape entirely.



The Pawn Patrol (Steg and Sten)

The Pawn Patrol are from the border villages on the kingdom's eastern frontier, where winter arrives early and stays long. They are, of all the pawn-pairs serving at the academy, the *most-trained*. Their job, before they were called to serve at the chessboard, was to watch the kingdom's border crossings — the same eastern crossings, in fact, that figured in the bad winter when Queen Vesper rode across the frozen lake on a stolen horse. The Pawn Patrol were posted at one of the outposts that held that winter against the cold and the strategic confusion. They have, on occasion, mentioned this fact. They do not boast about it.

Steg is the older of the two by about six months. He is solid, methodical, and slightly grim by temperament. He believes the word *patrol* is a job description, not a name in the proper sense, and he was deeply suspicious when their unit commander introduced them as *the Pawn Patrol* during their first chess-academy appearance. He has, in the years since, accepted the designation. He has accepted most things in his life with the same quiet shrug.

Sten is six months younger than Steg and approximately twice as cheerful in her resting expression. She doesn't smile during patrols — that would, she insists firmly, be unprofessional in the field — but she smiles plainly afterward, when the watch has ended. She is the one who taught Steg, after considerable effort, to occasionally lean on his halberd instead of standing rigidly to attention through every hour of every shift. She had to teach him this twice, on separate occasions. He is, by his own admission, still working on it.

Both of them speak with the careful gruffness of people who have stood guard in cold weather for a very long time. They are, in the chess kingdom's informal military hierarchy, the most disciplined members of the pawn cohort. Captain Castle introduces them to the children with respect, which is the form of introduction Steg actually prefers.

Their job on the board is to *hold the line*. They are usually placed as the centre pawns — the d-pawn and the e-pawn — and they advance only when ordered to by their king. They do not improvise. They have never improvised. They have, at the academy, twice been asked whether they would consider improvising, and the answer was the same both times.



Sienna and Bran

Sienna and Bran are siblings — fraternal twins, born on the same hour of the same evening — from a farming village called Wheatsetter in the kingdom's southern plain, where the harvest schedule organises most of village life. You may notice the wheat reference in the name of the village. King Sable, who is from the same southern region of the kingdom, would say "*the wheat came in*" about these two if you happened to ask him. He would not elaborate further. He never does.

Sienna is the elder of the twins by twenty-three minutes. She is patient by temperament, the way the season is patient. She has the patience of someone who has watched grain grow over many summers, which is a particular kind of patience that simply cannot be hurried. She is, in fact, slow on purpose during games. Children watching her on the chessboard sometimes find her almost too quiet to follow. Captain Castle, who has played enough games to know better, simply waits her out. Sienna's quiet is the kind that always pays off in the long run if you give it enough turns.

Bran is the younger sibling by twenty-three minutes. He is, in his own calm way, cheerful about most things. He does not sing while working, but he hums sometimes when nobody is listening. He has the cheerfulness of someone who has been to the same harvest festival every year of his life and still looks forward to the next one. He believes — and has said so, on the board, more than once — that pawns are the *backbone* of any properly organised army. He is right about this. He is also not loud about being right.

The siblings dreamed, when they were small children, of becoming queens. This is the standard dream of most pawns, and most pawns do not get it. Sienna and Bran did not get it either. Two of their cousins did, however. The siblings are not bitter about the outcome. They are genuinely proud of their cousins. They write letters back and forth on holidays.

Their job on the board is to *be reliable*. They are usually placed as the c-pawn and the f-pawn — the supporting wing pawns — and they hold their squares stubbornly across the long middle of the game. They are the pawn-pair Captain Castle most often points to when he wants to teach children that *holding ground* is, in itself, a kind of victory worth celebrating.



Trotter and Trundle

Trotter and Trundle are roadside merchants from the kingdom's western highway, a long road that runs from the capital out to the trading towns near the western border. They have, in their pre-board lives, sold leather goods (Trotter) and small woodcraft (Trundle) from a single cart they pulled together up and down the highway for nearly a decade.

They are the *jokesters* of the pawn cohort.

This may seem unusual for pawns, who are otherwise the most-serious pieces on the board by reputation, but Trotter and Trundle have a particular and well-earned reason for being the way they are. They have heard, over their decade together on the road, *every customer's joke in the kingdom*. You cannot stand at a market stall for that long without developing a kind of patient humour about how people behave when they are about to buy something they don't strictly need. They are, by their own cheerful admission, professionally amused by most things.

Trotter is taller and louder of the two. He is loud only by pawn standards, of course. Captain Crossfire would describe him as "merely audible." Trundle is shorter than Trotter and considerably more dry in his delivery. Their jokes are usually structured as a setup-and-payoff, alternating between them — the way the Twin Knights of Fork Hill finish each other's sentences, but with worse rhythm and considerably better punchlines.

A typical Trotter-Trundle exchange goes something like this:

- Trotter: *"Two squares! On our first move!"*
- Trundle: *"And nobody noticed!"*
- Both, together, at the same time: *"Don't tell the bishop."*

The chess academy was, at first, slightly uncertain about the question of hiring them. The hiring committee worried that the children would get distracted by the jokes during the lessons. Captain Castle pointed out, mildly, that distraction is a teaching tool when handled correctly by the right teacher. The academy hired them on a one-month trial. They are still here.

Their job on the board is to be the *a-pawn and h-pawn* — the outer wing pawns. They are the pawns who, in many games, get the first chance to push two squares forward unnoticed because everyone watching the game is focused on the centre. They love this fact about their job. They tell jokes about it. They have told the same joke about it, with minor variations, for nearly six years.



Gable and Garrett

Gable and Garrett are from the town-rooftop wanderer tradition of the kingdom's northern hill towns. This requires a small explanation, because the tradition is not well-known outside the region itself.

In the northern hills, the towns are old, and the houses are tall, and the roofs are *connected* — built deliberately to lean against each other for warmth and structural support against the wind. If you grow up in a northern hill town, you grow up climbing onto your neighbour's roof as a matter of routine. You grow up walking across roof-tiles instead of crossing streets to get anywhere worth getting to. There is even a kind of unofficial profession in those towns: the *wanderer*, who walks the rooftops to deliver small messages, retrieve cats from chimneys when they refuse to come down, and notice things that ground-walking people simply do not have the angle to notice.

Gable and Garrett are both wanderers.

They are not siblings, in case that needs clarifying. They met when they were eleven years old, both walking the rooftops of the same town on the same morning, and they have walked rooftops together more or less ever since. They are not twins disguised as friends. They are friends. That is allowed.

Gable is the more *thoughtful* of the two by temperament. He looks down from rooftops and notices the shape of the streets below. He has, in his head, a near-perfect map of every town he has ever wandered through. He is the quiet pawn of the entire cohort.

