

**University of Iceland**  
**School of Humanities**  
**Department of English**

# **Myth and Monster**

*On Writing Beyond the Blessed Wall*

**B.A. Essay**

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## Summary

This B.A. thesis comes in two parts: a novella and its background. The story, *Beyond the Blessed Wall*, is approximately 16,500 words and the exposition is a little over 4,000. Originally called *The Myth of the Fentaur*, the novella was a short story written as a final assignment for a Creative Writing course I attended during my second year under the tutelage of the amazing Dr. Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir. For my thesis, I expanded, rewrote, and edited the original story into a novella and provided an exposition on the writing process.

*Beyond the Blessed Wall* is a fantasy novella that follows the journey of Tiernan, an apprentice mage at the Academy sent to the Blessed Wall for his final assignment. Together with his fellow classmates Asha and Nef, he accompanies the Captain out of the familiar environment of Midway and into the bleak wastes of Granatia. While on their travels, Tiernan's knowledge of his abilities deepens and he learns he may be capable of more than he thinks.

The exposition details many of the decisions I made while writing the story as well as the writing process. I explain my writing and editing style, my efforts towards good dialogue, my worldbuilding, and plot decisions. I also reflect on the story as a whole, discussing what could have been done better and what was difficult to overcome in order to finish the novella.

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*Beyond the Blessed Wall*

By Snorri Sigurðsson

## Chapter 1

### Essence in Resonance

“Hey, bookworm! Put that book down and get in the arena. Now! It’s your turn to fight.”

“Yes, sir!” Tiernan gently placed his precious worn tome on the bench beside him before jumping to his feet and sprinted across the sand-covered ground to the weapons’ rack built into the massive marble wall that separated the audience seats from the arena floor. Snatching up a harness lined with sheathed throwing knives, he began to fasten it across his chest as he hurried towards the arena grounds.

“Hurry up, boy, we haven’t got all day.” The instructor’s voice cracked like a whip as it echoed through the Arena. Alef was rarely patient even on the best of days, so Tiernan and the other apprentices of the Academy had learned quickly to not make the man wait or else ace the consequences.

“Coming, sir!” Tiernan hastened his step, almost running into one of the free-standing pillars that sustained the Arena’s wards, protecting the audience from any stray magic, allowing the combatants to focus on their fight. Dodging at the very last second, Tiernan felt the hairs on his body raise as he passed through the first ward. Arranged in three concentric ovals, parallel with the outer marble wall, the pillars separated the arena grounds from the staging grounds, known as the Circuit, where the weapons’ racks stood, healers paced with worried expressions, and participants waited between bouts.

Tiernan fumbled with the clasp of the harness and gave a final pull to the tightening straps just as he reached where Alef stood near one end of the oval-shaped arena grounds, impatiently tapping his heel on the sawdust covered floor. His muscular figure and plethora of scars that spiderwebbed his skin marked his years of veterancy as an Agent for the Academy, though he served the school today mostly as one of the Adept, training new apprentices.

Standing beside him, a good head taller, Asha shot Tiernan a wide, excited grin. Her tan skin, jet-black hair, and deep, dark eyes might have been pretty on someone else, but her brutish features and robust frame negated the beauty of the rest. Not that she lamented this fact; the last man who had asked her out had left with a broken nose and a couple of

chipped front teeth. Her constant twitching or fidgeting, in combination with her tall stature and appearance, gave any who met her a sense that she would start a brawl at any time, any place, with anyone unlucky enough to be in her immediate vicinity.

“Throwing knives, eh?” Asha rolled her shoulders and cracked her knuckles. “Got something new planned for today?”

“I’ll have to if I want to have a chance at beating you someday,” Tiernan quipped, returning her grin, though his anxiety erased it quickly.

Asha snorted. “You’ll need something stronger than those brittle things to beat me,” she said and palmed her fist in emphasis.

“You two done?” Alef’s fingers tapped against his belt as he stared at them with a look of profound impatience.

“Yes, sir,” Tiernan answered. “Sorry, sir.”

“Take your positions, then,” Alef directed, gesturing Asha to the opposite end of the arena from where another apprentice was retreating through the rows of pillars, limping heavily after their bout with Asha. Alef gestured for Tiernan to stand next to him, where Asha had stood previously. “So, have you been practicing?”

“As much as I can, sir,” Tiernan responded. “Though I’m still having some difficulties. I haven’t been able to resonate with any one thing consistently, sir.” Tiernan’s essence resonated with other essences, allowing him to sense the presences of every essence around him; an ability relatively rare and highly valued for its capabilities. Essence dwells in the soul of all things, the very thing that allows them existence. For living beings, this essence is stronger, and of these, a few have the ability to control their own essence and, very rarely, other essences that resonate with their own. Humans with this ability are variously named mages, sorcerers, witches, or warlocks, but all have this one ability in common. The ability to resonate with a certain type of object and create a harmony with it, thus gaining complete control over their harmonic object. In other words, magic.

“We’ll focus on that later,” Alef said, “since I doubt you’ll need to resonate with anything during your first fight. Though I feel I must remind you.” He turned to Tiernan with disapproving eyes. “A mage’s strength depends on their ability to resonate. Having complete power over something beats having to wrap your essence around it just to make it move.”

A silence fell over them as Tiernan suffered Alef's uncomfortable gaze before his eyes softened, his hand reaching out to pat Tiernan encouragingly on the shoulder.

"Speaking of," Alef continued in a softer tone. "How were those control exercises I gave you?"

"Excellent, sir," Tiernan replied, glad to change the subject. "I'm progressing steadily, sir. I managed to lift the half-tonne weights yesterday." Tiernan practically swelled with pride. In control, he excelled all the other apprentices. Not limited by a mage's resonance, the ability to extend their essence beyond their bodies to move any physical object was simply called *control*. Yet, though it was an ability all mages possessed, independent of their resonance, few chose to nurture the skill as it was much harder and required far more focus than simply resonating with an object to manipulate it.

"Well done," Alef said, giving Tiernan another pat on the shoulder. "I'd like to see some of the Adepts do that."

"Thank you, sir." Tiernan could not meet Alef's eyes, feeling awkward at the compliment.

"Onto the next question, then." Alef's tone made it clear he knew the next subject would make Tiernan uncomfortable.

Tiernan's heart sank.

"Have you managed a manifestation yet?"

"No, sir." Tiernan stung from this, as essence manifestation was seen as one of the most elementary abilities of a mage. The ability to manifest one's essence into its harmonic object, creating rather than manipulating, was usually seen as the first mark of an apprentice, though Tiernan had been allowed to proceed with his studies without it.

"Nothing yet, but I'm still trying."

It was a lie they were both familiar with, as Tiernan had stopped trying after his thousandth failure.

"Very well, but keep trying," Alef said, the words a routine at this point. "Right then. Let's not keep Asha waiting any longer." Alef turned and walked to the edge of the arena, halfway between the two apprentices but well clear of the space between them.

"Asha, are you ready?" he shouted.

“Ready,” Asha shouted from across the arena, an anticipatory grin spread across her face. Tiernan knew she was eternally itching for a fight; she could easily lose herself in the flurry of fists and essence that came with it. Tiernan hoped against hope that she held the reins of her excitement tightly during the duel. The healers probably knew Tiernan’s body better than he did at this point.

“Tiernan?”

Tiernan took a deep breath and focused inward, feeling at his essence. How it flowed through him like a steady river, gently breaking at the banks. He allowed some of it to flow out from him, like tendrils of energy that warped the air like a mirage, and immediately seized control of them, manipulating them to do as he commanded. Tiernan could feel his consciousness interwoven with the essence; an extension of his own body. He stretched.

“Ready, sir.”

A heartbeat’s pause. Then, Alef shouted.

“Fight!”

Tiernan could sense Asha infusing her whole body with her essence. Her resonance, too, was of a rare kind as she could resonate with physical power. Manifesting her essence and infusing her body with her it allowed her to become stronger, faster, and most importantly, deadlier. In the blink of an eye she had crossed the arena and leaped at Tiernan, attempting a rough tackle.

Reacting instinctually, Tiernan drove his essence downward into the ground, launching him into the air and out of Asha’s trajectory. Simultaneously, a dozen translucent tendrils shot and wrapped themselves around the hilts of the throwing knives strapped to his chest, launching them in Asha’s direction below him in a storm of blades.

Asha dodged easily, letting out a roar of laughter as she crouched low to the ground before launching herself into the air with a powerful leap, thirty feet in the air. Seizing Tiernan’s leg in a powerful grip, she threw him towards the ground, her strength an irresistible force that made him fly faster than she fell.

Bracing himself for the impact, Tiernan again thrust his essence down to the arena floor, hoping it would lessen the impact somewhat. Breath left his body in a rush as he landed on his back, pain flaring across his entire body. Tentatively, Tiernan pulled his

essence back, feeling for any serious wounds as it passed back under his skin. Thankfully, he sensed nothing worse than bruising, though he suspected his back would be a tapestry of blue and purple in the morning.

“Stop!” Alef cried out. “Duel goes to Asha.” Tiernan felt the sand beneath him shift as Alef approached, riding a wave of sand. He kneeled over Tiernan, his eyes searching for any critical injury with military efficiency. Satisfied that Tiernan was in no dire need of a healer, he rose and quickly turned on Asha.

“Just *what* have I told you about using deadly force in practice?” His voice dripped with venomous anger.

“Well, I can’t become a better fighter if I don’t push myself, can I?” Asha replied snidely. “And neither can he. It’s not my fault he can’t keep up.”

“That is no excuse, Asha,” Alef reproached. “These mutual exercises are not just meant to flex your brute strength to beat up your classmates. We have those dummies in the training yard for a reason.”

Tiernan knew Asha well enough to see the struggle between guilt and indignation on her face. “I’m fine, sir.” He groaned as he sat up. “Truly. Nothing broken, nothing to worry about.”

“Nothing to worry about?” Alef’s piercing eyes turned to Tiernan in disapproval. “Oh, I disagree. A careless warrior in training is a careless warrior in battle. And a careless warrior *will* get themselves – or their comrades – killed. I do not condone carelessness in my apprentices. Are we clear?” The last was directed at Asha.

“Fine,” Asha grunted in response.

“Excuse me?” Alef stood and faced Asha, barely concealed rage in his eyes.

Immediately aware of her situation, Asha snapped to attention and shouted, “yes, sir!”

“Better,” Alef said and turned his back on her. “Now, get out of my sight.” The instructor pulled Tiernan up by his arm and looked him in the eye. “Are you sure you are fine, Tiernan?”

“Yes, sir,” Tiernan answered, suppressing a wince. “Truly.”

“Very well,” Alef sighed. “Nef, get in here!”

Alarmed at hearing who would be his next opponent, Tiernan broke out in a cold sweat. “But sir, you said I wouldn’t have to try to resonate today.”

“No, I said you wouldn’t have to in the fight against Asha. I said nothing about your second duel.”

“But I’m not good enough, yet. I told you, sir.”

“Look, Tiernan.” Alef put one hand on his shoulder. “I know you still feel insecure about not having mastered resonance yet, but you won’t improve unless you practice. And it should be considerably easier for you since you’ve already fought Nef several times before and should be familiar with his essence by now.” Seeing the concerned look on Tiernan’s face, Alef sighed and continued. “Listen to me, Tiernan. It’s not all about how powerful you are or how much control you have. Both are insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Inferior. What’s important – what magic is all about – is ingenuity and perseverance. And I suspect you have both to spare.”

Tiernan could feel his face blush from the complement and looked away in embarrassment only to see Nef enter the arena.

Thin and pale, Nef looked eternally ill. His shoulder-length black hair and richly dyed clothing marked him as a member of the Delian nobility, though Tiernan knew Nef had not seen the court since he was a babe, sent away to the Academy because of his mother’s indiscretions.

“Take your position, Tiernan.” The instructor gestured to where Asha had stood at the beginning of their duel.

“Yes, sir.” Tiernan tried to ignore the aches and shooting pains that plagued him as he walked to the other end of the arena and took his position at the marked spot. He could hardly believe that despite the pain he was in, he did not have a single broken bone. Sending a tendril of essence through his body, he noted again how lucky he had been. Distracted by his relief, Tiernan was shaken from his trance as the sand beneath him shifted, knocking him off balance.

“Tiernan, are you sure you are all right?” Alef shouted from the other end of the arena.

“Sorry, sir,” Tiernan shouted back. “Just got a bit distracted. I’m fine, sir, I promise.”

“Very well.” Leaving Nef’s side, Alef rode a wave of sand to the spot where he had stood during the previous duel before shouting again, “Are you ready, Tiernan?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Are you ready, Nef?”

“Aye, sir.” Nef’s eager voice cut across the arena like a knife, most likely amplified by his own powers. As with Asha, Nef was always itching for a fight, though it was the glory of victory he sought, not the fight itself. Tiernan had seen Nef’s lust for prestige every time they duelled and was half-frightened by the intensity of Nef’s zeal.

“Fight!”

