



GambitTales

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 5 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.

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This is Volume 2 of 2 of the *GambitTales — Meet the Cast* series; each volume is a complete standalone book you can read on its own.

For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.

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Introduction

The GambitTales cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 5 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.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Queen Vesper

The QUEEN — moves any direction, any distance; the most powerful piece; primary king-defender



The thing you have to understand about Vesper, before anything else, is that she does not like the word "queen."

She will use it. She has been asked to use it. There are certain ceremonies in which not using it would be rude. But if you watch her closely, you'll notice she finds a way to refer to herself as something else — *ranger*, *messenger*, *the one who arrives*. She prefers verbs to titles. The title makes her feel like she should be sitting somewhere.

She has never been good at sitting.

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. Occasionally she runs. She arrives at places before anyone expects her to, and leaves again before anyone has finished thanking her.

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

It happened the winter she was nineteen, before her cloak was warm-amber, before anyone called her *Queen*. (Her name was Vesper then too — she had always been Vesper — but no one *announced* it. People just yelled it out the window.) 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. She walked. She skied. Her boots were already on their second pair, both held together with knots she had tied herself.

The winter was unusually bad. The Slow Lake froze early. The roads filled with snow up to a tall person's knees. The post office was, frankly, doing its best, but the system depended on rangers like Vesper to fill in the gaps when a sledge couldn't get through.

On the second-coldest day of the winter, two letters arrived at the post office in the small town of Marrowmile, where Vesper happened to be drinking tea and arguing 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 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. The river-crossing strategist who had written them — a tactician named Strait, who would later be promoted and immediately retire because of this exact night — had not coordinated with anyone. She had assumed the post office would handle it. She had not realised the kings' couriers were the same courier.

Vesper finished her tea. She read both letters. She looked at her boots.

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.

Second, she stole a horse. (She would later send a very polite letter of apology, and the horse's owner would later be paid back with interest. But at the time, the stealing was the point.)



Third, she chose a route that no sensible courier would have chosen.

The two outposts were thirty miles apart. Standard routes followed the safe roads, which followed the curve of the Slow Lake. Standard routes would have taken sixteen hours to reach one outpost and twenty-four hours to reach the other — meaning, in practice, that one king would get the message and one would not, and one army would be reinforced and one would be lost, and the river crossing would tilt in favour of whoever happened to be reached first.

Vesper looked at the map. She did not follow the curve. She went *across* — straight over the frozen lake, then diagonal across the open plain, then straight up the river ice. Three movements. One trip. Both outposts.

She arrived at King Pumble's outpost at dawn. She handed over the letter. She did not wait for thanks. She turned the horse and went diagonally back across the open plain — different angle now — and arrived at King Sable's outpost three hours later. She handed over the second letter. She did not wait for thanks here, either.

Both kings sent reinforcements. The river crossing tilted neither way. The outposts held. The winter ended. The horse, which was a remarkable horse, was returned with a long apology and a basket of apples.

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

Both kings wrote to her. Independently. Identically. They wanted her to serve at the capital. Pumble wanted her in the white-board palace. Sable wanted her in the black-board palace.

She wrote back to both. The letters were almost identical too. 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 negotiation. The two kings, who were cousins, agreed (after careful adjustments to two separate sets of court protocols) that Vesper would serve both. 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 needed, on whichever side, and she would not be a question of loyalty so much as a question of geography.



This is technically against the rules of chess. Chess says there is a white queen and a black queen, and they are different. But Vesper's deal is older than the rules of chess. 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 it was, frankly, more efficient than introducing himself.

She visits the academy whenever she is needed and not a moment before.

She does not have a permanent seat there — Captain Castle offered her one, in writing, and she wrote back politely declining. ("I don't sit," she added at the bottom. "Thank you, though.") When she arrives, she does so in three movements: across the courtyard, diagonally up the stairs, straight into whichever room the children are in. The children know her by the sound of her boots before they see her cloak.

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

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

A boy in the back said, "h1."

"Where would help him?"

The boy considered. "e4? Or maybe h4?"

"From where?"

"From... anywhere along those squares."



Vesper moved her queen from a1 to h1's defending diagonal in a single motion. The king was suddenly safe.

"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. Captain Castle, from the side of the room, looked extremely pleased and tried not to show it.

She still does not like the word "queen."

If you ask her what she is, 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 corridor and ask: "What's it like to be the strongest piece on the board?"

Vesper will stop. She will consider — briefly — whether to answer the question that was asked, or the question that lies beneath it.

She will say: "It's like being the one who is asked. That's the part nobody tells you. The strongest piece is the *most asked*. You arrive first because you can, 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. She will nod at the child. 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. And as the cold air meets her face and the road opens up ahead, Vesper feels the thing she loves most in the world — not powerful, not important, just wonderfully, happily needed, and free to go.

Captain Castle

Storytelling about chess — meta-narrator who introduces other cast members + scaffolds learning



- prompt: "He was scared and excited at the same time when he knocked on that library door. When was the last time you felt both those feelings at once?"