Garrett is the *dreamer*. He looks up from rooftops, mostly. He notices clouds. He notices birds. He notices the way the kingdom's banners change colour in different qualities of light. He is the pawn most likely to forget which square he's currently on during a game. Gable always reminds him, gently. Garrett always thanks Gable. The exchange has happened so many times that the children have begun to anticipate it.

Both wanderers believe, in their separate ways, that the world looks smaller from above — which is a useful belief to have when you are a pawn on the eighth rank looking back at the long walk you've just finished making.

Their job on the board is to be *the promotion pawns*. When a game reaches the endgame and a pawn looks like it might reach the far rank, it is usually Gable or Garrett doing the reaching. They are the dreamers. They are the ones who imagine becoming queens before they have actually done it. Their cousins from Wheatsetter did become queens, on two separate occasions. They might, too, one day.

Captain Castle has, in his eleven thousand watched games, seen Gable promote to a queen eighty-six separate times. He has seen Garrett promote ninety-one times. He keeps the count quietly. He does not mention it to either of them.



Why the four towns

These four pawn-pairs — eight pawns total, from four different regions of the kingdom — are *everyone*. They are the kingdom's foot-soldiers and citizens, taken together. The kings are the stakes of every game; the queens are the messengers; the bishops, rooks, and knights are the specialists with their narrow techniques. But the kingdom itself is *made of pawns* in the ordinary sense.

When Captain Castle introduces the pawn cohort at the start of any campaign, he says only this:

"They are everyone. They walk forward. They cannot go back. They sometimes become queens. They always matter."

The children always remember this part of the introduction, even when they have forgotten most of the others.

And on the day when one of them — a Gable, perhaps, or a Garrett, or a Sienna, or a Sten — reaches the far rank and stands up, taller, transformed by the rules of the game into a different piece, all of the cast members on the board stop what they are doing for a moment to acknowledge it. Queen Vesper nods, once. Sir Pinwell sets down his notebook on the table. Lady Skewer bows slightly in the new queen's direction. Captain Crossfire, for once in his life, shuts up. Even the Glass Lantern dims her light for a moment, in a small private salute that nobody else quite catches.

Captain Castle says, very quietly: *"Welcome to the job."*

The walk was long. The walk was worth it.

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<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/gambittales/the-pawn-cohort>

Twin Knights of Fork Hill



- "Fork Hill"
 - "West Prong"

Chapter 5 — Two Knights, One Hill, No Apologies

The academy training-yard has a low stone wall along one side, about waist-high to the children when they are standing on the flagstones beneath it. The twin knights of Fork Hill are standing on top of it, balanced easily, looking down. They are not supposed to be standing on top of it. Captain Castle has, at some point during their first month at the academy, told them this fact directly. They have, with great politeness and even greater enthusiasm, ignored the instruction ever since.

Down on the flagstones below them, a class of nine children is sitting in a half-circle on cushions, looking up at the wall and the two knights perched on it. On the flagstones, between the children and the wall, somebody has chalked an enormous chessboard in white, sized for demonstration. There are two wooden pieces standing on it — a rook on one corner of the chalk-drawn board, a bishop on the other. The knights are surveying the board from the wall the way two cats survey a kitchen at supertime.

"You see one target," says Knight One, deliberately.

"We see two," says Knight Two, equally deliberately.

"You walk," says Knight One.

"We jump," says Knight Two.

"Watch."

They jump. Both at once. The same instant. The same height. They land, lightly, on the same chalk-drawn square in the middle of the board — a perfect knight-move from both the rook and the bishop simultaneously. They land so close together that the children, watching from below, cannot at first tell that there are actually two of them in the spot. One of them, slightly taller, is wearing armoured leggings the colour of summer leaves. The other, slightly shorter, is wearing

armoured leggings the colour of summer pears. Both of them are grinning broadly.

A child in the front row says, in some astonishment, "Did you — both —"

"Yes," say the knights in unison, without bothering to look at each other.

"That's the fork," says Knight One. He gestures behind himself, without looking, in the direction of the rook. "We are attacking the rook from this square."

"And the bishop," says Knight Two. He gestures behind himself, also without looking, in the direction of the bishop. "We are attacking the bishop from this same square."

"At the same time."

"With one move."



Captain Castle, watching the demonstration from a safe distance at the edge of the yard, sighs the sigh of a man who has watched two performers deliver the same line a thousand times. He has been watching them deliver this line for two solid years now, and it has not stopped being effective on the children. The children are leaning forward. The children always lean forward when the knights leap. The forward-lean appears to be involuntary.

They were not always at the academy in the capital. They were, for a very long time before they came here, on Fork Hill in the eastern part of the kingdom.

Fork Hill is a hill in the eastern province of the white-board kingdom that is shaped, when seen from the air or from a low-flying bird's perspective, like a kitchen fork laid down flat on the landscape. Two prongs, a stretch of saddle between them, and a long handle leading down to the valley below. The prongs are about a kilometre apart at their widest. The saddle between them dips sharply in the middle, with a stream at the bottom that runs cold even in the height of summer when everything else is dry.

The road through the area went around the hill, naturally enough. Anybody sensible who wanted to get from one prong to the other walked the long way around the base of the hill. It took an hour and was, as walks go in that part of the kingdom, perfectly fine.

The twin knights did not walk the long way. They learned, before they had learned almost anything else useful in their childhoods, how to *jump*.

The story their mother tells about the first jump (it is her favourite story to tell, and she has told it many times over the years) goes something like this. They were six years old. They climbed the eastern prong with their lunches in their hands, took a long look across the saddle towards the western prong, and *just went*. It was not a leap of faith; the hill had been teaching them how to leap for some time. They had spent every day for nearly a year throwing stones across the saddle and watching them arc through the air. They knew the distance. They knew the wind. They knew that the brook at the bottom of the saddle had a single smooth flat rock that you could land on if you came down at exactly the right angle, and otherwise you got wet.

Their mother did not learn about the first jump until the twins came home for dinner that evening. She was peeling apples at the kitchen table when they walked in.

The first knight said, "We went to the west prong today."

The second knight said, "We did not take the road."

Their mother set down the knife on the table. She asked them, very calmly, with that particular calmness mothers use when the news could be much worse than it sounds, how they had gotten there.

The first knight said, "We jumped."

The second knight said, "It was very fast."

She did not, to her considerable credit, faint at the kitchen table.

She did, however, make them sit down on either side of her and walk her through, very slowly, every single part of the jump. The takeoff position. The shape of the arc. The landing technique. The rock in the brook. She asked them, when they were finally done explaining it, if they could promise her to do it the *same way* every time. They both said yes, immediately. She believed them. She had to believe them, given the alternative.