Tiernan was familiar with Nef’s style of fighting and felt no surprise as a dozen Nefs appeared in a circle around him, each equipped with a different weapon. He suppressed a flinch as they all took a swing as one, though he did cringe internally as one clone aimed a mallet between his legs.

Instead, he closed his eyes and let his essence burst from him in all directions. Letting his consciousness flow outward with the branching tendrils of translucent essence, he stumbled as a storm of sensations and presences hit him as he resonated with every living thing in his vicinity. *Focus*, he thought to himself and began to hone in on Nef’s presence. Familiar with its feel, Tiernan found him quickly, not three feet in front of him. The presence suddenly blurred, causing Tiernan to jump away, barely dodging Nef’s fist.

Shocked at the reaction, Nef lost control of his illusions which faltered and vanished in a flash of light. Seeing the opportunity, Tiernan capitalized on Nef’s shock without pause and, with a quick swipe of the leg, he brought Nef tumbling down to the ground.

“Duel goes to Tiernan,” Alef announced from the edge of the arena.

“Good fight,” Tiernan said as he reached out his hand to Nef. “You moved quicker than I expected.”

Nef took Tiernan’s outstretched hand and pulled himself up, a look of frustrated shock on his face. “You are mistaken,” he said sulkily, if a little proud. “I was halfway across the arena before the start of the duel. You simply failed to notice.”

“Why didn’t you just attack me immediately, then?” Tiernan scratched his head. “You would have won instantly.”

“I—“ Nef started but quieted as Alef walked up to them.

“That was impressive, Nef, if a bit simple.” Alef’s compliment seemed to do little for Nef’s mood. “A dozen clones is no easy feat but it’s still not very impressive in its creativity.”

“A dozen and one, sir. That ‘me’ at the start was another clone.”

“Ah, I see.” Alef sounded surprised, realizing he, too, had been deceived. “Then I withdraw my remark regarding your creativity, but you can’t hesitate like that in a fight. Especially if it’s just to gloat.”

“Understood, sir,” Nef said and Tiernan could sense his bruised pride.

Alef dismissed Tiernan with a wave and a recommendation that he see the healer as soon as possible.

Tiernan strode through the forest of pillars again, stumbling as the strange sensation of passing through the ward made his mind go numb. Returning to the spot where he had sat previously, he found Asha waiting for him, rifling through the tome he had been studying. With a carelessness that made Tiernan grow cold, she flipped through the ancient book, barely skimming the words.

“I’m sorry, you know,” Asha said, tossing the tome to Tiernan who caught it gingerly and sighed in relief. “I went too far, I know that. I just have a problem holding back, that’s all.”

“I know, Asha.” Tiernan sat down next to her and opened the tome on the page he had left it. “But you should be more cautious. If not for the safety of myself and the other apprentices, then for yourself. You could easily get expelled if one of your outbursts ends up permanently hurting someone. Neither of us want that, though I suspect some of the other apprentices don’t agree.”

He glanced up from the book to see Pyre enter the arena. Her flame-red hair hung past her shoulders in flowing curls, catching the light now and then in a way that made it look as if it were truly on fire. No-one called Pyre by her old name anymore. Long ago, she had had enough of trousers and shirts and transitioned to dresses and skirts, adopting a new name alongside the new wardrobe. Quite a good name, too, Tiernan thought, considering it suited her fiery temperament perfectly.

Alef spoke briefly to her before retreating to his usual spot. After making sure each contestant was ready, he shouted again, “fight!”

In an instant, the arena was engulfed in flames that rose a hundred feet in the air, though the pillars' wards kept them at bay. Tiernan covered his eyes against the sudden blaze, clutching the tome tight to his body, afraid the heat of the flames might singe it. He had no doubt the duel would end in Pyre's favour and was soon confirmed in his convictions as he heard Alef shout over the roar of the flames. "Duel goes to Pyre!"

As the flames died down, Tiernan could see Nef frantically patting his singed clothes, not five feet from where Pyre stood. Apparently, he had tried the same trick twice, not realizing Pyre had seen his duel with Tiernan and clearly expected the manoeuvre.

"By storms, that was stupid," Asha said, blinking stars from her eyes.

"Not stupid," Tiernan corrected, "merely thoughtless."

"Is there a difference?" Asha snorted.

"Yes."

Carefully, Tiernan opened his book again and settled in his seat to read.

"How can you read that?" Asha immediately interrupted his reading, unfamiliar with the etiquette of bookworms.

"What do you mean?"

"That book," Asha explained. "It's so old. Unreadable. Who writes like that anymore? And who'd want to read this stuff/shit? 'The Monster of Malelon.' Sounds so boring."

"It's *not* boring," Tiernan insisted. "At least not to me. These are the stories of my ancestors, passed down through generations. Stories that tell the history of Granatia; of my people. Stories of the Stone Heart, the Blessed Wall, and the monstrous Fentaur; the truths of my country."

"And do you actually believe in them?" Nef seemed to materialise out of thin air, nonchalantly leaning up against the wall beside the bench. "You think they actually exist? The Fentaur and the Stone Heart? Are you a child?" Clearly, a second defeat had done little to improve Nef's temperament. Though usually bearable and rather infrequent, Nef's relentless remarks turned venomous whenever his mood worsened.

"Oh, give him a break," Asha said, tired of Nef's bottomless supply of snide barbs. "Just, let him believe what he believes. And, meanwhile, you could stop sticking your pale, pimply nose in other peoples' business or else I'll stick it up your arse." No apprentice

other than Asha made an effort to argue with Nef, choosing the occasional silence over incessant jeers. Asha, however, had no such reservations, usually returning them in equal measure.

“Thanks,” Tiernan whispered to Asha as Nef stalked away, chest puffed and nose high in the air; the very image of affronted noble dignity. “But you didn’t have to do that, you know. Usually it’s just better to ignore him when he’s being like that.”

“True, but it’s much more fun to play with him a little,” she murmured back with a grin. “If only it weren’t so easy.” Picking up a stray rock off the floor, Asha hurled it at the pillars with casual, fluid motion. Fast as a diving falcon, the projectile shattered in a cloud of dust as it met the invisible barrier between the pillars. “I’m not ‘fraid of him,” she continued as she searched the ground for another rock suitable for immediate disintegration. “If he throws a tantrum like a child, I’m gonna respond in kind. And he called *you* a child.”

Though grateful for Asha’s support, Tiernan could not help but feel uncomfortable with the confrontation. Turning his focus back on the book in his lap, he flipped the page to an illustration of the Fentaur, intimately familiar to Tiernan.

The illustration covered the entire page; the beast’s giant form detailed in the extreme, making Tiernan’s skin crawl in response. Though resembling a wolf, the beast stood tall on two canine legs. Thick, black, grey-speckled fur did little to hide the Fentaur’s strength, its muscles thicker than any man’s. Its claws were wicked and curved, each as long as a dagger and sharper than a razor. A grinning muzzle protruded from its face, filled with twisted fangs some of which stuck out at odd angles. But despite all this, it was the eyes that evoked Tiernan’s fear. Overflowing with fury and bloodlust, they were the spawn of nightmares; rabid malevolence made manifest.

“But do you though?” Asha asked, hefting a new rock, testing its weight absent-mindedly. “Believe those stories, I mean.”

“Of course, I do.” Tiernan flipped the page, though the image still haunted him. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know, Tier.” Another cloud of dust bloomed as the second rock met the barrier. “Logic?”

Both fell silent as Alef's voice rose again from the arena to start the bout between Pyre and Mara, a tall, blonde apprentice who Tiernan knew could manipulate all physical objects with her resonance; a worthy opponent, indeed. The two were the Academy's most formidable apprentices so all eyes turned in their direction as the fight began. Pyre's flames immediately shot out in Mara's direction but, just as quickly, were blocked by a wall of stone rising from the ground. Without missing a beat, Pyre launched a hail of fireballs over the stone construct as a snake of roiling water struck from the side of the newly formed wall. A pillar of flame burst from the ground, stopping it right in its tracks in a massive explosion of steam. On the other side of the wall, Mara waved her hand nonchalantly and a gust of wind blew the flaming hail off course.

"By storms," Asha breathed in awe. "What I'd do to be in there right now. I think I'd actually break a sweat in a fight like that."

Tiernan tried not to think what this said about his duelling skills as he watched the fight continue, a magic-born marvel. Though Pyre was outmatched in terms of power, her ingenuity was astonishing. Whenever the fight's tide turned against her, she would dodge away by intentionally detonating an explosion that launched her away from harm. Mara, however, was relentless, sending attack after attack Pyre's way without mercy or relent. A wall of stone here, a jet of water there, a wall of wind buffeting or blocking every single one of Pyre's attacks.

"Draw!" Suddenly, the duel was over. Pyre lay in a heap at the base of a pillar, having been caught by a stray stream of water that hurled her off to the edge of the arena. At the same time, Mara had been launched a dozen feet into the air by a pillar of flame that had somehow gotten past her defences, and now lay still on the ground, unconscious.

A team of healers rushed to the two apprentices' sides, treating their injuries with expert efficiency.

"You ask me of logic, Asha," Tiernan said as he wiped the sweat from his brow, whether caused by the heat or the intensity of the fight, he did not know. "Fighting like that isn't logical. Power like that. It bends the laws of nature to the breaking point. No wonder they're considered the Academy's strongest." Tiernan sighed, relieved he had not been either combatant's bout partner today. He had had enough burns and broken bones on their account.

“Asha. Tiernan.” A sudden silence spread across the arena at the voice as all eyes turned in its direction. A tall woman, her skin covered in scars that stretched her face into a ghoulish visage, stood in the entranceway to the staging ground. Nef stood at her side, seeming a little paler than usual.

“Come with me,” the Captain commanded in a voice that would have carried over a raging battlefield – and most definitely had – before marching briskly into the shadows of the hallway behind her, not bothering to wait for them to join her.

Scrambling to gather their things, Tiernan and Asha sprinted to catch up with the Captain, anxious to know what she wanted with the three apprentices.

As he stepped into the hallway, Tiernan could feel the eyes of everyone in the Arena follow them through the portal and thought he could sense a strange mixture of curiosity and worry emanating from the crowd.

## Chapter 2

### The Captain's Quarters

The Arena stood at the heart of the Academy's campus, a tree hundred feet tall dome, casting its shadow on the marketgoers that swarmed the nearby streets.

The smells and sounds of the Midway Market hit Tiernan like a tidal wave as he exited the Arena, following the Captain through the Arena's gates. The enormous dome of the building cast the street into a deep shadow, the setting autumn sun's golden rays lending its final light to the tops of the city's towers, so they sparkled like gems in the twilight sky.

At the bottom of the Arena steps, they were met with the current of people that flowed through the market all hours of the day. Though normally a near impenetrable wall, the crowd parted before the Captain, creating a bubble around the party as they crossed the stream. The inquisitive gazes and whispered voices of the crowd enveloped them even as they started up the steps on the other side, directly across from the Arena.

Tiernan's breath caught as it always did when he was confronted with the majesty of the Arcana Arx, the Academy's main administrative building. The massive building was made entirely of black marble, veins of white and richest blue a delicate lattice on the darkness. In place of clear windows were panes of obsidian glass like the maws to the void, lending the whole institute an eerie appearance, not at all unnoticed by the city's inhabitants. Crowned by a tower at each cardinal corner, the fortress was only second to the Arena in height.

Once through the massive oaken doors of the Arcana Arx, the Captain turned right and led them down a wide hallway intricately carved from floor to ceiling with the history of the Academy.

"What do you think she wants with us?" Asha whispered excitedly to Tiernan as they followed the Captain. "Do you think they'll finally send us out on our final assignment? Or..." Her face darkened, "do you think she found out about the pie I stole from the kitchens?"

“Pies, Asha,” Tiernan said under his breath, stressing the S. “Plural. And, no, I don’t think she knows. Because if she did, she would have just stripped you in the arena and flogged you for all to see.”

“Or, perhaps, she plans to torture and expel you in private,” Nef interjected. “Doubt the headmaster would like it much if she killed a student in public. Even if you are a duchess, unbelievable as it is.”

“Oh, shut up, Nef,” Asha snapped, turning to him as they walked. “We weren’t talking to you anyway, so leave off, nosey bastard.” She glared at him.

“Asha, I told you,” Tiernan said, his tone begging Asha to lower her voice. “Leave him alone.”

“If you three are done yapping like some street mongrels,” the Captain said, letting a silent threat hang in the air for a moment. “In here. Watch your step.” She gestured to an open door behind her, the plain wood a stark contrast to the intricate decorations of the doorway; the entrance to one of the Academy’s towers, a stone staircase visible through the portal.

Driven by the Captain ever higher, the three apprentices climbed the stairs in complete silence, afraid to anger the Captain further. The stairway seemed to spiral upwards infinitely, the monotonous climb only broken by the thin arrowslits in the wall every ten steps or so to light the way. By the hundredth step, Tiernan’s legs had just started to ache, and by the two hundredth, his breath was becoming laboured. Another two hundred later, Tiernan could feel his legs start to shake with each step, but the Captain’s unrelenting pace forced him onwards.