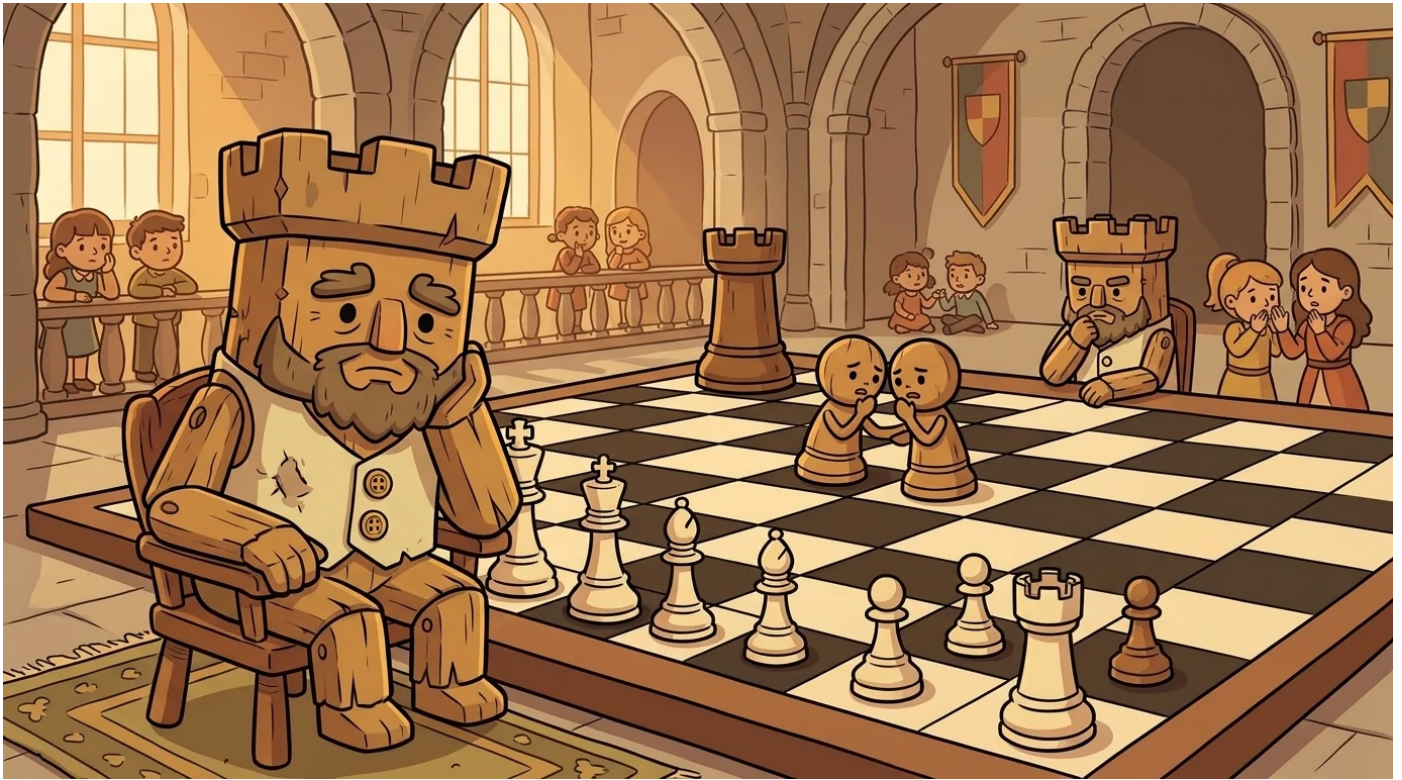
There is a question the Captain has heard a thousand times, and he has stopped trying to answer it cleverly. The question is this:

Why did you retire?

People assume there was a battle. They want there to have been a battle. They want Captain Castle to lean across the table with a grim sigh and say, *I lost a friend in the eighth rank, my child, and I never went back*. It would be a good story. It would explain the brass buttons on his waistcoat (people would assume the buttons were a tribute) and the small dent on his left flank (people would assume the dent was honourable).

But there was no battle.

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 because she always made them slightly too large, and the Captain liked her too much to ask her to redo them. And the dent on his left flank was from a falling pumpkin, which is not as interesting as a sword wound but is, the Captain insists, perfectly real.



He was on his usual square — corner of the board, eighth rank, white side, exactly where rooks belong before any reasonable person has decided what to do with them — and he was thinking about how he had not moved in eleven games. Eleven games is not a long time for a rook. Some rooks do not move in their entire careers. The Captain knew rooks who had been on the same square for forty years and considered themselves *busy*. But on that particular Wednesday, in that particular position, the Captain found himself thinking:

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

Now, this is not the kind of thought you can un-think. Once a rook starts asking what he has actually *done* in his life, the answer tends to be: *moved in a straight line, occasionally, and at the request of someone else*. That is the rook's job. It is an honourable job. The Captain had never resented it. But on that Wednesday, the question sat down beside him and made itself comfortable.

He looked across the board. The opposing rook was sitting in the same kind of corner, doing the same kind of nothing. Down the file, a pair of pawns were having a small, almost shy argument about which of them would advance first. A bishop sailed past on the long diagonal, very pleased with himself for no obvious reason. Two knights leapt over each other in opposite directions, both convinced they were ambushing something.

And the Captain thought: *I have watched all of this for a very long time.*

He had watched, by his own count, eleven thousand games. He had been 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 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 with impatience. He had watched a child cry 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.

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



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:

"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 think I would like to tell them about the pieces. Not the moves. The pieces. Who they are. Why they do what they do."

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

The Captain considered. He said: "Like — there is a librarian I have heard of, in the Slow Lake. 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."

Marigold said: "He sees *pins*. In books."

The Captain said: "Yes. Exactly."