By the time they were ten years old, the twin knights could jump from one prong to the other in either direction. They could jump *over* obstacles in the saddle between — a low-flying bird, a wandering goat, a very tall person crossing the saddle on foot. They could jump from a standing start. They could jump while carrying lunch in both hands. They could land on the rock without scuffing it.



They had figured out that, on certain days, when the wind was just right and they had practised the timing all morning, they could jump in *two directions at once*.

They had been practising the two-direction trick, in secret, for nearly a year before the scout came to find them.

The trick required two people leaping at the exact same moment from the exact same spot, going to two different landing places at the end, and *not landing in the brook by mistake*. It required practice. It required communication. It required, more than anything else, twins.

What they realised, over hundreds of practice jumps spread across an autumn and a winter, was a quiet thing that had not occurred to anyone before.

If you take off from the right place, you can threaten two places at the same time.

You don't need to actually *be* in both places at once. You only need to be able to *reach* both. The threat — the readiness to land on either one — is the thing that does the work.

They called it, with the kind of teenage seriousness that doesn't normally survive into adulthood, *the fork*. You can see, perhaps, where this naming is going.

The kingdom's chess scouts came around at the start of the next spring. This was during the early reign of King Pumble, who had just instituted a youth-programme for unusual movers across the kingdom. The scout was a polite older woman named Brindle, who wore a long grey travelling-coat and carried a small folded chessboard in her bag for emergencies. She arrived at Fork Hill on foot one morning and asked, at the cottage door, whether the children of the house might be available to demonstrate *whatever it was they were said to be doing on the prongs*.

Their mother, peeling apples again, said yes. She always said yes by this point in their childhoods. The twins were sixteen.

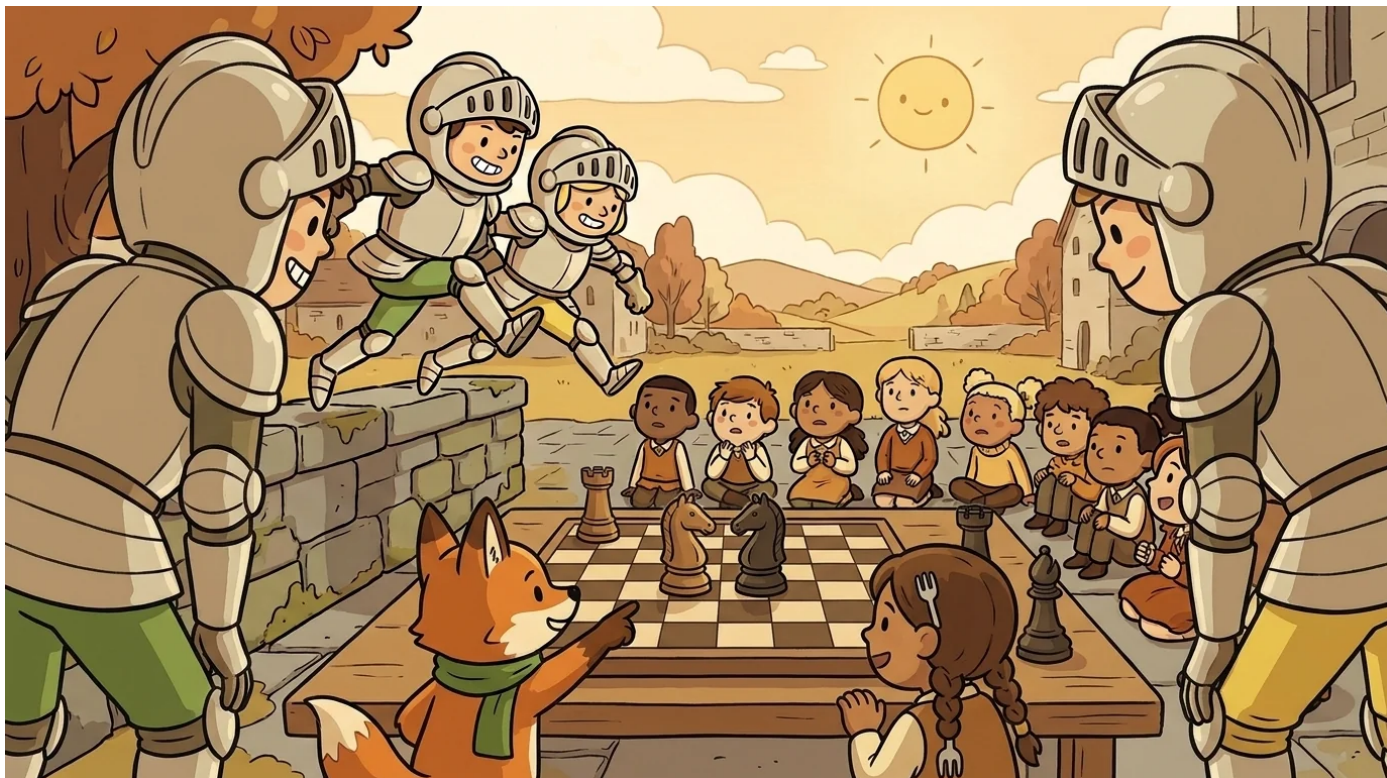
They took Brindle up to the eastern prong without ceremony. They asked her where she wanted them to land on the far side. She pointed across to two flat stones on the western prong — one each, about ten paces apart. The knights nodded together. They took off together. They landed on the two stones. They turned, in unison, and waved.

Brindle did not speak for a long moment.

Then she said, almost carefully, "Have either of you ever played chess?"

The first knight said, "No."

The second knight said, "Is that the one with the board?"



She brought them down to the capital that month, on the next available coach. She walked with them part of the way on foot, and at the gates of the city she handed them off to the academy master, who watched them play their first three games and then said, to nobody in particular, what he had said about so many of them over the years: "*Oh. Good. Another pair.*"

They have been at the academy for two years now and they have, in that short time, taught more students to spot a fork than the entire previous decade managed without them. They teach in alternating sentences. They never trip over each other. They never confuse the children. The children figure out the pattern within the first lesson, and from then on they expect it, and it works for them.

This afternoon, after the demonstration on the wall, the knights walk among the children on the flagstones. They have set up a smaller board on a low table at the side of the yard. Two wooden knights — this time not themselves — are placed on the board in starting positions. A rook and a bishop sit nearby on adjacent squares.

The fox in the green scarf — Inkling, who is by general consensus everybody's favourite student — looks carefully at the position on the small board. She points, very deliberately, to a square in the middle of the board.

"If a knight moves *there*," she says, "it attacks the rook *and* the bishop."

"Yes," says Knight One.

"Both at once," says Knight Two.

"You can only save one."

"Pick the one you can save."

"Don't pick the one to defend."

A girl with a fork-shaped pin in her hair (this is Adela Marrowstone's niece, though nobody at the academy yet knows that) asks the question that always arrives at this point in the lesson: "What if the rook just moves? Doesn't that solve the problem?"