Just as Tiernan’s knees decided they had endured enough abuse, they reached the underside of a thick oak floor hatch set in the ceiling, marking the end of their an achingly long ascent. Reaching past the exhausted apprentices, the Captain lifted the heavy hatch without apparent strain, revealing a room that served as both the Captain’s office and personal quarters.

Starkly furnished, austere, and completely without decorations, the soldierly space perfectly matched the Captain; an ascetic’s room stripped down to the bare essentials. A simple bed, a small cabinet with a steel washbowl placed dead-centre, and a large desk meticulously organized, scrolls stacked and ordered in one corner, feather and ink just right.

The only sign of personality in the room was the massive ornate weapons' stand that stood opposite the desk, half hidden behind the now open floor hatch.

Stepping over to inspect the weapons, Tiernan nearly impaled himself on a carved wooden spear that jutted from the crowded stand. The dizzyingly large collection of weapons included everything from the most mundane sword of the Midway garrison to knives, bows, axes, and hammers whose origins Tiernan could only guess at.

"Did my weapons distract you?" The Captain stood at her desk, obviously impatient to finish briefing these simple, airheaded children and be rid of their presence.

"Apologies, Captain," Tiernan said, snapping to attention, immediately followed by Asha and Nef.

The Captain huffed mockingly at their display and turned to her desk, gesturing to a map unfurled on its top, pinned down by three delicate knives and a giant waraxe at the corners. At the Captain's wave, a wicked dagger of burnished silver coalesced from the shadows above the desk, the tip hovering inches above the paper. An inky droplet dewed on the blade and dripped down the edge, evaporating into shadows before reaching the map. Tiernan had never seen such a casual display of essence manifestation before and marvelled at the Captain's skill. Manifesting something so delicate generally required immense concentration and training, yet she made it seem as effortless as breathing.

"Do you all know what this map depicts?" the Captain asked them indifferently.

"The north part of Granatia, Captain," Asha replied promptly. "These are—"

"The northern reaches of the Petrian mountain range, to be exact, Captain," Nef interrupted. Tiernan noticed Asha shoot him a baleful glare which fortunately went unnoticed by both Nef and the Captain.

"To be *exact*," said the Captain mockingly, tilting her head to address Nef directly, "this is a map of the Blessed Wall and remnants of the Ruined City that lay beyond." Her gaze shifted to Tiernan, her eyes locked on his with an unnerving intensity.

"Malelon." Tiernan knew the name by heart.

"Well, colour me impressed," the Captain remarked with a sarcastic smile. "Few know the city's true name these days. Though I'm not surprised you do, Tiernan. After all, you have been obsessed with the city since you arrived here at the Academy, have you not?"

The hair on the back of Tiernan's head rose as he met the Captain's all-too-knowing gaze. Had she been watching him? Why? Her intense eyes lingered on him for a moment before shifting back to the map.

"We have received reports that the Wall's wards have begun to weaken," the Captain said, her voice cold and aloof again. "Because of this, the Fentaur's attacks have increased enough for Granatia to feel a need to request the Academy's assistance.

"Pardon me, Captain." Nef voice sounded a little shrill to Tiernan's ears. "You mean to tell me that the Fentaur is real?"

Tiernan elbowed Asha harshly as she began to cough to conceal her laughter.

Looking up from the map, the Captain gave Nef a disdainful look. "Why, of course, dimwit. Now shut up and try not to interrupt me again or I'll throw you out of the balcony."

Knowing this was no idle threat, Nef closed his mouth and clenched his jaw, his eyes fixed on his feet.

"As I was saying," the Captain continued as she turned back to the map. "The Fentaur has become relentless, attacking not only on moonless nights as it used to, when the light of the moon that powers the Wall's wards was absent. Even a half-moon is barely enough to contain it now." Taking the hovering silver dagger by the hilt, the Captain flung it so the blade lodged itself firmly in the wooden desk, piercing the map near the inky lines of the Blessed Wall.

"So, Granatia has asked the Academy to send a force – a whole legion of mages, no less – to reenchant the Blessed Wall." A mysterious grin spread across the Captain's scarred face as she looked at the apprentices. "It's a two-month journey and another month of hard work, but I think this will serve well for some lucky apprentice's final assignment. And seeing as how both Pyre and Mara have been given their own assignments already..." The Captain looked directly at Asha. "Well, to answer your earlier question: Yes. It is finally time for your graduation. And this mission shall serve as your final test. We leave in the morrow, at dawn."

## Chapter 3

### Midway Market

Open from dawn to dusk to dawn again, the Midway Market was an eternal river of lights and sounds, teeming with life and – more importantly – overflowing with gold. Stalls lined the streets in such numbers that it would take a full week to visit them all and many a shopkeeper had been forced to move their wares to the street lest the innumerable stalls block all entry to their shops. Taverns and inns occupied every available corner, more often than not a package deal, though Tiernan rarely had a chance to visit.

Though he had lived at the Academy since he could remember, the throngs of people always disconcerted him. The crowd's immense presence overwhelmed him, a single entity made up of a multitude essences bearing on his senses like waves on a cliff-face, washing him away one miniscule grain of sand at a time. Though the night market was slightly less busy than during the day, a clandestine undercurrent emerged soon after the sun set. Many shops replaced their merchandise with that of more nefarious purposes to suit the needs of their new clients. Still, Tiernan preferred the relative quiet of the night-time market, despite the dangers.

“Young sir, a moment, please,” a tall man shouted from the other side of a stall bearing a dizzying array of knives, dirks, and daggers. Averting his gaze, Tiernan hurriedly made his way past the stall, the merchant's shouts gradually becoming inaudible by the market's noise.

Tiernan strode with a purpose down the crowded street, running through the list of essentials he needed for the morning's journey in his head. Stopping at an apothecary's, he bought bandages, salve, and several bundles of different dried herbs, including a small pouch of burning blossom, used in ointments for frostbite which Tiernan imagined would be necessary in the frozen wastes of Granatia.

“Now watch yerself, little lady,” Tiernan could hear the knife merchant warn from his stall, loud enough to carry through the noise. “You'll cut yerself if you—” A sudden yelp caused the crowd to ripple as several marketgoers turned towards the sound. Turning

around himself, Tiernan spotted Pyre standing at the merchant's booth, a long dagger of red steel extended from her outstretched arm, pointed at the man's chest. A faint blue flame flickered over the blade.

"Oh, do shut up, little man." With a flick of the wrist, Pyre flipped the knife into the air, casually catching it by the blade and handing it to the merchant. "There you go. And see?" She raised her arms, pulling back the long sleeves of her dress to show her pale, unscathed hands. "Not a cut in sight."

"Pyre," Tiernan called, waving her over, away from the merchant, knowing her temper could flare from smouldering to calamitous in a heartbeat.

"Well, hello there, Tiernan," Pyre said as she reached him, taking him by the arm and leading him away down the street. Following the everchanging current of people, they seamlessly melded with the amorphous crowd. Made up of more backgrounds than possible to count, the Midway market was the only place on the continent where members of all three countries – and some few members of the lands across the sea – mingled in harmony; or, as near-harmoniously as possible for a populace to be. Ranish sailors bought sugar and herbs from Delian merchants while Granatian masons and miners sold stone and iron, sculpted or rough. And when the business was done, people of all sorts gathered for a mug of Fellish mead and wine at the many taverns the city contained.

"What leads an innocent little mouse like you down to the dark market? A little love potion for your lady love?" A coy grin spread across Pyre's face. "Or are you perhaps here to procure a poison? Oh, please tell me it's for Asha. I'd love to see her choke on her own blood."

"That's—" Tiernan struggled to find the right words. "Vivid."

"You are allowed to say 'horrid', Tiernan," Pyre teased. "I won't take offense. In fact, I take it as a complement."

"Very well," Tiernan said. "That's *horrid*, Pyre. You shouldn't say things like that. Especially about another apprentice."

"I say what I think, and I think what I will, thank you very much." Pyre sniffed in mock indignation. "And I happen to think she's a brutish, untrustworthy bitch."

Making the wise decision to stay quiet, Tiernan let Pyre lead him further through the thoroughfare, passing stalls and shouting merchants. A couple of urchins ran by them shrieking as they dodged through the crowd with their precious lot of bread and pastries.

“Get back here, you lousy tykes,” a guardsman shouted as he jostled through the masses in pursuit.

“The market’s full of life tonight,” Tiernan said as a second guardsman pushed past them.

“You don’t go out much, do you?”

Caught off-guard by the comment’s biting nonchalance, Tiernan fumbled for an answer.

“Oh, relax,” Pyre said soothingly. “It’s just banter. You’re always so tense, Tier. You need to learn to just have fun.”

“I know, I know.” Tiernan sighed. “It’s just that... it’s just so *loud*.”

Catching his meaning, Pyre stroked his arm in consolation. “I know how it feels. Not being able to control your powers. How overwhelming it can be.” She released his arm and stepped in front, locking eyes. “But you can control them. You just have to practice. You *have* to. ‘Cause if you don’t, your inexperience may hurt you. Or someone close to you. Remember this, Tiernan.” A dark flame smouldered in her eyes. “A wildfire consumes all it touches. Don’t let it consume you.”

Tiernan could sense there was more to the statement than Pyre let on, but chose to keep quiet, not sure how she would react to his questions.

A moment of silence passed before Pyre took Tiernan’s arm again and led him further down the busy street.

“So, where to next?” Pyre said, back to her regular, loud self. “You’re going to the north, right? Do you have a good cloak? Snowboots? Burning blossom? I hear it’s essential for those travelling in the winter months.” She gestured at a nearby apothecary whose wares seemed to be much cheaper than the one Tiernan had visited earlier, much to his displeasure. “Or maybe you’re done shopping for the day? Shall we find you a brothel, then?” She winked at him.

“I... I can't... No, thanks.” Tiernan flushed. “I should probably get back to the Academy soon. I still have some packing to do, and I have to be at the Eastgate stables by dawn.”

“Ah, well.” Pyre sighed, letting go of Tiernan's arm. “Yeah, it's probably best you hurry, then. Dawn's in two hours and the Captain might strip you naked, saddle you up, and ride you all the way to Crún if you're a minute late.”

“Again, how delightfully vivid you are, Pyre,” Tiernan said, laughing. As he turned to leave, Tiernan remembered something the Captain had said. “Oh, and congratulations on your finally getting your final assignment! And a solo mission, no less, though you definitely deserve it.”

“I haven't been assigned a mission,” Pyre said, sounding confused.

“But she told me—”

“Well, she's not told me anything.”

Tiernan could sense Pyre's temper begin to rise. “It's probably just a misunderstanding,” he said in a pacifying tone. “Maybe I heard wrong or maybe she's just yet to tell you”

“Yeah, sure,” Pyre said, sounding anything but convinced, her pensive gaze wandering over the market. “You sure are going to have fun in that mission of yours, Tiernan. The Captain. Asha. It's bound to be a thrill.” Giving Tiernan a wry smile, she turned and shouldered her way into the market crowd, leaving Tiernan to fend for himself in the chaos of the Midway Market.

## Chapter 4

### Stone Heart

The road to the Granatian capital was worn and winding.

A month had passed since Tiernan had left Midway. A whole month of saddle sores and lumpy bedrolls with nothing but gruel, stale bread, and salted jerky to eat. At first the landscape had been the sole pleasurable part of the journey, apple orchards and acres full of golden wheat stretching all the way to the horizon, though that was soon replaced by a lifeless white waste of ice and snow. Tiernan was beyond miserable as he daydreamed of warm meals and soft beds.

The legion had made camp off to one side of the road, tents clustered tightly together to ward against the frigid winds that wailed over the bleak landscape. A cast-iron pot hovered over the campfire at the centre of camp, constantly guarded by a surly pyromancer cursing his luck under his breath, in case the relentless gale managed to extinguish it.

Most of the legion's members huddled together in the command tent, glad for the shelter and the braziers' warmth. Except for Tiernan and Asha, who stood watch on a small hill by the road, devoid of cover and heat save for what their thick fur coats afforded them.

Trying to keep his mind away from the cold, Tiernan practiced, letting his essence flow from his body and twisting it into various shapes. Concentrating, he formed it into a sword whose edge cleaved the frigid gale, producing a low whine. Pleased with himself, he released the form and watched as the translucent tendrils of his essence unwound themselves like a string unravelling. A moment passed before he seized control again and forced them into the shape of a shield, providing a small refuge from the wind. Tiernan closed his eyes to enjoy the respite for a little longer before releasing his hold again.

He was certainly pleased with how his control was progressing, though he knew it meant little if he remained unable to manifest his essence into its physical resonant object. True, it had been long since he last tried, but each failure had made him despair that he may never succeed. And now, frozen to the core in the middle of nowhere, desperately in need of distraction, all Tiernan could think was: what better time than the present?