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

The Captain, who had a 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. He simply did not show up for his next tournament, and when his tournament-bag came looking for him three days later, he was already walking down the road towards the Slow Lake.

It was a long road. 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 bridge. He stopped, by accident, in a meadow and watched a flock of geese for almost an hour. None of these things were chess. All of them, the Captain 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 on the seventh day. He knocked on the door.

Pinwell answered the library door slowly. He was holding a teacup. He said: "Yes?"

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



The academy was not, at first, much of an academy. 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.

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.

He watched the children watch Pinwell.

He watched the moment — and there was a moment — 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. He had never been the one teaching the writer.

After the lesson, he sat with Pinwell on the front step of the tea-house. The light had turned that colour again. The Captain said, slowly:

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

Pinwell considered. "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 is called 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 sip of tea. He said: "I think they would come, if you asked properly."



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

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 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's the same line. 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 is 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. They all sound smaller than the truth.

The truth is this:

He wanted to tell the stories.

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

The PAWN — moves one square forward at a time, captures diagonally, advances slowly; can promote to a queen (or other piece) on reaching the far rank; the foot-soldiers and citizens of the kingdom



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*. The kings and queens know this perfectly well. (King Pumble has said so, in a letter to King Sable, several times. Sable always agrees, briefly. Sable agrees with most of what Pumble writes.)

The kingdom has, broadly, four regions. Each region sends two pawn-pairs to serve when the kingdom needs them — which is, in the world of the chessboard, *every game*. You have probably already met one of them on the board without quite meeting them as people. This chapter fixes that.

This is the story of the eight pawns, the four towns, and the long walk they take from their first square to the eighth.

The Pawn Patrol (Steg and Sten)

The Pawn Patrol are from the border villages on the kingdom's eastern frontier. They are, of all the pawn-pairs, the *most-trained*. Their job, before they were called to the board, 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. (The Pawn Patrol were posted at one of the outposts that held that winter. They have, on occasion, mentioned this. They do not boast about it.)

Steg is the older of the two by about six months. He is solid, methodical, and slightly grim. He believes the word *patrol* is a job description, not a name, and he was deeply suspicious when their unit commander introduced them as *the Pawn Patrol* during their first chess-academy appearance. He has, however, accepted it. He has accepted most things.

Sten is six months younger and approximately twice as cheerful. She doesn't smile during patrols (that would, she says, be unprofessional) but she smiles afterward. She is the one who taught Steg to occasionally lean on his halberd instead of standing rigidly to attention. (She had to teach him this twice. He is still working on it.)



Both of them speak with the careful gruffness of people who have stood guard in cold weather for a long time. They are, in the chess kingdom's military hierarchy, the most disciplined of the pawn cohort. Captain Castle introduces them with respect.

Their job on the board is to *hold the line*. They are usually the centre pawns — the d-pawn and the e-pawn — and they advance only when ordered. They do not improvise.

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.

(You may notice the wheat reference. King Sable, who is from the same southern region, would say "*the wheat came in*" about these two if asked. He would not elaborate. He never does.)

Sienna is the elder by twenty-three minutes. She is patient. She has the patience of someone who has watched grain grow, which is a particular kind of patience that cannot be hurried. She is, in fact, slow on purpose. Children watching her on the chessboard sometimes find her almost too quiet. Castle, who has played enough games to know better, simply waits. Sienna's quiet is the kind that always pays off in the long run.

Bran is the younger. He is, in his calm way, *cheerful*. He does not sing while working, but he hums sometimes. He has the cheerfulness of someone who has been to the same harvest festival every year of his life. He believes — and has said so, on the board, more than once — that pawns are the *backbone* of any army. He is right. He is also not loud about being right.

The siblings dreamed, when they were small, of becoming queens. This is the dream of most pawns, and most pawns do not get it. Sienna and Bran did not. (Two of their cousins did. The siblings are not bitter. They are proud of their cousins. They write letters.)



Their job on the board is to *be reliable*. They are usually the c-pawn and f-pawn — the supporting wing pawns — and they hold their squares stubbornly. They are the pawn-pair Captain Castle most often points to when teaching children that *holding ground* is, in itself, a kind of victory.

Trotter and Trundle

Trotter and Trundle are roadside merchants from the kingdom's western highway, a 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 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, but Trotter and Trundle have a particular reason for it: they have heard, over their decade on the road, *every customer's joke in the kingdom*. You cannot stand at a market stall for that long and not develop a kind of patient humour about how people behave. They are, by their own admission, professionally amused.

Trotter is taller and louder. (Loud by pawn standards. Captain Crossfire would call him "merely audible.") Trundle is shorter and more dry. 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 better punchlines.

A typical Trotter-Trundle exchange:

- Trotter: "*Two squares! On our first move!*"
- Trundle: "*And nobody noticed!*"

- Both, together: *"Don't tell the bishop."*

The chess academy was, at first, slightly uncertain about hiring them. They worried the children would get distracted. Captain Castle pointed out, mildly, that distraction is a teaching tool when handled correctly. The academy hired them.

Their job on the board is to *be a- and h-pawns* — the outer wing pawns. They are the pawns who, in many games, get the first chance to push two squares forward unnoticed because everyone is watching the centre. They love this. They tell jokes about it.



Gable and Garrett

Gable and Garrett are from the town-rooftop wanderer tradition of the kingdom's northern hill towns. This requires explanation.