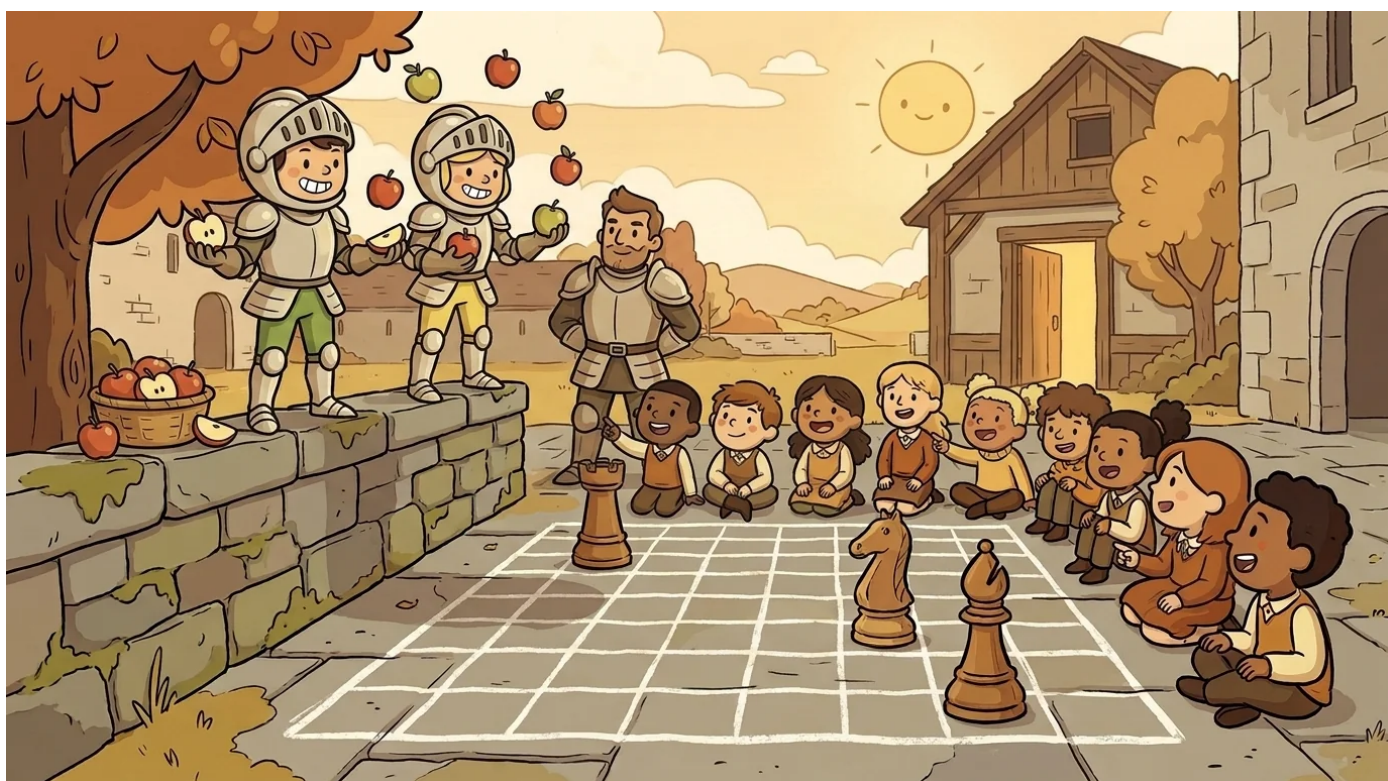
The knights look at her. They look at each other. They look back at her.

"Yes," says Knight One.

"That solves it," says Knight Two. "Then we take the bishop."

"You traded a defending move for a captured piece."

"You did not get away free."



Sir Pinwell, watching from the doorway of the academy hall, observes the lesson without comment. The knights have, twice now during this same lesson, *jumped over his neat row* of demonstration pieces on the side table — they did not need to jump it for any tactical reason, the table was not in their way, they did it because they could. Pinwell has straightened the row twice. He has not said a single word about either incident. The knights know perfectly well that he has straightened the row. They appreciate him for it. They have, in fact, recently learned his name properly, which they took as a sign of growing maturity. They are still privately proud of this achievement.

After the lesson has ended, Captain Castle finds the twin knights eating their lunch on top of the kitchen-yard wall, in their preferred spot. They are eating apple slices, which is what the academy chef gives them every day at this hour, because (as the chef has explained patiently to anyone who asks) apples are the only food the knights cannot juggle while jumping.

Castle stands below them on the flagstones, hands clasped behind his back, looking up.

"Well done with the demonstration this morning," he says.

"Thank you," says Knight One.

"It was easy," says Knight Two.

"Most things are."

"For us."

Castle nods. He has heard this exchange before. He says, after a careful moment, "Pinwell mentioned. The row."

"We knew," say the knights, in unison.

"He did not mind?"

"He minded."

"He always minds."

"He straightens it again."

"He likes straightening it."

"He should not be deprived of the joy."

Castle considers this argument. He has, over the past two years of supervising them, learned that arguing with the twin knights is like arguing with the wind on Fork Hill: technically possible, but unproductive in any practical sense. He says, instead of continuing the argument, "There is a student who wants to learn the fork. She is eight years old. She has been waiting all morning. Will one of you come?"

The knights look at each other across the wall.

"Both of us," says Knight One.

"Always both," says Knight Two.

"You see one target."

"We see two."