Closing his eyes, Tiernan focused, feeling the presences of the nearby essences wash over him. Blessedly, the frost-covered land had little in terms of life though he could feel seeds of life beneath the surface of the frozen earth, dormant plants biding their time, waiting for the spring thaw. Asha's essence was an undeniable presence beside him, strong as stone and hard as steel. Extending his senses further, he felt the heat of the legion's combined essence behind him, a bonfire raging against the cold. Tiernan counted each flame of life within the camp, some hundred and fifty, most of them huddling together in the command tent, and another two hundred just outside the encampment border where he knew the horses to be.

Tiernan reached out his senses even further until he could feel a fox huddling in its den on the next hill over. A little at a time, he extended his senses until he could feel everything in a mile radius, a rushing river of essence, thrumming with life all around him.

Even below him, far beneath the snow and ice, he could feel...

Tiernan opened his eyes in astonishment. Something ancient and powerful beyond belief. A dormant mass of essence, far beneath the surface, root-like tendrils reaching out into the faraway wastes beyond Tiernan's senses.

Could this be... the Stone Heart?

Stunned, he could do nothing but marvel at the sheer immensity of the presence before Asha jolted him from his stupor.

"By fire, why's it so cold, Tier?" Asha said, her chattering teeth making her words near unintelligible. "I can't feel my face anymore because of this fucking wind." Crouching behind Tiernan, she dug her face into the back of his fur coat. "I'm just gonna stay here a moment, Tier." She sighed. "Ahh, much better."

"Sure, just use me as a windbreak," Tiernan muttered through his numb lips. "Not as if I'm freezing here, too."

"Just what are you imbeciles doing?" Nef's voice came from nowhere, causing Asha to leap away from Tiernan, hurtling him into the snow in the process.

"Cut that out, Nef," Asha yelled, her face flushed. "By ice, I hate it when you sneak up on me like that." Her head swivelled side to side as she tried to pinpoint the source of Nef's voice.

"Oh, am I interrupting something?" asked Nef's voice icily.

“You slimy little snake.” Asha swiped at the air in the direction of Nef’s voice. “Show yourself, you liverless coward, or I swear by stone that I’ll—“

“Asha, don’t,” Tiernan interrupted, struggling to lift himself from the snow. “Leave it. And Nef.” His eyes fixed on where he knew Nef to be, sensing his presence clear as day. “You shouldn’t use your powers like this. It’s beneath you.”

Seemingly materializing from thin air behind Asha, Nef stared back at Tiernan, a slight look of shock on his face.

“How did you—“ Nef was cut off as Asha whipped around and grabbed him by the collar, lifting him up so that they were face to face.

“I’ve told you, creep,” Asha muttered menacingly. “Leave us alone, or I’ll gut you like a hog, you little son of a whore.”

“A man-whore, actually.” Nef met her sword-sharp glare with daggers, not daunted by her threats, though his defiance was somewhat undermined by his feet not touching the ground. “My father may be a *gentleman*, and I am not ashamed of it, Asha. Now, if you would be so kind, put me down.”

“Let him go, Asha,” Tiernan said as he rose and dusted the snow off his clothes.

With a grunt, she complied and released Nef, dropping him a good two feet.

“What is it, Nef?” Tiernan asked, trying to diffuse the tension.

“The Captain.” Nef’s eyes narrowed as they shifted between the two of them, some intense thought sparkling behind them. “She wishes to see us.”

“Well,” Tiernan said, turning towards the camp and striding in the direction of the command tent. “Let’s not keep her waiting.”

“As you know, we are only a day’s march off from our arrival at Crún, Granatia’s capital,” the Captain continued briefing her attendants as the three apprentices entered the enormous tent, her voice raised over the wind’s manic howls.

Tiernan had to shoulder his way into the crowded command tent, Nef and Asha behind him. The thick air inside was stiflingly hot compared to the icy cold outside and stank of horse and stale sweat. Tiernan saw one soldier subtly pass another his waterskin, though Tiernan doubted it contained water from the face the man made as he took a sip.

“Still, I feel it necessary to review our plan one last time before we get to the city.” The Captain scanned her legion with a baleful glare from behind her desk, laden with cartographer’s tools and maps of the area surrounding the Blessed Wall. “Just in case you idiots have not been paying attention and decide to screw it all up once we arrive. But first.” She gestured for the apprentices to join her side. “I think it is high time for me to introduce our recruits. Over here, you three.” The many eyes of the legion followed the three students as they made their way to the Captain, their battle-hardened eyes appraising them quickly and efficiently before dismissing them.

“You should all be familiar with them from my earlier briefings,” the Captain said to her subordinates, barely acknowledging the apprentices as they took their place beside her. “I, however, think that I should put faces to the names to preemptively counter any misunderstandings that may arise.” She waved in Asha’s direction indifferently. “This is Asha. Skilled in combat due to her resonance, allowing her to boost her body in various ways. She can increase her strength, speed, and agility, as well as the durability of her body. She can also infuse her essence into an object, enhancing its durability much like her body. She is, however, utterly useless in ranged and magical combat, so she should only be relied on if there be need of someone to take care of the rabble.”

Tiernan could hear Asha inhale sharply at the insult.

“Next to her is Nef,” the Captain continued, apparently unaware of the malice she had earned with her words. “As an illusionist, he can be useful in certain circumstances when utilized cunningly, but he has no combative capabilities, whatsoever. His essence resonates with both light and sound, so he can perform any type of illusion, though I fear any great illusions are beyond his abilities.” A bark of laughter from some of the legionnaires quickly turned into a cough under the Captain’s glare.

“Lastly, we have Tiernan.” The Captain’s head shifted slightly in Tiernan’s direction. “A rare type of mage, he is able to resonate with other essences, though he has practically no skill in that regard. Unfortunate, I know.” Her voice dripped with a mocking disappointment. “He has however learned control to a degree beyond most other mages, making him an adequate telekinetic, though not impressively powerful by any means.”

“These three apprentices are on their final mission before graduating from the Academy so show them no mercy in their tasks. But you would all be wise to remember...”

She paused, looking around the room. “They are our responsibility. So, do not be careless with them and injure them somehow. I would hate to waste paper on the infirmary report.”

The legion shifted uncomfortably under her icy gaze.

“Now, as for the current mission,” she said, a pleased, vaguely sadistic smile on her lips. “As of now, our original mission still stands, though it may still be subject to change. We have received new reports from our liaison in Crún pertaining to the Fentaur.” She pointed at a figurine on one of the maps, indicating the Fentaur’s last known location somewhere along the northern edge of the wall.

“According to the liaison’s intel, there is a civilian living in Crún who possesses vital information on the Fentaur, hopefully on how to kill him. When we get to Crún, I will go meet with this source in order to obtain their intelligence. Meanwhile, the rest of you restock and prepare for the possibility of a battle.” A maniacal grin stretched the scars on her face. “For, should the information prove to be useful, Granatia has requested we forgo mending the Wall altogether and instead hunt down and kill the Fentaur.”

Tiernan could see a feral enthusiasm grow on the faces of the legion at this and a chill ran up his spine.

“Any questions?” the Captain shouted, not expecting any. “No? Good. Dismissed.”

## Chapter 5

### Crún

The Granatian capital loomed over her bleak domain like a crown of frozen stone.

As the legion drew closer, Crún's enormous walls rose like a dark cloud on the horizon. Over a hundred feet tall, the walls encircled the city completely, interspersed by spire-like towers that shone darkly with the reflected light of the setting sun. Giant shards of ice hung from the parapets like white lichen and grew out at irregular angles in places; gems adorning the crown.

Halting before the city's gates, Tiernan saw the Captain ride out ahead and enter a small alcove in the side of the wall, leaving her legion to stare in amazement at the giant oaken doors that barred their way. Though reinforced with dull steel bands and plates, the gates were a work of art. Both wood and metal were engraved with flowing waters and reaching vines, people and beasts hiding among them. A large plate of silver symbolised the moon, its light shining down upon the creatures beneath, a blessing of benevolence and bane of beasts in equal measure. The more he looked, Tiernan saw a story unfolding within the images, an epic tale of heroes fighting beast after beast with sword, shield, and magic, great armies in battle, and, in the final frame in the bottom corner of the door, the Fentaur defeated and chained in bands of moonlight.

Enraptured by the images, Tiernan barely noticed the Captain ride back to the legion until she stopped right in front of him and the other two apprentices. Snapping to attention, Tiernan broke out in a cold sweat, anxiety making his heart flutter.

"You three are with me," the Captain commanded from her war-steed, a steel-grey beast whose flanks were scored with long, bald scars, too numerous to count. "The others will see to provisioning and reconnaissance, but I think it would be best if you were by my side when we meet the... informant." Her overly mysterious tone was not lost on Tiernan.

"As you command, Captain," Nef answered in an obsequious tone that set Asha's teeth grinding with an audible pop.

Together, the four rode towards the gates whose massive doors pried themselves apart just enough for them to pass through, leaving the rest of the legion to their own devices. As the group proceeded through the rimed gates, Tiernan snapped to attention, eyes scanning the nearby houses with the gaze of an inquisitive hound, searching.

“What is it, Tier?” Asha asked, whispering so as not to alert the Captain.

Ignoring her, Tiernan continued surveying the street, a surprising sense of familiarity surging in him. His essence roiled within him in agitation, resonating with some presence Tiernan could not pin-point. Sensing Asha and Nef’s concern for him, Tiernan quickly blocked them out, letting his essence flow from his body in translucent tendrils to better locate the source of resonance.

“Sensing something, Tiernan?” The Captain’s voice rode the frigid breeze in Tiernan’s direction from where she rode at the front. Turning in her saddle, she flashed them a smile, a cold pleasure shining in her eyes. “Perhaps I should have given your abilities a little more credit, though I am surprised you sensed anything at all.” Tiernan did not need his abilities to see that her smile was all too knowing for his liking.

An unadorned door wrenched his attention away from the Captain’s gaze, and he suddenly knew. Whatever he was resonating with – whatever he was searching for – lay behind it.

“Ah, there it is,” the Captain declared, turning away from Tiernan. “Recruits, dismount.”

Tiernan barely heard the command, half out of his saddle already. He rushed to the door but, before he could reach it, a long-fingered hand gripped him by the shoulder with undeniable force.

“Behind me, recruit,” the Captain commanded in a frigid tone as she pulled him back and stepped in front. As they stood in front of the plain, sturdy wooden door, Tiernan’s strange feeling of familiarity and anticipation raged like a gale within him.

At the Captain’s knock, the door opened to reveal an old, haggard woman dressed in the Granatian fashion. A dark blue wool tunic reached past her knees, white and green embroidery along every seam. Her kind, grandmotherly face smiled at them, framed by the hood of her long fur vest that protected her from the icy winds.

“Ah, Captain.” Her rasping voice sounded relieved. “I’ve been expecting you. Please, do come in. Our tea is ready.” Though her tone sounded friendly enough, Tiernan found his sense of familiarity shift slightly, a faint current of alarm tainting it.

“Thank you, Elder, for your hospitality,” the Captain replied in a sweet, courteous tone that startled the apprentices behind her. “I would love some tea. May my companions enjoy some as well? It is cold outside, and I would hate to have them wait out here in the cold.” She gestured to the three apprentices, stepping aside so that the old woman could see them clearly.

“Elder?” The old woman jumped as Tiernan’s shocked voice rose in a near shout. “Is that you? Is it truly you? But, how...” His voice trailed off as the sense of familiarity surged stronger than ever. He found himself standing right in front of the elderly woman, mouth agape in surprise, mirrored by the old woman’s.

“Who...” the old woman began before her face lit up in recognition. “Hyra. Oh, you’re her son, aren’t you? You’re her darling Tiernan.”

“You two know each other?” The Captain’s unconvincing tone of surprise made Tiernan turn around. A curiously unreadable expression hid behind her mask of shock, though not well enough to fool Tiernan.

“In a way, we do,” Tiernan said between his teeth as his jaw clenched in the effort not to strangle his Captain. “She is— was the matriarch in my mother’s old village. I’ve never actually met her but only ever heard of her through my mother’s stories. Yet, somehow, I recognize her. And, somehow, I suspect you do too, Captain.” Tiernan did not bother to hide the venom in his voice.

Again, Tiernan saw that same unreadable expression glint in the Captain’s eye, quickly vanishing as she turned to the Elder.

“May we perhaps discuss this inside, Elder,” she said in that same sweet tone. “It would be a shame if we let the tea go cold.” She pushed past Tiernan and took the old woman by the shoulder, leading her inside.

Following them inside, Tiernan was shocked to see how devoid of any personal items the small house was. If it were not for a whistling iron kettle with a handle of interwoven brazen roses hanging in the stone fireplace, Tiernan would have thought the

house long abandoned. A worn bedroll, a table, and a couple of rickety chairs were the only furniture, though the bedroll seemed to be the only one not covered in a thin layer of dust.

Not wasting a moment, the Captain took the chair furthest from the now-shrieking kettle, a look of benign curiosity on her face.

“So, my dear Elder,” she said as the old woman brought the still seething kettle to the table. “I’ve been told you have some news for us. Oh, very exciting news, indeed. News of some importance, might I say.”

Carefully, the Elder pouring tea into five mismatched wooden mugs, before finally turning her eyes back to the Captain.