In the northern hills, the towns are old, and the houses are tall, and the roofs are *connected*. If you grow up in a northern hill town, you grow up climbing onto your neighbour's roof. You grow up walking across roof-tiles instead of streets. 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, and notice things that ground-walking people don't notice.

Gable and Garrett are wanderers.

They are not siblings. They met when they were eleven, both walking the rooftops of the same town on the same morning, and they have walked rooftops together ever since. (They are not, in case you are wondering, twins disguised as friends. They are friends. It is allowed.)

Gable is the more *thoughtful* of the two. He looks down from rooftops and notices the shape of streets. He has, in his head, a perfect map of every town he has ever wandered. He is the quiet pawn of the 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 light. He is the pawn most likely to forget which square he's on. Gable always reminds him. Garrett always thanks Gable.

Both wanderers believe 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 made.

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. They are the dreamers. They are the ones who imagine becoming queens. Their cousins from Wheatsetter did. They might, too.



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

Why the four towns

These four pawn-pairs — eight pawns total, four regions of the kingdom — are *everyone*. They are the kingdom's foot-soldiers and citizens. The kings are the stakes; the queens are the messengers; the bishops, rooks, and knights are the specialists. But the kingdom is *made of pawns*.

When Captain Castle introduces the pawn cohort, he says only:

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

The children always remember this part.

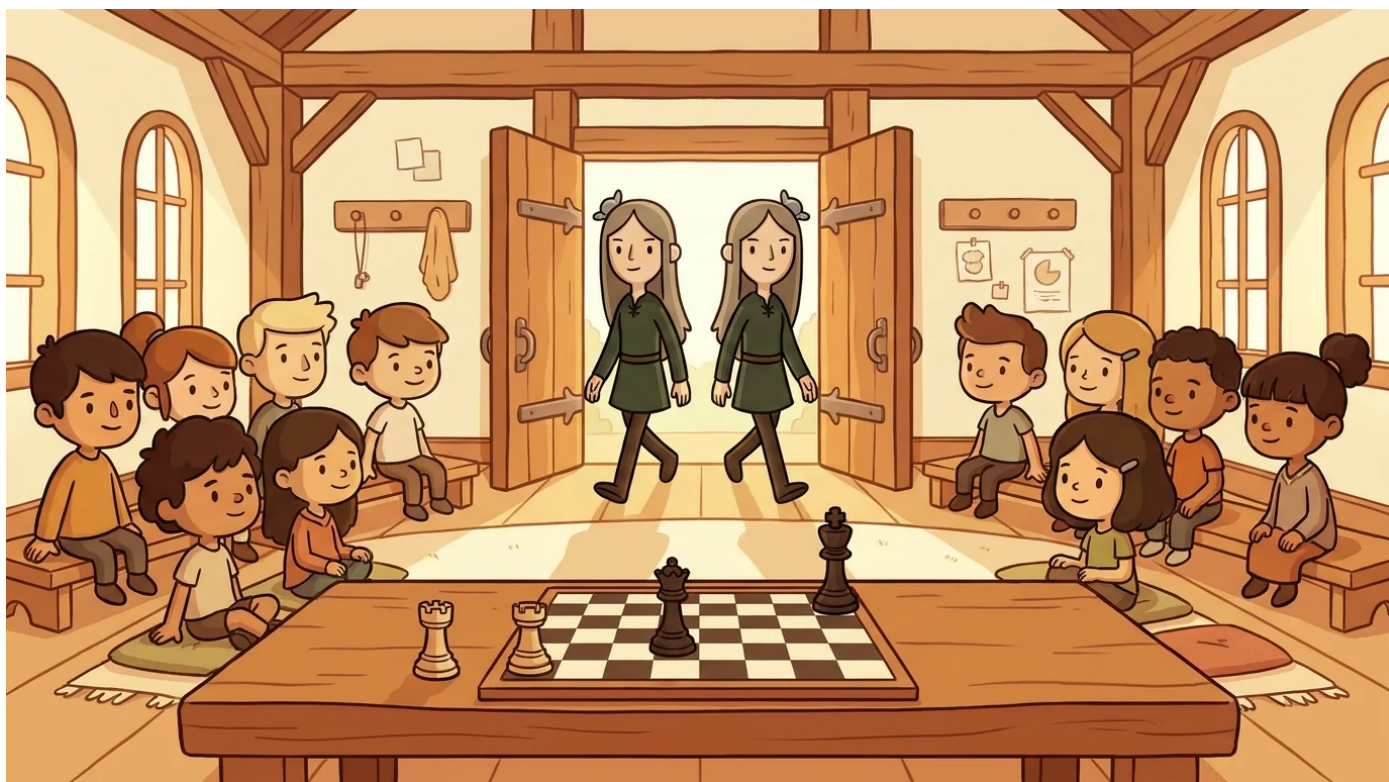
And on the day when one of them — a Gable, perhaps, or a Garrett, or a Sienna, or a Sten — reaches the far rank and stands up, taller, transformed, all of the cast members on the board stop for a moment. Queen Vesper nods. Sir Pinwell sets down his notebook. Lady Skewer bows slightly. Captain Crossfire — for once — shuts up. Even the Glass Lantern dims her light for a moment, in a small private salute.

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

The walk was long. The walk was worth it. And every pawn who makes it feels the same warm, breathless swell of pride — the quiet joy of an ordinary someone who kept walking forward, one square at a time, until they became more than anyone expected.