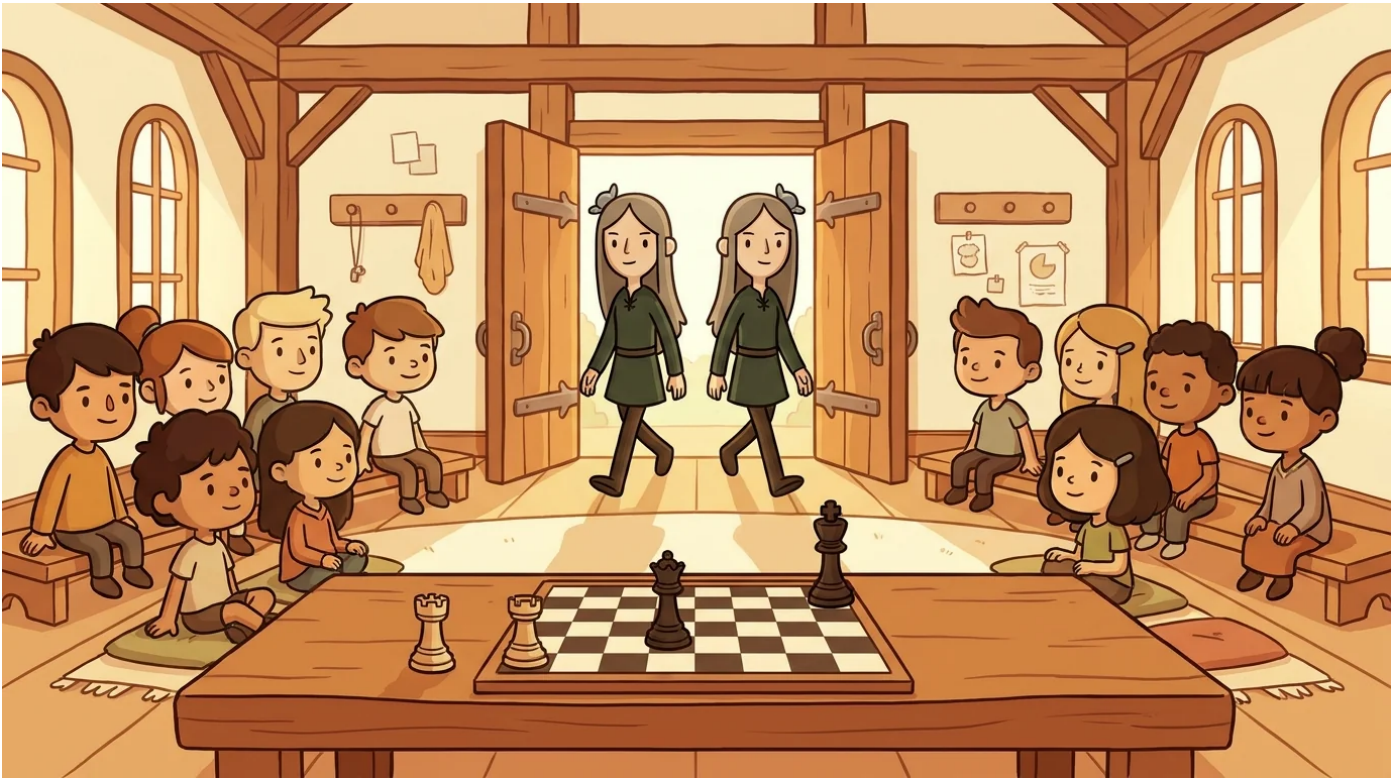
They jump down from the wall in perfect unison. They land lightly on the flagstones below. They walk together towards the academy hall, in step, the way they have walked together since they were old enough to walk anywhere at all. Castle follows behind them, shaking his head, smiling despite himself.

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/gambittales/twin-knights-of-fork-hill>

Veil and Vow



The first thing to know about Veil and Vow is that they always enter a room together, and they always enter in the same precise order. Veil comes first, half a step ahead. Vow comes second, half a step behind. They do not announce the arrangement to anyone. They do not even seem to think about the formation consciously. They simply walk in like that, the way two horses pull a cart in step without needing to be reminded, and the door of the academy training-hall opens and closes once for both of them in a single motion.

A class of nine children watches them come in this afternoon.

The sisters are tall and thin and identical down to the small grey clasps in their dark hair. They are wearing matching dark-green tunics — Veil's clasp on the left, Vow's on the right; that small detail is the only way the children will, by the end of the kit, learn to tell them apart. They walk to the front of the hall and stop in front of a long wooden practice-table that has been set up for them.

On the table, somebody has already set up a chessboard with three pieces standing on it. A white rook on a1. A black queen, in the middle of the file, on a4. A black king at the back of the file, on a8.

Veil looks at the board carefully.

Vow looks at the board carefully.

Neither of them speaks for almost ten seconds. The children, who do not yet know the sisters' particular patterns, wait — politely at first, then with growing interest. They have not seen this particular kind of teaching-silence before.

Then Veil says, in a voice barely above a breath: "The queen is in the way."

And Vow says, in a voice that carries cleanly all the way to the back of the hall without seeming to be raised at all: "But the queen *is* the way."

She points, very slowly, at the rook. She traces a line up the file with her index finger — past the queen, past the empty squares behind it, all the way up to the king at the top of the board.

"The rook," Vow says, "is looking at the queen. The queen *is* in the way of the rook. But the rook is also looking — through her — at the king behind her. The queen is the defender of the king. The queen is also the *piece in front* of the king. If the queen ever moves" — and Veil mirrors the motion exactly, lifting the queen off the board very gently — "the rook is *already* attacking the king. The rook does not have to do anything more. The rook is already there, threatening through her."

She puts the queen back on her square. The children stare at the position in silence.

"This," Veil whispers, "is the X-ray."

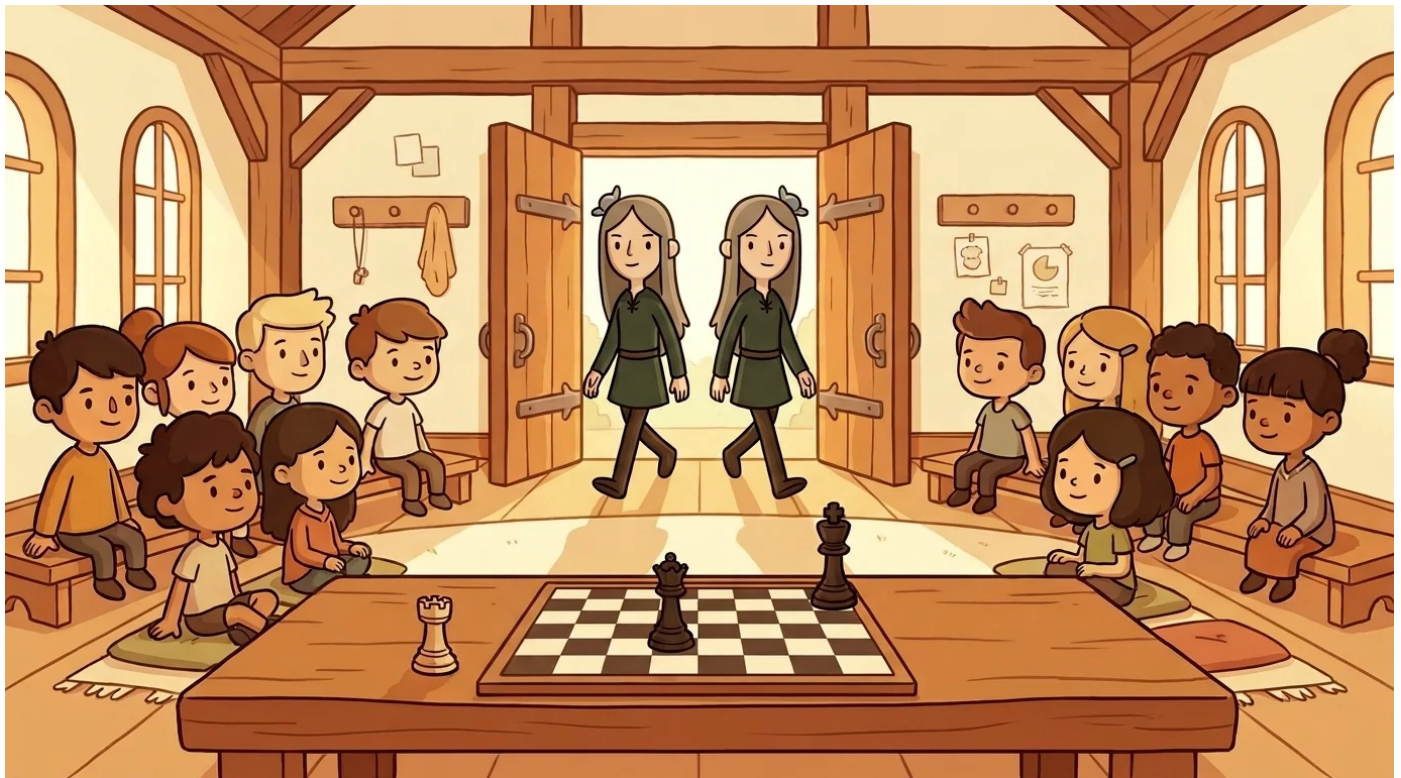
"This is *our* shot," Vow says.