“You’re not fooling anyone, child,” she said as she took the seat opposite the Captain, her tone suddenly stern. “Drop the act.”

“If you insist.” The Captain sighed, slipping back beneath her usual mask of cold solemnity. “I thought I was doing a rather good job, considering. Though I apparently need more practice.” Her eyes locked on the Elder’s. “What do you have for me? You’ve kept us in the dark for long enough, so it had better be worth it to warrant all this tiresome secrecy.”

“I think you’ll be pleased enough when you hear what I’ve got to say,” the Elder said knowingly, obviously enjoying letting the Captain dangle a little while longer. “I’ve recently reacquired some texts I thought I had lost long ago, when my village burned down.” Her eyes darted to Tiernan, the note of warning rising again in his head. “They were the personal notes of previous matriarchs, dating all the way back to the founding of Granatia and even further. One text talks of the building of the Blessed Wall, which was built long before the Elder Tribes settled these lands, when all others thought it uninhabitable. It even describes the construction of the Wall and the forging of the beast’s chains.” She took a long sip of her tea and smacked her lips contentedly, before falling silent.

“Oh, out with it,” the Captain snapped, her patience wearing thin. “I know you have discovered how they were built and that you know what essences they melded, what sources and materials they used for the beast’s binding. But I’m not interested in any of that. What I am interested in is how I can kill the bloody beast!”

“Hush now, child.” The old woman smirked and took another sip. “No need to throw a tantrum. You seem to be suffering from some delusion. Yes, I know how to bind

the beast and contain it. But there is no killing it. We can strike it down with our swords or smite it with fire and lightning, but the beast will always prevail. That is its curse.”

“So, we came all this way for nothing.” The Captain practically fumed as she sprang from her chair, her breath steaming in front of her. From the corners of the room, shadows stretched out towards the Captain, coalescing into a cloud of silvery smoke in front of her. Plunging her hand into the mist, she pulled out a wicked silver sword, hooked at the tip and thin as a blade of grass. “We wasted all this time just to hear an old hag tell us that there is nothing we can do.” She waved the sword in the Elder’s direction, the blade producing a keening wail as it sliced the air. “All because of this shrivelled, old husk of a witch.” The Captain turned her back on the Elder and started towards the door, cutting the chair clean in half with a quick swing of the sword before letting it evaporate into shadows.

“That is no way to speak to your elder, child,” the old woman scorned, though with a slight look of satisfaction at the Captain’s temper. “I’m not so senile as to send someone on an impossible quest. Yes, it is true that the beast is immortal, invincible. But had you truly listened you would know that it is possible to bind the Fentaur again, in chains even stronger than the last.”

Taking a deep breath to compose herself, the Captain turned around and returned to the table, kicking the ruined chair out of her way. “And how, *exactly*, do we do that?”

“It’s simple,” the Elder answered and reached deep into the folds of her fur jacket. “With this.” She pulled out a large leather pouch, warped with age, and presented it with a small flourish. “Moonstones.”

“Moonstones,” the Captain echoed icily.

“Aye. Moonstones,” the Elder echoed back. She pulled the bag open and poured a handful of grape-sized rocks into her palm. Smooth as river stones and pale as ice, the opaque pebbles caught the meagre light from the fireplace like a placid lake reflects the moon. “The texts say that these are like poison to the beast. They—”

Abruptly, the Captain snatched the pouch from the Elder’s grasp and strode to the door, wrenching it open and exiting without a second glance.

“Well, wasn’t that rude of her?” The Elder huffed though she did not look offended in the least. She looked victorious.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Elder,” Tiernan said, bowing his head in respect to the Elder. “And apologies for my commander’s... bad manners. I wish I could stay so that we may speak, but I must follow her or else she’ll most likely whip me bloody.” He turned to the door, left swinging with the cold gust that rushed in after the Captain. “Farewell, Elder.”

Asha and Nef were already outside the door, waiting for Tiernan with curious expressions. But before he could cross the threshold, Tiernan found his wrist locked in the Elder’s withered hand. “What—” he started, but fell silent at the Elder’s urgent wave.

“Listen to me, Tiernan,” the Elder said, sneakily handing him with a second pouch, smaller but just as worn as the one the Captain now had. “Take these. I pray you won’t have need of them, but maybe you will be able to use them, somehow.”

Pulling at the pouch’s string, Tiernan caught a glimpse of the moonstones within, the sun’s last light reflecting on their pale surface.

“And whatever you do, do not fight the beast,” the Elder said, hurriedly. “If the legion goes to battle, promise me you’ll run the other way. The Fentaur is your Captain’s prey and I fear that if you were to confront it—” She faltered, clearly unsure of what to say. “No, I *know* that if you meet the beast, you’ll not survive the encounter.” Fear tinged her pleading gaze as she met Tiernan’s eyes. “Please. For me. Don’t fight it. I won’t be able to forgive myself if I led Hyrna’s precious son to his death.”

## Chapter 6

### Hope

The legion left Crún that night, driven hard by the Captain. Her temper had barely cooled since her confrontation with the Elder, and her rage clearly showed in her terse commands and indiscriminate punishments. That night, any whisper of discontent at the sudden departure or torturous pace was quickly met with a bloody whipping.

Soon after they left the gates of Crún, a blizzard began to rouse from its slumber, gathering its clouds into a dark mass above the legion. A howling wind swept the falling snow and wielded them wildly, buffeting the legion with little needles of ice.

Only after the snowstorm reached an unbearable strength did the Captain call a halt for the night. With frostbitten fingers, tents were hurriedly raised close around the campfires, their flames fighting a desperate battle against the forces of the weather. Some unlucky few settled on raising their tent around the horses, using them as a source of heat – however meagre it was.

Tiernan lay in his tent alone, tightly wrapped in his bedroll, his fur cloak laid on top. He shared the tent with three others, two attendants and Nef, though the attendants had been called away and Nef had been unfortunate enough to take the first patrol shift. Sleep evaded Tiernan like a snowflake in a blizzard, though whether this was due to the cold or the dread at having next shift, he did not know.

A shuffling sound at the tent entrance startled him from his frozen reverie as Nef crawled in. By the light of the little candleflame in the corner, Tiernan could see Nef's blue shivering as his teeth chattered from the cold. He tossed his frost-covered cloak over the cloth screen that served to separate the four bedrolls, providing a false sense of privacy to the occupants. Tiernan could hear his shivering as he settled into his bedroll.

"Is it my turn, then?" Tiernan asked, knowing the answer to be obvious. He started to crawl out of his bedroll with great reluctance before Nef spoke.

"Wait, Tiernan," Nef said from his corner of the tent, sounding out the words with difficulty through his chattering teeth. "I need to t-t-tell you s-something."

Tiernan heard Nef shift as he reached for the cloth wall, pulling it back in jerky movements.

“I h-heard the Captain talk-king in th-the command tent.” Nef shivered violently before continuing. “She was talking about the Elder. About how she wanted to tear her—” Seeing Nef overcome with another shiver, Tiernan reached into his bag, producing a small clay jar.

“What’s this?” Nef asked before taking it.

“Just something I made,” Tiernan answered. “Burning blossom ointment. It’s supposed to help with the cold.” Tiernan helped him open the jar, Nef’s frozen fingers making it difficult for him.

“Better?” Tiernan asked as Nef smeared the red paste on his hands.

“Yeah,” Nef paused. “Thanks.”

Feeling a little awkward, Tiernan reached for his cloak, wrapping it around his shoulders before sitting back down.

“So, what did she say about the Elder?” he asked.

“That,” Nef paused, seemingly a little distracted. “That is irrelevant, actually. Let us just say she was less than happy about their meeting.” He shifted as he sat straighter to look Tiernan in the eye, suddenly serious. “I heard her planning something, Tiernan. Something... nefarious. I couldn’t hear it clearly, but it has something to do with the Fentaur. And the Elder as well, I think. And something or someone called Umbra.” He shook his head in order to clear it. “But that is irrelevant, too, I think. What is relevant is that she mentioned you, Tiernan. Something about how you were their hope.”

Tiernan suppressed a shiver, entirely unrelated to the cold. Knowing that the Captain wanted something from him. That he was her *hope*. It was... eerie. Ominous.

“You must be careful, Tiernan.” An imperceptible pleading note had bled into Nef’s voice. “You know what the Captain is capable of. If she desires something from you, she will take it by force, if necessary.”

“I—” Tiernan was at a loss for words, numb inside and out. “I’d better go. I can’t be late to my patrol.”

As Tiernan rose, Nef tried grab his cloak, but the fabric wrapped around him made him too slow.

Tiernan stepped into the raging gale, finding its chaos resonate with the turmoil in his mind. Dazedly, he walked to the edge of camp and saluted the guard captain on duty before starting his route around the camp perimeter.

## Chapter 7

### The Blessed Wall

Barely a week had passed since the legion's short stop in the Granatian capital when they arrived at the Blessed Wall.

As the legion approached, the Wall seemingly sprung from the ground in an instant, its silvery stones piteously reflecting the dying light of day. It did not stand nearly as tall as Tiernan had expected, barely ten feet at its highest point, yet only a couple of feet in some places. As the legion rode closer, he realized why. The Wall was in fact, merely the eroded rubble of far grander fortifications, now ruined with the passage of time and overgrown with the few plants that survived out here in the frozen tundra.

Positioned in the Wall's shadow, the camp was sheltered from most of the wind that incessantly chased its tails across the bleak tundra. With the proficiency and precision that comes with a warrior's way of life, the camp rose in an instant, tents raised in neat, concentric semicircles and a giant firepit dug at their centre near the base of the Wall. The command tent stood in the innermost circle, facing the fire and the Wall beyond.

"When do you think we'll attack?" Tiernan asked Asha as the pair huddled around the fire, watching the Captain and the other high-ranking officers enter the large tent.

"Thththth," was all Asha could say in answer, standing as close to the firepit as she could, her whole body trembling with fatigue and cold.

They had ridden hard to the Blessed Wall, only ever stopping for half a night's rest. The Captain had no doubt wanted as much distance between herself and the Elder's house, Tiernan thought.

Reaching towards the flames, Tiernan picked up his flask that had lain by the edge of the firepit to capture some of the heat. "Here." He handed it to Asha. "Sheep's milk. It'll help warm you up."

"Th-th-thank you," Asha stuttered, her numb hands grasping the flask greedily and bringing it to her lips so that she could gulp it down all at once, giving a loud belch when she was done. She lowered the empty bottle and tossed it to Tiernan. "Much better."

“To think you, of all people, are an heiress to a duchy.” As usual, Nef appeared from thin air, without greeting or warning. “Vulgar and uncouth as you are, I’m surprised your family has yet to disown you.”

“Nef, please,” Tiernan pleaded, rubbing his temples in exhaustion. “Do you have to be so—” He paused, finding it difficult to express his frustration.

“Goddamn annoying?” Asha suggested venomously. “Toad-fucking shit-brained? So unlovable his own mother kicked him out?” Her voice rose in a shout. “By shit and stone, just leave us alone!”

“Unpleasant,” Tiernan corrected, shooting a sharp glare at Asha in reprimand.

Swelling with indignation, Nef opened his mouth only to close it again in a stubborn grimace and storming off towards the Wall, quickly vanishing into nothing.

Tiernan turned on Asha, feeling his frustration coming to a boil. “Do you know what, Asha? You can be just as *fucking* annoying as Nef.”

Before she could respond, Tiernan turned his back on her and strode away, heading in the direction Nef had gone.

Tiernan barely had to look before he found him by the Wall. The sun had passed beneath the horizon, and the moon rose slowly in the west, a whisper-thin sliver of purest starlight. Nef stood still, looking through a break in the wall where it had crumbled down to barely higher than Tiernan’s shins.

“Have you come to insult me too?” Nef’s tone was devoid of emotion, but Tiernan could sense his anger and frustration. And his hurt.

“No,” Tiernan replied nonchalantly. “Just to see if you’re all right.”

Snorting, Nef turned and looked Tiernan dead in the eyes. “How can you tolerate her? Why are you friends with her? She’s so—”

“Unpleasant?” Tiernan offered, a small grin glinting on his lips at the irony. “I don’t know. I like her. I like being around her. She’s fun when she’s not being an idiot. And she’s only an idiot around you, interestingly enough.”

“She doesn’t deserve you,” Tiernan could hear Nef whisper to himself. Turning back to the lands beyond the Blessed Wall, Nef’s gaze was fixed on the bottomless valley that faced them. Somewhere out there in the darkness lay the ruins of Malelon, haunted by the cursed Fentaur.

Tiernan started towards Nef to comfort him when a screaming note of alarm sounded in his mind. So overwhelmingly powerful, Tiernan staggered at the sensation, the taste of metal coating his tongue. “Nef,” he said weakly, “there’s something wrong.”

“It’s there,” Nef whispered. “The beast.”

A chill settled in Tiernan’s bones as he heard the words. He could feel it like a blow to the head, the presence of feral hatred, a torrent of rage and fury. “We have to go warn the Captain.”