Veil and Vow

The X-RAY — an attack that passes THROUGH a defending piece (usually an enemy piece) to threaten or strike at a piece behind it; the threat reaches further than the immediate defence



The first thing to know about Veil and Vow is that they always enter a room together, and they always enter in the same order. Veil first, half a step ahead. Vow second, half a step behind. They do not announce it. They do not even seem to think about it. They simply walk in like that, the way two horses pull a cart in step, and the door of the academy training-hall opens and closes once for both of them.

A class of nine children watches them come in.

The sisters are tall and thin and identical down to the small grey clasps in their hair. They are wearing matching dark-green tunics — Veil's clasp on the left, Vow's on the right; that 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.

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

Veil looks at the board.

Vow looks at the board.

Neither of them speaks for almost ten seconds. The children, who do not yet know the sisters' patterns, wait — politely at first, then more interested. They have not seen this particular 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 to the back of the hall without seeming raised: "But the queen *is* the way."

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

"The rook," Vow says, "is looking at the queen. The queen *is* in the way. But the rook is also looking — through her — at the king. 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, lifting the queen off the board very gently — "the rook is *already* attacking the king. The rook does not have to do anything. The rook is already there."

She puts the queen back. The children stare at the position.

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

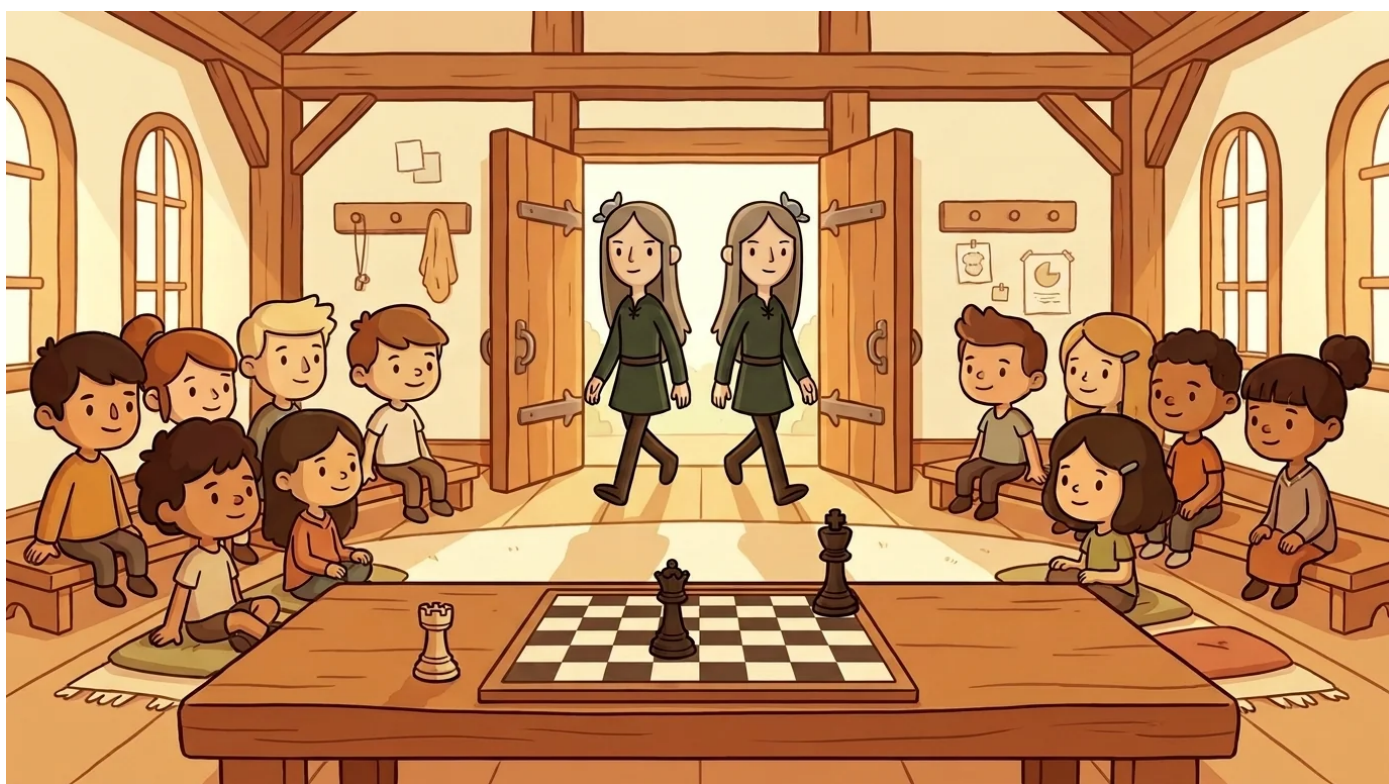
"This is *our* shot," Vow says.

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

"Yes," says Veil.

"Always," says Vow.

A few children laugh — quietly, the way you laugh in a chapel. The sisters do not mind. They have been getting that laugh for eight years.



They were born in a village called Cresswell, on the western side of the kingdom, eleven minutes apart. Their real names are 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, and after that nobody could quite remember what the sisters were originally called.

Their mother had been calling them Veil and Vow since they were very small. The names had stuck, the way names stick when they are exactly right. Veil for the older sister, the one who was always at the front of the room; Vow for the younger, the one whose voice carried across the fields. 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. (Their father is not in this chapter. He died when the sisters were two. The sisters do not remember him. Their mother carried the whole family on her shoulders. She is, you should know, an exceptionally good parent. She is not a character in this chapter — but she is the reason the chapter is possible.)