The room is so still afterwards that a child near the back of the hall asks, almost involuntarily, "Do you always speak like that?"

"Yes," says Veil.

"Always," says Vow.

A few of the children laugh — quietly, the way you laugh in a chapel during a service. The sisters do not mind the laughter. They have been getting that particular laugh for nearly eight years now.



They were born in a village called Cresswell, on the western side of the kingdom, eleven minutes apart from each other one summer evening. Their real birth-names were written on the village rolls, but the rolls were kept in a wooden box that flooded one spring, and after the flood nobody could read the rolls properly, and after that nobody could quite remember what the sisters had originally been called.

Their mother had been calling them Veil and Vow since they were very small children. The names had stuck, the way names stick when they turn out to be exactly right for the person carrying them. Veil for the older sister, the one who was always at the front of any room they entered; Vow for the younger sister, the one whose voice carried across the fields and meadows behind their cottage. The girls did not, even as small children, mind the names. They had not been given a chance to mind anything else.

Their mother was a quiet woman who had been a hunter in her younger years, before she settled in Cresswell to raise the twins on her own. Their father is not in this chapter. He died when the sisters were two years old. The sisters do not remember him. Their mother carried the whole family on her shoulders alone from that point onward. She is, you should know in advance, an exceptionally good parent. She is not a character in this chapter — but she is the reason the chapter is

possible.

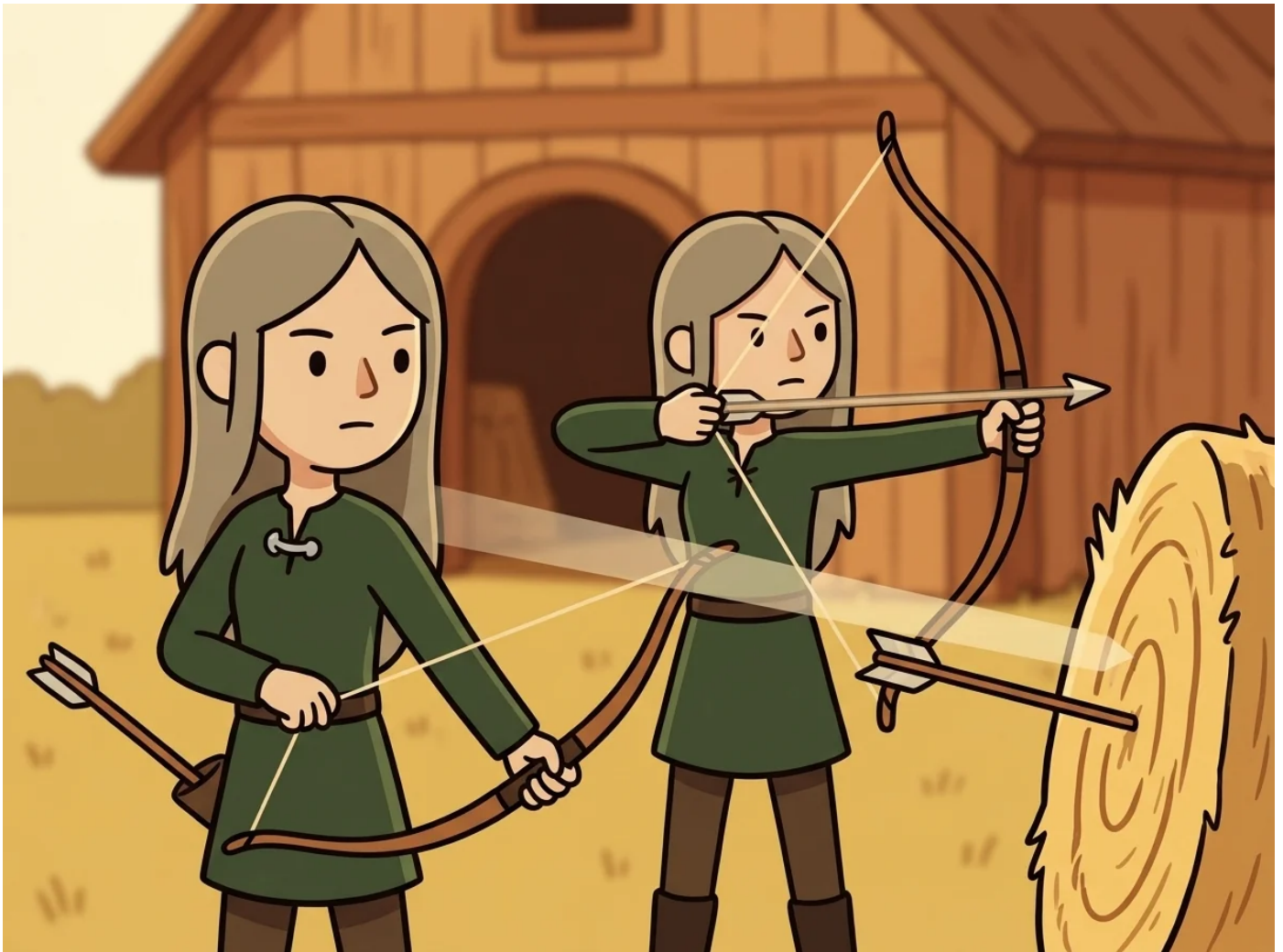
She started teaching the sisters to shoot a bow when they were seven years old. She had grown up shooting bows herself; she did not think there was anything strange or unusual about teaching her daughters the same skill. She had two old yew bows kept in good condition and a sheaf of straight arrows that she had fletched herself, and she walked the sisters into the field behind the barn one autumn afternoon and showed them how to nock and draw and release the bowstring.