“No,” Nef whispered. “This is our chance. We need to go. Now.” Fervent urgency coloured his voice as he swung around to face Tiernan, his expression eager, lusting for the glory that would come with killing the Fentaur.

“What’re you talking about?” Tiernan had only ever glimpsed but never fully seen this side of Nef, this frightening and utterly alien facet of his personality. The zealot that lived deep down inside him, lusting for prestige and fame.

“We have to be the ones to kill it, Tiernan.” Nef’s eyes were glowing with the passion of his bloodlust. “I didn’t realise it before, but imagine it, Tiernan. We kill the Fentaur by ourselves. The legendary beast of the Malelon. We’ll be heroes!” Nef’s unbridled fervour sent a chill to Tiernan’s core.

“You’re insane!” Tiernan exclaimed as he strode towards Nef and attempted to seize him by the wrist. But just as he reached him, Nef vanished into a shiny mist. “You’re an illusionist. You can’t do anything against a monster like that.”

“I’m sorry, Tiernan, but I have to try.” Nef’s voice floated on the wind, directionless and fleeting. “But if you refuse to do this with me, I will do it myself.” And with that, he was gone.

“Asha,” Tiernan shouted as he ran back into the camp. “Asha!”

“What, Tier?” Asha shouted at him from the firepit. “What now? You come to yell at me s’more?”

Breathless, Tiernan grabbed her by the shoulders. “We need to go. Nef’s gone chasing the Fentaur. Alone. Can you get our horses while I go alert the Captain? We need to go save him.” Looking conflicted, Asha set out to retrieve their horses.

“What is this commotion?” The Captain strode out of her command tent, her retinue of officers trailing behind. “Tiernan, report.”

“Captain,” Tiernan said as he approached her. “Nef’s gone. He saw the Fentaur and went after it. We need to go help him.”

“So Nef went hunting the beast,” the Captain repeated pensively. “Well, there’s no avoiding the paperwork now, eh?” A dark glint of amusement flashed in her eyes. “He has gone to meet the Fentaur, a worthy quest to be sure. Let us allow him to walk his path as he chooses. Meanwhile, the legion must rest and recuperate before we can join him in his noble efforts.” The Captain’s sarcasm produced a roar of laughter from her officers.

With a smirk, she turned her back on Tiernan and entered her tent, soon followed by her attendants. Tiernan could feel the cruel sense of pleasure emanating from the Captain, a sharp, sickly feeling that set his teeth on edge.

“I actually agree with her on this one,” came Asha’s voice from behind him. “I mean, he did this to himself, so why should we rush in to save him?”

“Because this isn’t right,” Tiernan shouted at her, his anger seething in his chest. “We can’t just leave him to die. It isn’t right!”

Snatching his horse’s reins from Asha’s grip, he marched out of the camp, pausing briefly to grab his saddlebags and equipment from his tent, throwing them over the saddle before mounting and galloping away.

“Ugh, fine,” Asha said to herself, annoyed at her predicament. “Fine!” she yelled at the world before mounting her horse and taking off after Tiernan, nimbly snatching up her saddlebags in front of her tent as she passed through the camp and out into the night.

## Chapter 8

### Blood and Ruin

Together, Tiernan and Asha stalked Nef until the sun had set behind the horizon and the stars appeared above them, twinkling like a handful of frosted jewels flung across the night sky.

Tracking an invisible man was anything but easy, let alone by only starlight to guide them, but they knew how to look for signs of his passing. A frozen stream shattered here, a stone upturned there. They tracked him slowly, wary of what might hide in the night.

Opening himself up to the essences around him, Tiernan searched for Nef's presence in the vain hope of finding him. Immediately, his senses were overwhelmed as an unimaginably strong presence washed over him, emanating from the ground beneath him. Straining, he tried to ignore it and focus on Nef's essence, but the sheer force of the presence drowned everything else out, making it difficult to detect anything at a distance. Realizing it was hopeless to track Nef this way, Tiernan gave it up with a sigh, instead focusing his efforts on the presences closest to him.

"Tiernan, wait," Asha's voice cracked the silence. "Look, here." She pointed ahead of them, at rocks piled up in front of them, like a collapsed cairn. As they rode up closer, the rocks took on a different shape. "Kinda ooks like a fountain, doesn't it? We must've reached Malelon already."

As they moved further away from the Blessed Wall and deeper into the valley beyond, the ruins of Malelon were reborn as shadows in the night. Crumbled walls and arches rose from the ground, tombstones of a lost civilization. Faces staring from fractured frescos with their lifeless eyes as they lay strewn like bodies across the ground.

"Stop," Tiernan whispered as they entered one of the city's many plazas. The ruins of a dozen white marble houses stood around the space, facing what had been a garden of statues at the centre of the plaza, now crumbled into rubble. Somewhere among the ruins, Tiernan could sense Nef's presence, hiding among the marble walls. "He's there." He

pointed to a small temple across the plaza, largely intact except for a half-concaved dome. “Just inside the doorway.”

“Well, let’s go get the fucker,” Asha said, eager to finish the chase, as she dismounted and pulled her broadsword, leaving the scabbard tied to the saddlebags.

Securing the harness of his throwing knives to his chest, Tiernan joined her, both stepping carefully on the uneven cobblestones. As they approached the temple, a low, rhythmic sound, like continuous thunder in the distance broken by the *whoosh* of a howling gale, grew steadily louder as they came closer. When they cleared the threshold, the sound had become a deafening rumble, like the rushing noise of an oncoming avalanche.

Jumping over a pile of rubble half blocking the entrance, Tiernan grabbed at the seemingly empty air in front of him. Gripping what he knew to be an invisible Nef, Tiernan dragged him towards the doorway.

“No,” Nef shouted over the noise, kicking and flailing at Tiernan. “I need to do this!”

The temple fell silent.

“Duck!” Tiernan yelled, dropping Nef and diving toward the entrance, feeling a breath of movement over his head as the Fentaur swiped at him. A heavy thump sounded from behind him, and Tiernan knew Asha had been too slow.

Keeping his head low, Tiernan dodged and wove between the debris strewn around the outside plaza like the skeleton of some long dead monster. He could feel the beast’s thunderous footsteps in his chest as he struggled to evade its attacks. Crouching behind the weathered marble head of some long-forgotten king, Tiernan prayed it provide enough cover as he prepared his essence, forcing it to flood out of him in a rush before taking control. Thin, miragelike tendrils extended from his fingers and palms, slithering across the ground like ghostly snakes. Across the plaza, loose rocks and debris slowly rose from the ground as they were imbued by Tiernan’s spell, suspended in the air by invisible puppeteer’s strings. Simultaneously, the knives in his harness floated out of their sheaths and took aim, their tips pointed directly at the Fentaur.

At a silent command from Tiernan, the spell took flight and came to life. A storm of stone and steel howled in fury as it raged and attacked the Fentaur, ravenous for cursed blood. But the beast merely batted away the feeble assault and advanced on Tiernan.

With a roaring shout, Asha burst out from the temple, apparently unharmed by the Fentaur's attack, and tackled the enormous monster. The beast roared in fury, its claws tearing at Asha, but she brushed them away, her fur coat as hard as steel, infused by her essence.

Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, Tiernan cast his essence out again, searching the plaza for something use against the Fentaur. With a jerk, the crowned marble head that he had used as cover lifted from the ground, followed suit by another piece of stone, almost twice as large. Twenty feet in the air they rose, hovering over the battle below.

"Asha," Tiernan shouted over the beast's roars. "Get back!"

As she dove away from the beast the stones fell from the sky, crushing the Fentaur beneath with a sickening crunch.

Exhausted, Tiernan felt as if the ground tilted beneath him. A spark of pain blossomed in his knees as they hit the broken cobblestones of the plaza.

"Bloody shit, did we kill it?" Asha asked, aghast.

"I..." Tiernan faltered, out of breath. "I don't know."

"No, you did not," came Nef's voice from the temple. From the shadows, he appeared, stumbling towards them. "It's invincible, remember? You thought a couple of rocks would be enough?"

"Then, how do you explain all that blood, genius," Asha countered, gesturing at the beast's blood spattered around the plaza, welling from beneath the stones at its centre. "There's no way it could surv—"

A sharp crack echoed through the night, interrupting her. The three of them turned their heads to the beast's corpse as a thin line spread across the marble head's face, immediately joined by another. And a third. A fourth.

They stared in horror as the cracks covered the two rocks like a cobweb.

"What now?" Nef asked, his voice shaking with panic. "Any ideas?"

Stumbling to his feet, Tiernan rushed to his horse and flung open one of the saddlebags.

"What are you doing?" Asha shouted at him.

“The moonstones,” Tiernan yelled back as he dug around in the bag. “We need the moonstones. I know they’re in here somewhere.” Rushing around his horse, he pulled open the other saddlebag and grabbed the worn pouch. “Got it!”

Running back towards the centre of the plaza, Tiernan was met with a harrowing, grotesque sight. A pulsating, oozing mass of blood and flesh flowed from underneath the shattered stones. Rising through the rubble, the ooze reshaped itself, recreating and mending broken bones, weaving and connecting torn flesh to sinew and bones, in the shape of the Fentaur.

“Tiernan. Please.” Nef’s voice was numb with terror. “Do something.”

Acting on instinct, Tiernan grabbed a handful of stones from the pouch. The translucent tendrils of his essence appeared from his hands and wound themselves around the pale rocks. Like arrows, the stones shot from his palm and tore through the beast’s newly regrown skin. A gurgling roar sounded from its toothless maw and it jerked in pain...

But nothing else happened. No howl in the night as the stones magically poisoned the beast. No flash of light as the Fentaur suddenly burst into flames. Nothing.

“Was that it?” Asha asked in horror. “That was it?” She sounded hysterical as she slowly backed away from the resurrecting corpse, fully formed in its black fur speckled with starry grey and a nightmarish face that would make a demon weep in fear with its fang-filled maw and eyes of hatred incarnate.

“But—” Tiernan was stunned. The stones were supposed to be poison to the Fentaur. Like the light of the moon, they should be anathema to the beast. How was it still alive? Something clicked in his mind, and he swung towards Nef.

“Nef, can you make light.” He rushed to Nef, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him roughly. “Nef, wake up!”

Returning from his terrified trance, Nef stared at Tiernan with tear-filled eyes. “What?” he said weakly. “Erm, yeah, I can make light.”

“Could you make moonlight?”

“Well, no,” he answered, slowly regaining his composure. “Not real moonlight, anyway.”

“What if you shone it through this?” Tiernan handed him the bag of moonstones.

“I’m not sure, but...” A flash of understanding passed across Nef’s face and he met Tiernan’s eyes with a look of determination. “I will try.”

“Good.” Tiernan turned to Asha as Nef started pouring his essence into the stones. “Asha, you hold him down while Nef—” But Asha was nowhere to be seen. Looking around the plaza, Tiernan searched for her but was unable to find her. “Asha!” he shouted. He spotted her, finally, past the plaza’s entrance, running towards the horses. “Asha, what are you doing?”

Mounting her horse, Asha yelled back. “Running away, of course.” She turned the horse around. “Come on! We’ve got to get out of here,” she shouted and kicked her horse forward, snapping the reins furiously.

Frozen in shock, Tiernan stared after her, dumbfounded. She left? How could she? The Fentaur’s still—

“Erm, Tiernan.” Nef’s voice brought him back. “Look.”

Turning to the beast, Tiernan could see its red eyes staring at them, glowing embers in the dark. Fully reformed down to its waist, it began to crawl, its claws sinking deep into the earth as it pulled itself from the rubble. A trail of black liquid flowed into the beast from below the stones behind it, transforming into flesh and bone on the way.

“Run!” Tiernan yelled as he gripped Nef’s arm and pulled him in the direction of Tiernan’s horse. As fast as he could, he jumped and dodged past crumbled stone, the beast slowly catching up with each step.

“But Tiernan, I think I did it,” Nef said urgently as they reached the horse. “The stones. I managed it. I infused them.”

Tiernan quickly hoisted Nef up on the saddle. “Good. Give them here.” He snatched the stones from Nef’s hand and tied the pouch to his belt.

“What are you—” Nef was interrupted as Tiernan slapped the horse on its backside, so that it darted off at a breakneck pace with Nef alone in the saddle.

Turning around to face the Fentaur, Tiernan was startled to see it lurch onto its feet. Almost fully formed, the beast stumbled forward, each step more stable than the last.

Hoping that this time it would work, Tiernan grabbed another handful of the moonstones, now blazing with silver light. A shining shower of fallen stars crashed into the Fentaur, tearing ligament and muscle, breaking bones as they pierced through its body. A

stray star burst through one of the beast's eyes, black blood spurting like a geyser as the stone exited on the other side.

The beast roared in equal pain and rage but did not appear any more harmed than before.

Fear shackled Tiernan in its icy fetters as he stared at the Fentaur's wounds close and reknit themselves with a sickening gurgle. Seeping into Tiernan's bones, fear's frozen fingers ripped all thought from his mind, leaving him an empty shell save for that paralyzing terror.