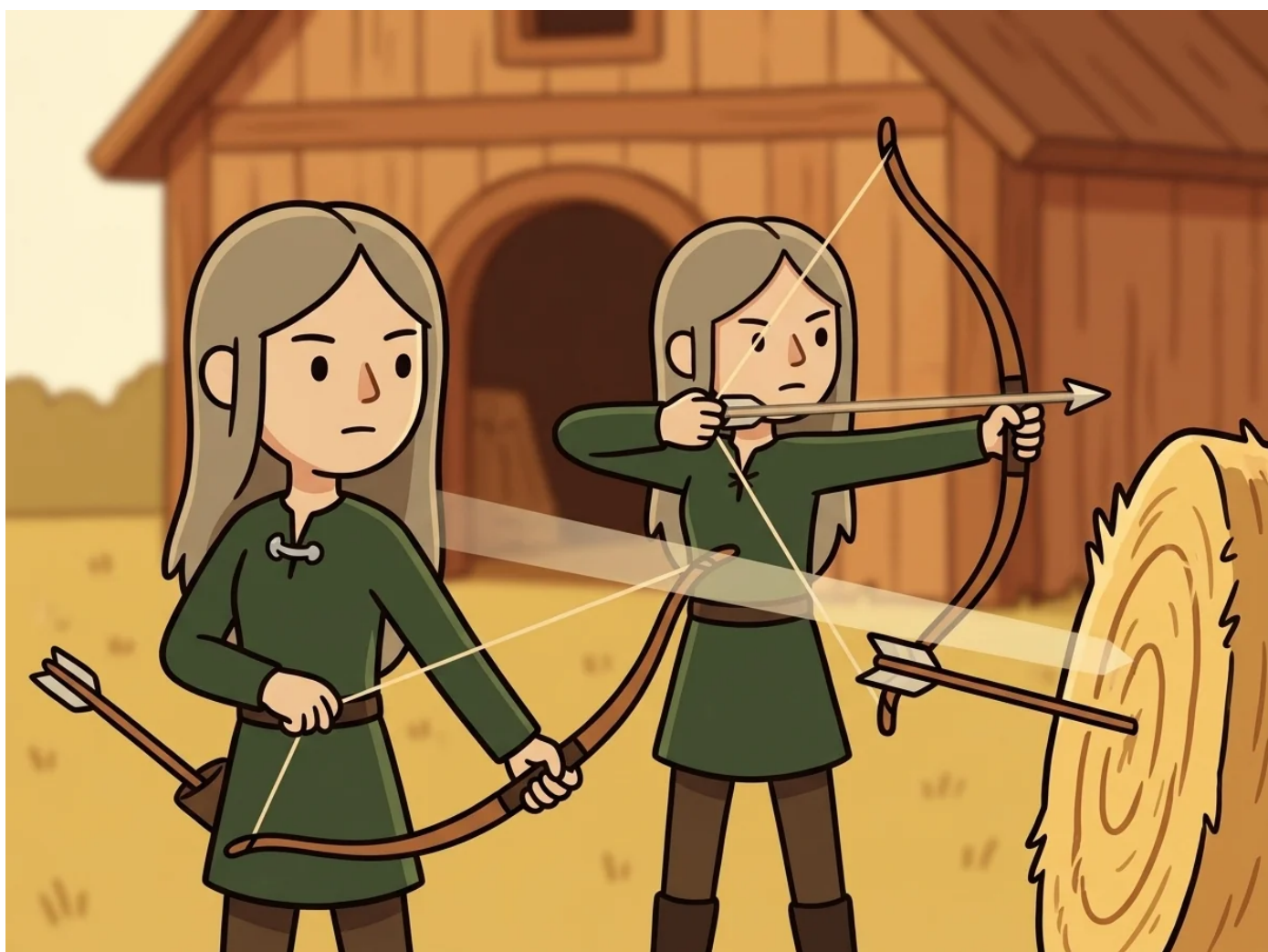
She started teaching them to shoot when they were seven. She had grown up shooting; she did not think there was anything strange about teaching her daughters. She had two old yew bows and a sheaf of straight arrows that she had fletched herself, and she walked the sisters into the field behind the barn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

Veil was very good very quickly. By the end of the first month, she was placing arrows in straw butts at thirty paces. By the end of six months, sixty. 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.

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

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

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



What happened next changed both their careers.

They were practising together in the field behind the barn. Veil was at the front of the field, near the targets, perhaps fifteen paces from the closest 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. She held the draw for a long moment, the way she always did. Then she released.

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

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. She saw the air the arrow had moved through. She saw, almost as a visible thing, 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 bow. She drew. She aimed, not at the target itself — at the *line*. The line her sister had drawn for her.

She released.

Her arrow followed Veil's arrow into the butt. Closer to the centre. It struck almost exactly where Veil's arrow had struck.

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

She did it again 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.