Veil was very good very quickly. By the end of the first month of practice, she was placing arrows in straw butts at thirty paces. By the end of six months, she was hitting them reliably at sixty paces. By the end of a year, she was shooting better than children twice her age and was the topic of conversation at every harvest gathering Cresswell held that season.

Vow was, for the first two years of practice, *terrible*.

She could not, at age nine, consistently hit a target at twenty paces. Her arrows wobbled in flight. Her grip was inconsistent across draws. She drew the bow correctly and aimed correctly and released correctly, and the arrows still seemed to find their own private routes through the air. Their mother said nothing about any of this. Their mother simply kept handing her arrows. Vow kept practising. She practised badly, but she practised every single day.

By the autumn the sisters turned ten, Vow had begun to wonder, privately, whether she was simply *not made for it* in some fundamental way.



What happened next changed both their careers entirely.

They were practising together in the field behind the barn one afternoon. Veil was at the front of the field, near the targets, perhaps fifteen paces from the closest straw butt. Vow was at the back of the field, ten paces behind her sister, both of them aiming at the same straw butt.

Veil drew her bow with her usual careful precision. She held the draw for a long moment, the way she always did before releasing. Then she released.

The arrow struck the butt cleanly, three fingers from the centre of the target.

As Veil lowered her bow, Vow — who had been about to take her own shot — looked along the line her sister had just shot. She saw, very clearly, the path the arrow had taken across the field. She saw the air the arrow had moved through. She saw, almost as a visible thing hanging in the autumn light, the *line* hanging in the field between her sister's bow and the butt.

She thought, very simply: *Oh. That's the line.*

She raised her own bow. She drew. She aimed, not at the target itself this time — at the *line*. The line her sister had drawn for her with her own arrow.

She released.

Her arrow followed Veil's arrow into the butt. Closer to the centre, this time. It struck almost exactly where Veil's arrow had struck a moment before.

Vow had — for the first time in her entire life — hit a target at twenty paces.

She did it again on the next shot. And the next.

When she shot without Veil in front of her, her aim was, again, poor. But when Veil was in front of her — when Veil had *just shot* and *just shown her the line* — Vow could place her own arrow along that line as if she were tracing it with her finger.

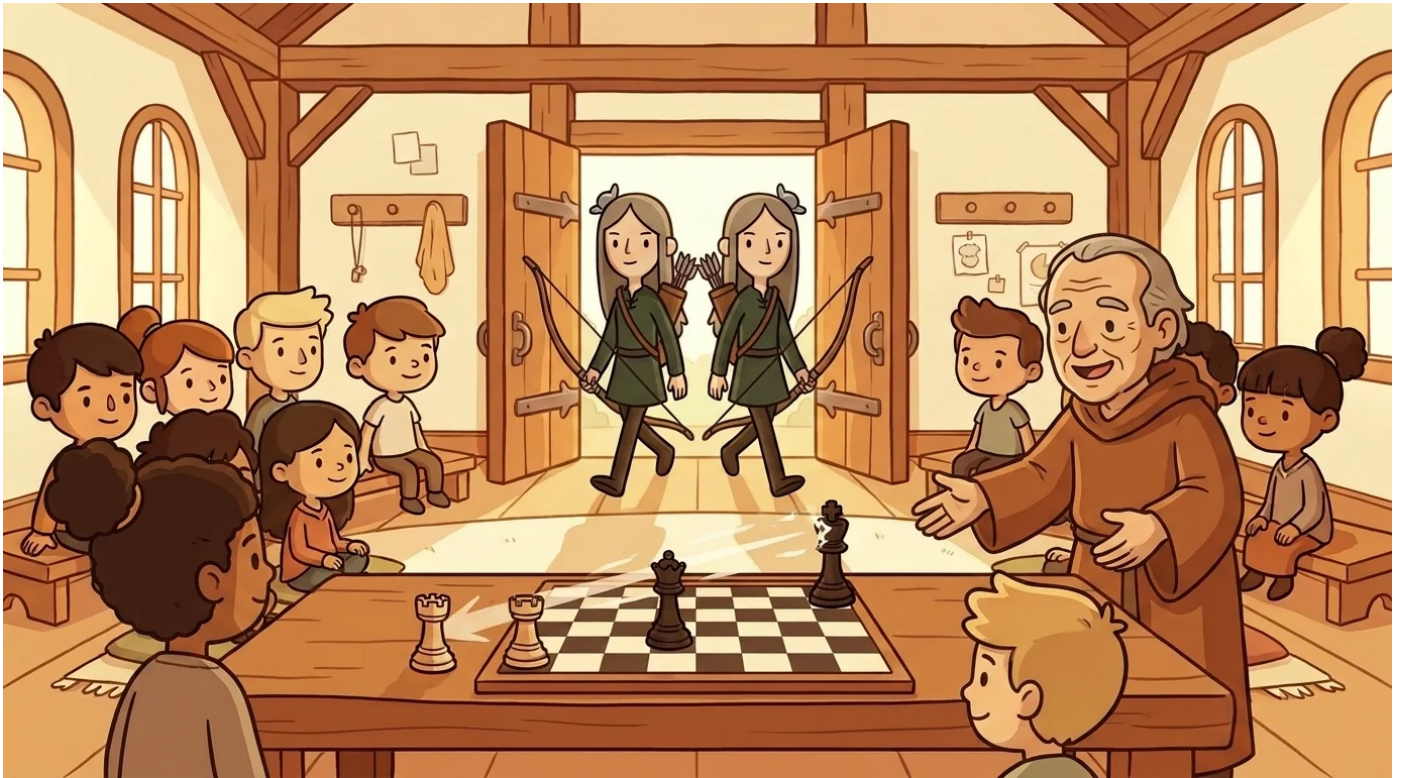
The sisters figured the principle out within a week of practising it.

Veil shot first; she *opened* the line. Vow shot second; she *followed it through* — and her arrow, because Veil's arrow had cleared the air ahead of it, *kept going*. Vow's arrows sometimes passed within inches of Veil's standing shoulder. Veil never flinched once. She trusted her sister completely.

By their eleventh birthday, the sisters could put two arrows through the same straw butt on successive heartbeats, one after the other, almost touching the same hole.

Their mother watched this practice from the edge of the field one afternoon and said quietly, "*Veil opens. Vow finishes.*"

The phrase stuck.



They first introduced themselves with the phrase when they were fifteen, at the kingdom's annual archery trial in the capital. They stood in front of the judges, side by side as always, Veil half a step ahead.

Vow said, in her carrying voice: *"My sister opens. I finish. We are Veil and Vow."*

They won the trial decisively. They were the first sister-pair to do so in the trial's recorded history. The judges were uncertain what to do with them. The kingdom's military was politely interested but ultimately confused — there was no place in a standard infantry line for two archers who shot best in series, rather than in parallel. The trial judges spent a long week debating the matter behind closed doors. The sisters waited patiently in a small guest house behind the trial grounds, drinking weak tea and not particularly minding the wait.