Suddenly, a different presence took hold of Tiernan's mind, crushing fear's hold on him. Tiernan stumbled as he felt the presence's overwhelming power rush into him. The Stone Heart. He could feel it reaching through the ground from far below and taking root in his chest, its essence enveloping his and mixing with it. Invigorated by this sudden torrent of energy, Tiernan could think again, clearer than ever. And something clicked within him.

Reaching out with his essence he could feel each and every presence around him, from the quiet solidity of the stones beneath his feet and the sleeping essence of water within the snow, to the gluttonous, rage fuelled void that was the Fentaur's presence. Everything had its own distinct presence to him, even the very light of the hair-thin crescent moon—

With his essence, he touched the moonstones in their pouch and noticed a... *wrongness*. The light shining within them was empty and incomplete, devoid of the brilliant presence of the moon. Reaching out with his own essence, infused with the Heart's, he touched the twin essences of the moon and the stones. On instinct, he twisted and wove the two together, forming a link between them, and could feel the essence of the moon flow through, filling the stones with its light.

Picking one out of his pocket, Tiernan marvelled at the unparalleled majesty of the moon shining from the stone, ethereal and beautiful. With a push of essence, the moonstone shot from his palm and pierced the Fentaur dead-centre.

The ruins trembled at the beast's shrieking howl. Clouds of dust rose as marble walls finally fell to the ground after centuries spent on the brink of tumbling. A thick, black smoke rose from the beast's gut where the stone had pierced it. In a flash of rage, the Fentaur lurched into a run, heading straight for Tiernan.

Dashing into a nearby alley, Tiernan tore a hole in the pouch so that a trail of brilliant droplets of solid moonlight traced after him. He heard the beast roar in fury behind him, blinded by the stones' lunar radiance.

Tiernan circled the plaza, sprinting from one street to the next, lighting up the dark night in his wake. Concentrating as hard as he could, Tiernan infused the stones as they fell to the ground. A long, complex weave of essence streamed from him as iridescent tendrils burst from his hands, full of Tiernan's energy and will. One by one, they encased the moonstones in their miragelike embrace, breathing life into the stones. Like a shower of stars falling in reverse, the moonstones ascended, a trail of light tethered to the ground beneath them, creating a barrier of brilliant moonlight around the plaza.

Out of nowhere, an enormous hand intercepted Tiernan, almost cutting him in half with its claws as he ran. Barely managing to dodge, he flung a fistful of glowing stones at the Fentaur, their light searing the claws and the massive, paw-like hand with a loud sizzle. As it jerked back, Tiernan threw another handful at the beast, scorching its fur and flesh to the bone.

Leaving the beast howling in pain, Tiernan sprinted past the dark temple doorway towards the place where he had begun his spell. The stones ahead of him had risen some twenty feet in the air and started to converge at the centre, forming the shape of a giant, moonlit dome around the plaza. As he neared the circle's start, he plunged his hand into the rapidly emptying pouch and seized a handful, preparing to finish the spell with another volley of moonlight. But as he reached out his hand, he heard a wet crunch and staggered in pain. A sharp spike of agony shot up his arm as he felt the Fentaur's jaws tear his arm off at the shoulder. In a rush, Tiernan threw all his essence outward with a shout, sealing the spell in a burst of light.

The Fentaur bounded off the dome's brilliant walls and landed at the centre of the plaza, shattering what was left of the marble boulders that had crushed it mere minutes ago.

Clutching his shoulder, the remains of bones sticking out between his fingers, Tiernan spent the last of his essence, infusing the rush of blood with an urgent will. Like water bulging on the rim of a glass just on the cusp of overflowing, the spurting blood gathered around the wound, creating a wobbling droplet of crimson that pulsed on his shoulder in beat with his heart.

Lethargy quickly closed in around Tiernan, darkening his vision and kicking his legs from under him. His face crashed into the hard ground and he could feel his nose break, but he had no energy left to defend himself from the fall, let alone shout out in pain. He simply lay there, in the radiance of his enchanted moonlight, for what seemed like eternity.

“Tiernan,” he heard someone shout in the far distance as his vision wavered and grew dark. The ground beneath him shook with the fall of hooves.

“Tiernan,” he heard again, now from above him. Joining his sight, his mind slowly started to drift away into darkness before the pain of someone tentatively touching his wound brought it back.

“Oh, Tiernan,” he heard once more, the voice a focus for his consciousness to cling to.

A jolt of pain dragged him from the edge, and he opened his eyes. He was laying on his back, the sun blossoming on the horizon. A silhouette against the light, he recognized Nef sitting by his side, looking down upon him.

“This is going to hurt, Tiernan,” Nef said. “Stay still.” Tearing strips off his shirt, Nef wove them around Tiernan’s shoulder and tied a tight knot with a jerk. Once again, pain flared from Tiernan’s shoulder, but he fought through it, not wanting to risk losing consciousness again.

Winching, Tiernan sat up, but Nef pushed him back down.

“Please,” Nef said, tears in his eyes. “Stay still. You have lost so much blood already...”

“I need to see it,” Tiernan said, his voice weak and raw. “I need to see the beast. I need to know if it worked.”

“It did, Tiernan. Somehow.” Nef’s tone was an odd mixture of worry and wonder. “But you *need* to stay down.”

“...see it. I need... to see...” Tiernan rambled with fevered intensity, trying to sit up without success.

“Fine.” Nef relented. “Fine!” He reached out to help Tiernan, gingerly raising him up so that he sat upright, looking into the mesmerizing spellcage he had created.

Lying in its centre was the Fentaur, arched over the pile of marble rubble and unmoving. Rivulets of black blood ran from its massive muzzle, pooling around it. From its gut rose a foul smoke, lit up by the blazing moonstones within, slowly scorching and burning through the beast's stomach, flesh, and fur so that its intestines lay bare.

"Wow," was all Tiernan could say as he watched the smoking remains.

"Wow's an understatement." Relief dripped from Nef's words. "I think you may have actually managed to kill it."

"We," Tiernan corrected. "We killed it."

They looked at it in stunned silence, frozen in place by sheer relief at their escape from death. There was no sign of regeneration. No sign of the beast's imminent resurrection.

The Fentaur was dead.

An hour later, they rode from the ruins.

Nef had re-bound Tiernan's wound with clean bandages from the saddlebags while Tiernan downed an entire flask of healing draught, though that would only hasten the healing for a wound so large; the arm would never grow back.

Saddled behind Nef, slumped up against him, Tiernan drifted between dream and reality, not knowing which was true. For the briefest of moments, his mother appeared, waving at him proudly from the horizon ahead. Her golden hair shone with all the radiance of the rising sun. He could feel her embracing him, warm and comforting. Welcoming him back home.

Lethargy interrupted his reverie, seizing hold of him again, tempting him with the sweet promise of painlessness and oblivion. Its cold caress pulled at him, dragging him under into the depths of unconsciousness.

"Thank you," he whispered to Nef and was defeated by the darkness.

On Writing *Beyond the Blessed Wall*

By Snorri Sigurðsson

## 1. Introduction

Phew, it is done. Finally. Now, onto the exposition.

The novella is an odd beast. Not a simple tale like the short story tends to be yet neither a complex and in-depth narrative like the novel. And let us save the discussion of the novelette for later. The novella requires a succinctness without losing too much, a plot without too many twists and turns, let alone subplots. Stephen King even calls it “an anarchy-ridden literary banana republic” in the afterword of his book *Different Seasons* (1982), a collection of four of his novellas, ironically. In short though, it is a tough nut to crack, yet here we are. The nut is cracked. And I hope you enjoyed the it.

But now we are onto the exposition, which is another rather odd nut, though not nearly as big. Below, you will find my experiences writing the nut – sorry, novella, as well as a run-through of the decisions I made when writing and why I made them.

## 2. On the Process of Writing

At my very core, I am a perfectionist; never mind all the other facets of my core that counter that trait. Despite this – or perhaps because of this – my writing process is extremely chaotic.

Each story I write, much like all other stories, starts with an idea; an inkling without context. These ideas can range from a theme or atmosphere to a single visual scene that struck my mind like lightning from a clear blue sky. These seeds then go through an explosive transformation as I bring them to the paper and usually write a full story in one go. Obviously, that was impossible for a story this size, considering it was several times longer than any previous work of mine, so it was written in several successive sessions instead.

The second phase, however, is where chaos reigns, seizing the pen from my hand and waving it around like a royal sceptre. I tend to edit my stories an excessive amount. And then re-edit. And re-re-edit. I, however, do not edit my work all at once, but instead I take it piece by piece, examining each passage on its own, without context. I do this because of two reasons. First, I like to review the passages without context because that is often how the reader experiences the story as they take a break now and then. Second, I do not have a consistently good long-term memory, so reviewing large chunks of story all at

once becomes a chore as I forget certain aspects of the story. Afterwards, however, I re-examine the passage with context to doubly make sure that nothing is missing or contradictory to another part of the text, and that it is at the very least intelligible.

Therefore, my editing process is quite lengthy and can become quite convoluted. The reason for this is that I always find a flaw in my work. And this is not hyperbole. Even after editing, I usually remain displeased with the text. This is the reason for the constant revisiting and revising that constitutes my editing technique.

The problem with this technique, however, rears its head when a story of mine has a deadline. As you might expect, time constraints of any kind mean less time editing which, in turn, leads to a product I am even more displeased with. Though, I do find some comfort in Sol Stein's words "[u]nwillingness to revise usually signals an amateur," (277) as, by his logic, I am a master writer of the highest order. Of course, I dare not declare this as fact, though it does act as a balm when my nerves are at their most frayed.

While editing, I focus on several factors that I, personally, deem essential to good storytelling. Most obvious of these are the words themselves, though the story often finds itself under the proverbial microscope as well.

### **3. The Words**

In writing, I find myself especially drawn to several literary tools. Metaphors, similes, allusions, and alliteration – most notably consonance – are chief among these. As they are not uncommon in literature, particularly in the fantastic genre, I often take liberties with their usage. As metaphors, similes, and alliteration appear on innumerable occasions throughout the novella, there is little need to list them all. However, they are an important part of the tone of the story, lending it a more poetic quality than is perhaps traditional.

Stein does advice against using too many metaphors and similes – and alliteration by extension, I imagine – as they can easily backfire when overused (264). At first, I did not heed this advice well enough, including a metaphor in every other sentence and alliteration in the rest, though I started to agree the more I edited the story. That is not to say that I edited them all out. No, figurative language possesses a particular part of my heart and, for that, I do not apologize. Rather, I plead for leniency and accept that writers may have differing styles.

As for allusions there are a few, the most notable of which is rooted in Norse mythology. A passion of mine since a young age, mythology inevitably made its way into the story in the form of Tiernan and the Fentaur. To those familiar with the old Norse tales, the names may be indication enough as to what they allude to since Tiernan is derived from the name of the Norse god Týr and the Fentaur takes his name from a combination of the Norse wolf of Ragnarök, Fenrir, and the Greek suffix -taur, commonly seen in the mythological figures the centaur and the Minotaur, thus belying the Fentaur's half-beast nature.

Literary imagery, as well, is a staple part of fantasy literature and an element I thoroughly enjoy when executed well. Imagery could even be argued to be the hallmark of fantasy, as it is used quite liberally in order to immerse the reader in a completely foreign world. Tolkien himself, who is generally considered to be the progenitor of the fantasy genre, literally filled his novels with imagery in order to convey the magical world born of his imagination; dedicating entire pages to descriptions of nature and environment that would otherwise have been left invisible to the reader. This is where the importance of imagery shows most clearly. Many examples of imagery are to be found within the novella, though there are a few I would like to highlight in particular.

The Blessed Wall, as the titular landmark, suffered much of my attention as I wanted to depict it in all its decrepit glory; a once fantastic monument of marble and magic, now more rubble and ruin than worked stone. Acting as both the Fentaur's cage and Granatia's ward, it was inevitable that it became a magical construct, so its description needed to fit that nature. However, to avoid making it too generic and predictable, I tried to subvert the reader's expectations by making the Wall a ruin just like the city of Malelon instead of the grand fortifications that pops into mind when hearing the words "Blessed Wall." At first the description of the wall approached a full page, but, realising I was not Tolkien, I edited it down to a small paragraph.

The Fentaur sees a significant amount of imagery, from the illustration in chapter one to the depiction of his death. As a key element of the story, much like the Wall, he deserved a vivid description resonating with his nature. As such, I found it most appropriate to draw inspiration from one of the more common beastly tropes, that of the "Big Bad Wolf." Evil eyes, black fur, and a viscous maw are probably the more obvious traits of the

trope and I included all of these but tried to elevate the horror aspect of the monster to better suit the story. It was also my intention to make the Fentaur's death as visceral and revolting as possible, further evoking its monstrous nature in its final moments, a cesspool of cursed hatred and rage.

With this imagery – and a whole lot more – I tried to immerse the reader in the setting, allowing them to experience the story more deeply and personally than if I had not included the descriptions. As immersion is the main goal of a fantasy story, I attempted as best I could to pull the reader into the story, even from the very first line.