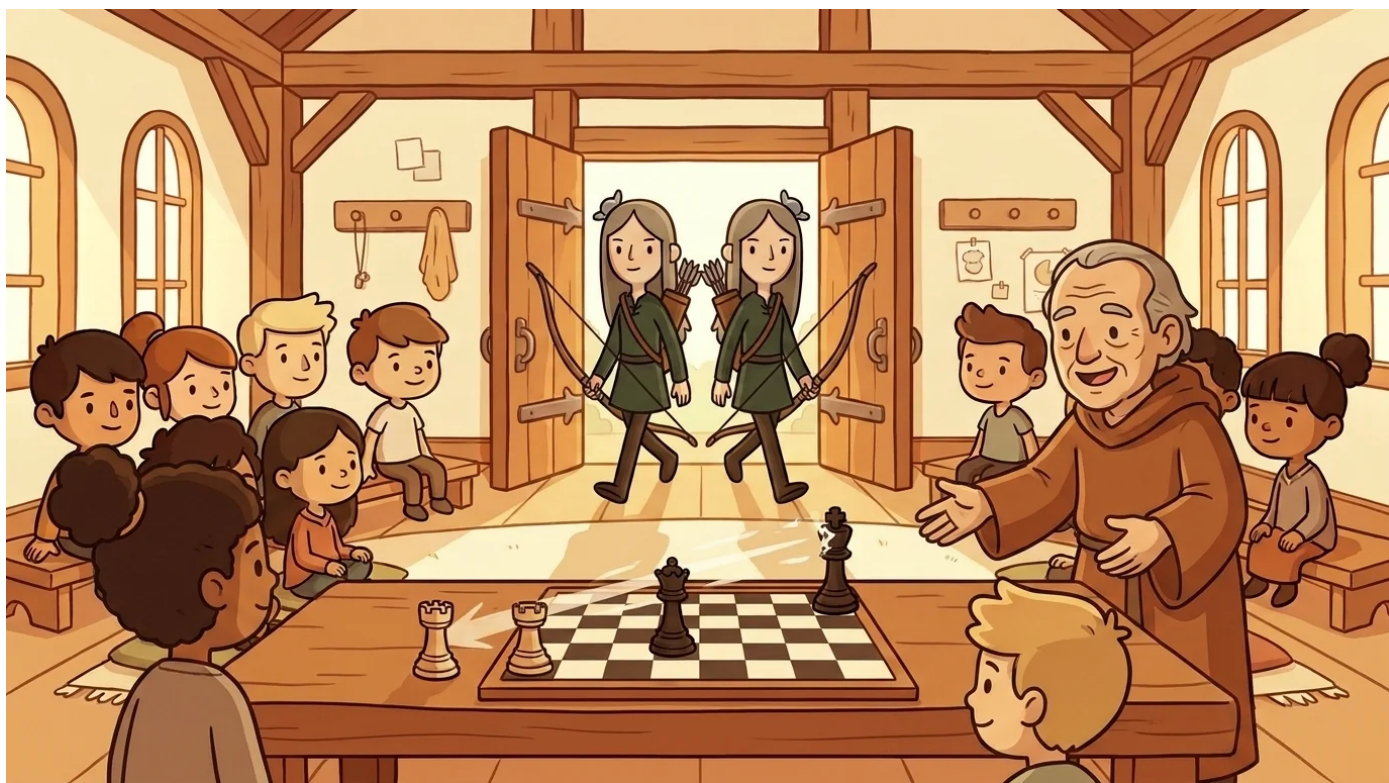
The sisters figured it out within a week.

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. 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.

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

The phrase stuck.



They first introduced themselves with it when they were fifteen, at the kingdom's archery trial in the capital. They stood in front of the judges, side by side, 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. They were the first sister-pair to do so. 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. The trial judges spent a long week debating it. The sisters waited in a small guest house behind the trial grounds, drinking weak tea and not minding the wait.

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

He sent word to the academy master.

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. He brought them into a quiet upper classroom and set up a chessboard.