A scout for the chess academy, passing through the capital on other business, heard about them in a tavern conversation. He had been at the academy for ten years by then. He understood, almost immediately, what the sisters were.

He sent word to the academy master the same evening.

The academy master, who had been searching for someone to teach the *X-ray* pattern for almost a decade — the pattern where a piece threatens another piece *through* a third piece in between — sent for them within the week. He met them at the academy gates himself, in person. He brought them into a quiet upper classroom and set up a chessboard on the table.

A rook on a1. A black queen on a4. A black king on a8.

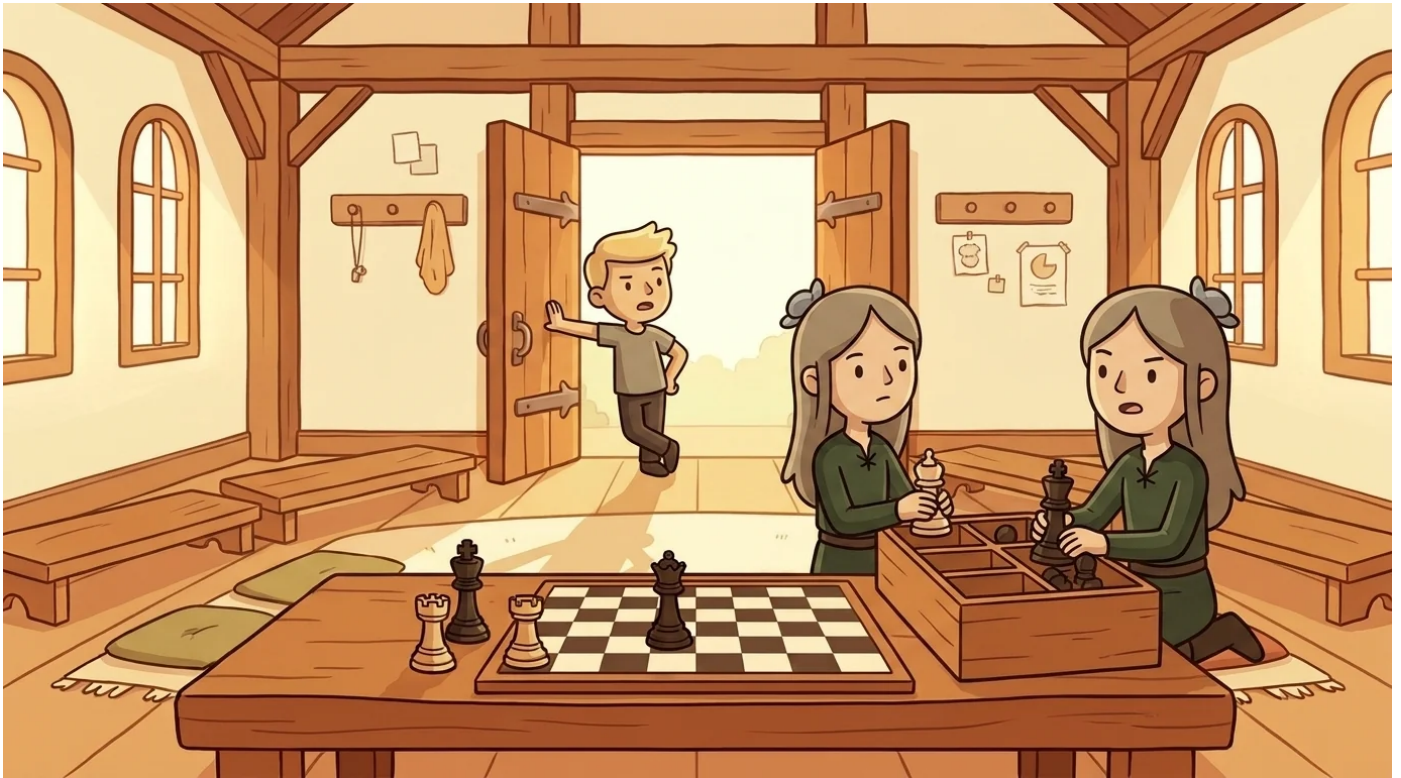
The sisters had never played chess in their lives. The academy master explained the rules to them, briefly. They understood quickly. They had practised in series for eight years; they understood lines.

The academy master pointed at the rook. He pointed at the queen. He pointed at the king. He said, "The rook is *attacking* the king. The queen is in the way. But the rook does not have to move the queen first. The threat passes through her, all the way to the king. This pattern is called the X-ray."

Vow said, immediately, "That's our shot."

Veil nodded once. *"I open. She finishes."*

The academy master hired them within the hour.



They have been teaching at the academy for eight years now. This afternoon, after the lesson has ended and the children have filed out, they stay behind in the training-hall to stack the practice-pieces back into their wooden boxes in proper order. Veil at the front, as always. Vow at the back. The hall is empty except for the two of them and, in the doorway at the back, a single small figure — Sir Pinwell, leaning on the doorframe in his quiet way, watching them work without comment.

He has been watching them for the entire lesson. They had known he was there. They always know.

He clears his throat carefully. They both look up at the same time.

"I have," he says, slowly, "been thinking. About the line. About what you do."

"Yes," says Veil.

"And?" says Vow.

Pinwell considers his words. He always considers his words before letting them out. He says, after a long deliberate pause: "I hold the row. I have always held the row. I have always been very sure that the row was, in its way, *real*. That a piece in the row was a piece in the way of something behind it. That a piece between two others was, by definition, *between* them."

"Yes," says Veil, again.

"And then you appeared," Pinwell says. "And you taught me a pattern that pretends — or perhaps does not pretend, perhaps it *is true* — that the row is not in the way of anything. That the threat goes through the row. That the piece between the two others is also, somehow, only the *front* of a longer threat that has not stopped."

The sisters say nothing. They are listening with both of their attentions.

"I have," Pinwell says, "written a footnote to myself about this. The footnote says: *I will think about this*. I am still thinking. I wanted you to know that I am still thinking."

Veil smiles — a very small smile, barely more than a softening of the eyes.

"Don't think about it too hard, sir," Vow says, gently. Her voice is calmer than usual, almost as quiet as her sister's. "We just go through."

Pinwell nods slowly. He pushes off the doorframe. He turns to go. At the door he pauses for a moment, looks back over his shoulder, and says, without ceremony, "The lesson was clean today. Both of you."

He walks out.

The sisters stand still in the empty hall for a long moment after he has gone. Then Veil looks at her sister and says, almost too softly to hear, "*He saw us.*"

Vow nods. "*He saw us.*"

They go back to packing the pieces away.

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