Stein has an entire chapter dedicated to the importance of the first sentence or paragraph, as they serve as the hook that “[arouses] the restless reader” and convinces them that the story is worth reading (15). Reading Stein's chapter, I was struck with the idea of an opening sentence that not only drew the reader's attention, but also directly addressed them, thus breaking the fourth wall and forcefully dragging the reader into the story. From there came the line: “Hey, bookworm! Put that book down and get in the arena. Now! It's your turn to fight.” Spoken by Alef, the Adept, the line addresses Tiernan as well as the reader immediately with the word “bookworm.” This type of opener is also often seen in some video games today, where a secondary character talks to the player through the medium of the protagonist, immediately immersing the player in the narrative. Though I am still unconvinced by the efficacy of my opener, I decided to leave it in rather than change it, simply because I like it and it amuses me as a writer. An editor might disagree, but writing is art and in art, the artist is above mortal law.

#### **4. The Story**

There are infinite possible permutations of fantasy stories, which is possibly the reason for the genre's success. To categorize these stories, however, is an effective way to enable the analysis of fantasy, both for research purposes and to aid the fantasy writers studying the craft. Farah Mendlesohn discusses and defines the different types of fantasy in her book *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), the first among them being the portal-quest fantasy genre (1). In this genre, the story involves the protagonist undertaking a quest of some sort that leads them outside the borders of their familiar environment. J.R.R. Tolkien's works *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-'55) and *The Hobbit* (1937), C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*

(1950-'56), as well as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) are prime examples of this genre, portraying the protagonist's journey through a "portal" into a new fantastical world as they undertake a "quest" of some sort. Deciding this was a familiar plot type and a good foundation to build upon, the plot of *Beyond the Blessed Wall* was intentionally laid along the traditional lines of the genre. The story takes place in a secondary world, beginning with Tiernan in Midway about to cross the metaphorical portal into the unknowns of the world beyond the gates.

However, a story built on this foundation would be stale and bland to read, as the reader will quickly become bored if the story follows the generic plot of the portal-quest fantasy genre at each step. This is where the author's duty to subvert the audience's expectations comes in. The prolific fantasy author Brandon Sanderson explains in his book *Rhythm of War* his approach to storytelling through the voice of Wit, an obvious self-insertion character; a lesson I quite agree with.

"You use the same dirty tricks for storytelling," Wit said, "as you do for fighting in an alley. Get someone looking the wrong direction so you can clock them across the face. Get them to anticipate a punch and brace themselves, so you can reposition.

Always hit them where they aren't prepared." (1214)

In short, subvert the audience's expectations at every turn. This can be seen at a few specific scenes in the story, though never so much as to alter the plotline in any significant way. Seeing as the story is a novella, I did not think it wise to over-complicate the story when it is already quite compact. So I decided to pull my punches, so to speak, hinting to the reader that a punch was coming while not revealing from where, exactly.

The most notable of these scenes in which I try to subvert the reader's expectations to "~~clock [the reader] across the face~~" is the one in which Asha abandons Nef and Tiernan. Though there were signs foreshadowing this selfish outcome, they were (hopefully) subtle enough to only become apparent at that very moment. Tiernan's discussion with Pyre in chapter two, Midway Market, was intended to foreshadow some of the future events and the hint of dislike she bears towards Asha was meant as a subtle prediction of what was yet to come. To put it into terms more akin to Sanderson's words, I was winding up for the punch for much of the story, trying to portray Asha as an ultimately selfish friend of Tiernan's whose betrayal was unpredictable but obvious after the fact.

## 5. The Characters

One of the more difficult aspects of writing – especially fiction – is, perhaps, the dialogue. Writing each character in a new, unique, and nuanced way is beyond challenging as each individual has their own speech markers, verbal idiosyncrasies, and vernacular. To make them seem distinct and realistic, the writer must put in a great deal of effort to create a dialogue as natural as possible.

Stein’s chapter on dialogue, *The Secrets of Good Dialogue* (110), features extensive guidance on the subject of writing effective and impactful dialogue. First and foremost of his teachings is the lesson that dialogue is not “actual speech,” but rather an imitation of how real people speak and should be treated as such. Neither is it a perfect discourse, completely devoid of mistakes and succinct enough to earn a perfect score from an English linguistics professor. Though it is very tempting to write dialogue either grammatically perfect or as a faithful facsimile of real-life speech, neither is as effective as a fictitious dialogue deliberately and immaculately crafted by the writer.

To try to facilitate this, I wrote up a “speech profile” for each character, directly related to the character’s personality:

Tiernan – Formality neutral, normal amount of contractions

Asha – Very casual, rural, vulgar, volatile, uses a lot of contractions

Nef – Very formal, highbrow and proper, no contractions whatsoever

Pyre – Casual, blunt, devil-may-care, audacious, a little capricious, normal contractions

The Captain – Relatively formal, confident, authoritative, sardonic, military jargon, some contractions

The Elder – Relatively casual, condescending in a grandmotherly way, some contractions

A clever reader may notice the similarities between these profiles and a character profile, and they would be correct in assuming the two are related. The speech profile is inherently based on the character profile but only describes overt characteristics, in this case oral mannerisms and idiosyncrasies, and not the covert, such as mental characteristics.

Tiernan's speech pattern was supposed to reflect his honest and fair personality, almost completely neutral in terms of specific speech tropes. As the protagonist, and therefore the main speaker, his use of contractions and vocabulary was kept standard so as to not frustrate the reader. Asha's speech was rife with contractions and very casual in nature, to emphasize her "unsophisticated" and rough personality, whereas Nef's was the exact opposite, formal and aristocratic with next to no contractions. Pyre's personality was volatile and fiery, so her dialogue intentionally reflected that by being rather morbid and capricious.

The characters of the Elder and the Captain are quite similar in nature, so their speech patterns ended up resembling each other in the end. I however, disliked their scene when I first wrote their dialogue, so I made each distinctly condescending in their own way. The Captain became much more mocking and arrogant (cf. Severus Snape from Rowling's *Harry Potter*) while the Elder's speech pattern became a lot more patronizing and matriarchal (cf. *Harry Potter*'s Minerva McGonagall with a dash of Betty White in *The Golden Girls*).

These speech profiles provided a valuable resource in my writing, as they helped me clearly define each character's speech pattern and gave me a reference point to look to when the dialogue became difficult.

It is worthy of mention that these profiles were not entirely my creation but rather a product inspired by Stein's chapter on dialogue (116). He explains how no one – even in real life – talks exactly the same as the next person. Everyone has their own "speech markers," whether that be their use of jargon, grammar quality, vocabulary, or specific tone of voice. By listing each character's speech markers, I made their speech profiles, making sure to try to encompass as many linguistic factors as possible without going completely overboard.

## **6. The Worldbuilding**

The setting of *Beyond the Blessed Wall* was first conceived during a fantasy worldbuilding exercise in a creative writing class in my second year. As this was a group exercise, I worked with my fellow student Samuel Hogarth on it. A rudimentary map was drawn and

basic cultures crafted, mythical monsters manufactured and ancient ruins were... well, ruined. Thus, the world in which I set my story was created.

Though it was originally intended to be a short story of no more than 5000 words that would serve as the final assignment for the Creative Writing course, I exercised my considerable proclivity for perfectionism (read: foolishness) and set to even more worldbuilding. As the story centres on two general geographic locations, Midway and Granatia, most of my efforts went into crafting their features and minutiae. As Midway was stationed right at the borders of the three main factions (the Delian Empire, Fell, and Granatia), it logically followed that the city-state became a major mercantile entity; and so the Midway Market was created. Granatia, however, was a stark and primal land of ice and stone, so I borrowed the trope of a northern waste, commonly seen in works such as Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (the idea of the Northern Wall was, however, entirely unrelated to that series).

In my worldbuilding, I even went so far as to develop an entire cult whose machinations would extend into future stories, should I write them. Umbra's members are actually shown in the novella, scheming away, though to what extent I shall not say at this time. Though I could give you a little hint: The ancient order's influence reaches much farther, and much deeper, than you could imagine.

With this general worldbuilding finished, I began to hone in on the details that would pertain to the story. The Academy, first conceived in the aforementioned worldbuilding class, went under major development. The Arcana Arx and the Arena were built, and the ranking of its members established. Teachers and trainers became Adepts while the students became apprentices. The graduated members and, therefore, employees were granted the title of Agents whereas the researchers and scholars were called Arcanists. This perfect assonance is entirely deliberate, I promise, as is the fact that all these terms are derived from Latin. The names Granatia and Crún also originate from the Latin language, though in the case of the latter, I chose a Gaelic spelling of the word, influenced as I was by a course on Celtic culture, language, and literature I was taking while writing the story.

As for the magic system, I took some inspiration from Robert Jordan's magic system as well as those systems often found in video games, and used Brandon Sanderson's Three Laws of Magic for some finetuning. Jordan's system relies heavily on elements of

“Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit” (called the “Five Powers” in Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time* series) and magic users are called Aes Sedai as they can channel these Powers into specific weaves to cast spells (279). Originally, my magic system was much closer to Jordan’s elemental system where any magic user can use every type of magic, but I decided against it seeing as how it allowed for less individual magic. Instead, I leaned to a superhero-esque system, where each character has a unique ability, but still with a magic twist. From this arose the essence-resonance system where each character draws upon their essence, similar to mana (a resource used in many video games to cast spells), but still has a unique aspect to their magic, similar to superhero magic.

Brandon Sanderson’s essays on his Three Laws of Magic aided me greatly in polishing the magic system, as they clearly define what makes a magic system effective and immersive. In these essays he primarily discusses the difference between “soft” and “hard” magic systems, the significance of limitations, and the importance of a simple yet immersive system.

The spectrum of “soft” versus “hard” magic systems refers to how structured and logical a given system is (Sanderson, “First Law”). A soft magic system is, therefore, a system in which there are few laws or whose rules remain a mystery to the reader throughout. As example of this, Sanderson argues that Tolkien’s magic system is inherently a soft magic system, as the reader has little to no knowledge how magic is performed in the books. As for hard magic systems, their rules are clearly defined to the reader and are rarely – if ever – violated. Sanderson uses “superhero magic” as an example of this type of system as the abilities of each superhero are usually very well defined and explained to the reader. Most systems, however, fall somewhere on the spectrum between soft versus hard magic systems. For example, the magic system in Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series is a hybrid system (Sanderson, “First Law”), with some rules clearly defined to the reader while others are omitted. This is where the magic system I devised falls on the spectrum, as each character has clear, defined abilities, but the rules of the system overall are rather ambiguous.

Each character having their own, unique abilities also created a limitation for them, as they are not able to use magic that is not compatible with their resonance. In Sanderson’s essay on the Second Law of Magic, he emphasizes how limitations are far more interesting,

narratively speaking, than the powers of the magic user (“Second Law”). With an unlimited and unbridled magic system anything is possible, but that makes for a boring story seeing as magic is suddenly as mundane as walking. A limitation acts as a hindrance that magic casters must overcome to cast their magic effectively. In *Beyond the Blessed Wall*, the resonance limitation forces mages to work together to create complex magic, such as building the Blessed Wall, or to defeat a common challenger, i.e. the battle with the Fentaur. Without Nef, Tiernan would not have been able to create the light within the moonstones, and without Asha, he would have certainly died within the first few seconds of the fight. Had he been able to do all three, it would have made for a very short and boring battle sequence, even though he did contribute the most.

The third essay discusses how, instead of just adding abilities and attributes to the magic system, a writer should opt to expand on pre-existing magic (Sanderson, “Third Law”). For example, when Tiernan finally begins to practice his magic, he becomes able to sense the presence of the Stone heart and, later, realizes he can connect two essences so that they share some attributes with each other. Nef, similarly, becomes able to infuse light into inanimate objects when asked by Tiernan to do so. Neither of these instances stretch or change their individual magics but instead deepen their connection to and knowledge of their ability.

## **7. Afterword and Conclusion**

In hindsight, there is so much more I could have done with the story in order to make it more immersive and complete. Though I was fully aware of the story’s shortcomings even while I was writing it, I simply did not have enough time to fix many of them. Additionally, whenever I fixed one thing, another cropped up, often immediately followed by a second and a third. The more I wrote, the more I wanted to fix and elaborate on, creating an endless cycle of rewriting and additions. Realising this could get out of hand quickly, I decided at a certain point that I had added enough and should stick with what I had, lest I never finish the story on time. Yet even though I had lessened my problems with this, the writing often did not come easy nor effortlessly.

The most difficult aspect of writing this story was most probably simply writing it. That may seem paradoxical, but it is true. Though it might sound easy to sit down, open up the laptop, and start writing, it is anything but. I am not a diligent nor productive person by nature, so dedicating myself to my writing was – and is – always difficult to me. Partly because whenever I reread my writing I am suddenly gripped by an intense urge to just scrap it completely and rewrite it from the ground up, but also because tapping into the creativity and imagination that is needed to write becomes nearly impossible when faced with the blankness of a piece of paper (or a Word document, in my case). Why this is, I have not a clue, though if I have learned one thing from this experience, it is that writing requires – nay demands – determination and dedication. Art is a jealous mistress, after all.

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