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

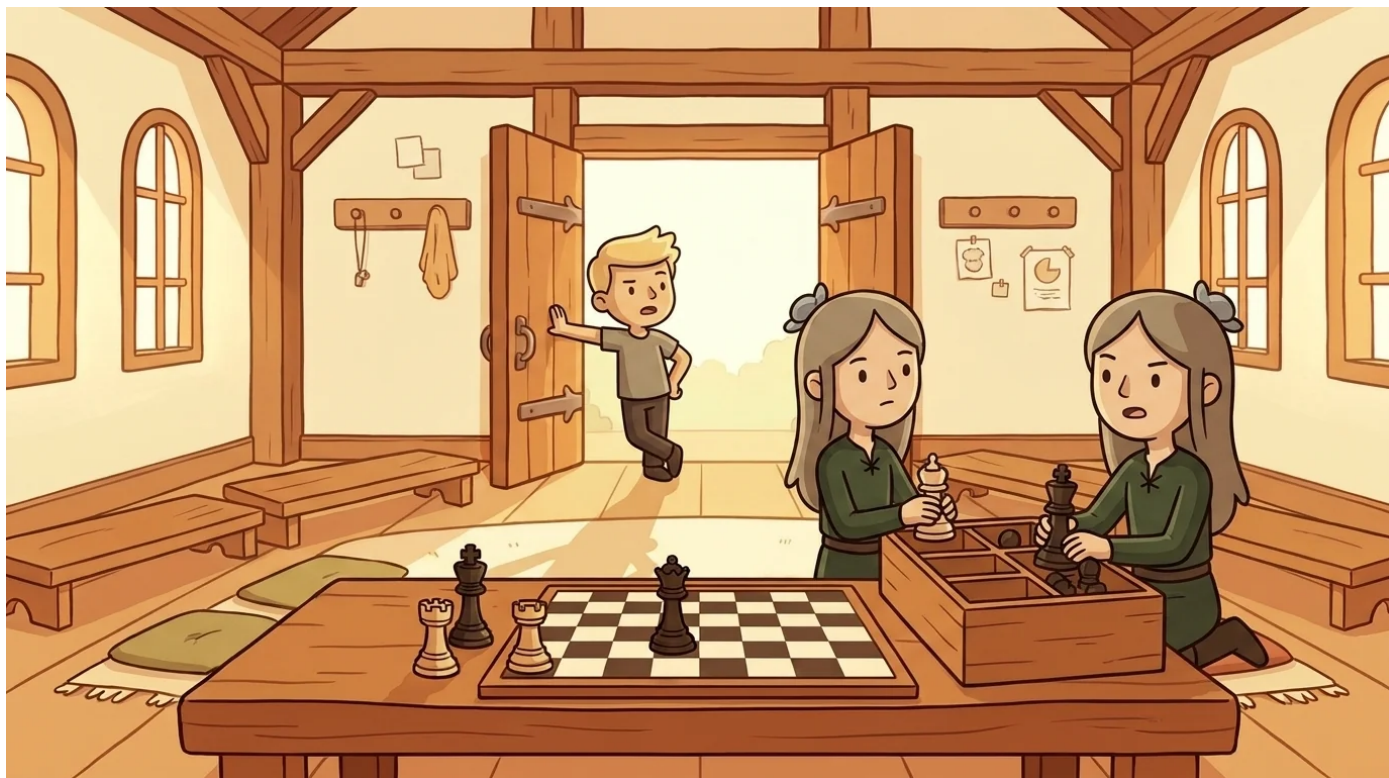
The sisters had never played chess. The academy master explained the rules, briefly. They understood quickly. They had practised in series for eight years; they understood lines.

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. The threat passes through her. This is called the X-ray."

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

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

The academy master hired them within the hour.



They have been teaching at the academy for eight years. This afternoon, after their lesson, they stay behind in the training-hall to stack the practice-pieces back into their wooden boxes. Veil at the front. 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.

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

He clears his throat. They both look up.

"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. He says, after a long 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. That a piece between two others was *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.

"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."

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. He pushes off the doorframe. He turns to go. At the door he pauses, 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. Then Veil looks at her sister and says, almost too softly to hear, "*He saw us.*"

Vow nods. "*He saw us.*"

And a warm, quiet gladness settles over both sisters — the deep, steady happiness of being truly noticed by someone whose noticing you have come to trust. They go back to packing the pieces away, close and content, in step as always.

King Pumble and King Sable

The KING — moves one square at a time in any direction; cannot enter check; the piece you must protect



Across the river from each other, on the morning of the academy visit, the two kings are doing what they do every morning.

In the library tower above Marrowbridge, King Pumble is reshelving books. He has been at it since before sunrise. He moves from the long oak table to the wall shelf, one careful step, holding a single rolled scroll between both hands like a thing that might break. He sets it on the shelf. He turns. He walks back to the table. One step. Another step. He takes the next scroll. He does not rush. If he rushes, the scrolls scatter — they have done it before, twice, when he was younger and thought he was faster than he was. He learned. 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. He pushes them back up with a knuckle. He smiles at no one. The library is empty except for him and the scrolls and the morning light through the high east window.

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 wants to be a sphere — and he makes one snip. He inspects. He steps to the next hedge. One step. He makes one snip. He inspects. He does not snip twice in a row. He has tried that, in his youth, and he has lost two hedges that way: cut a second time too soon, took off the new bud, ruined the year. 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. He does not whistle. He is not 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.

At ten o'clock they each 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. They cross from opposite sides. They meet at the academy door. They walk in together. They walk slowly.

The academy hall, this morning, has two thrones at the front of the room. They are not really thrones. They are two large wooden chairs that somebody (probably Captain Castle) has dragged out of the staff library and pushed up against the chalkboard. 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 alike.

Pumble is on the left, in a green coat with too many buttons. He keeps fiddling with them. He is sixty-two years old. He has a kind round face and very tired eyes. He smiles when 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, because he was tired of doing them up. He is sixty-two years old, exactly the same age as Pumble. 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.

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, "Whose mother was whose mother's sister?"

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

"His mother," says Sable, pointing across, "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.

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 asked exactly the right question.

"Because," Pumble says, choosing his words, "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 the river that the cartographers 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.

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 surprised 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 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.

So she made arrangements.

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 they were nine, both boys could 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. The boys were not allowed 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.

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."*

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. They have not stopped.

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 moves in a single letter — a thought, a worry, a small joke, an apology, a question, a goodbye, a postscript that reopens the question. He cannot help it. He 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.

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. 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 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 sure why. (He suspects it would make Pumble cry. He is, in this, probably correct.) 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 mind, *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.

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, the same letter. Each general had told each king the same thing: *"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. 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, 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. The slowness was the gift. It was the thing that let the rest of the pieces — the queen who ran, the bishops who swept, the knights who jumped, 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.

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 — 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 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 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. Captain Castle has answered some 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. 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.

"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.

"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 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.

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.

"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.

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 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. And on both sides of the river, when each old cousin thinks of the other picking up a pen that morning, something quiet and warm settles in his chest — the steady, unhurried comfort of knowing that, slow as they both are, they have never once stopped reaching for each other.

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Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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