

# All Is Fair

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A hard downpour makes music on the metal city. Mr. and Mrs. Grimwald stumble out of their black Mercedes. A layer of water an inch thick coats the sidewalk and glazes the walls of the buildings and the streetlights make it sparkle. Mrs. Grimwald gives an excited yell as they run, rain drops striking her bare shoulders and trickling off the toes of her shoes. Her husband removes his pea coat and holds it over their heads, laughing in her ear. They hurry through the revolving door of the restaurant, while Mr. Grimwald slips the valet his car keys, and his wife lets out an exasperated sigh and fixes her hair.

“Oh, honey, look at this!” Mrs. Grimwald cranes her neck to the left and right. The restaurant runs in either direction in a long circle, tables flanked to either side and packed full of strangers in black and white draped clothing, sipping from glittery wine glasses and licking the rims of exotic cocktails, manicured nails gliding over polished gold-ware. The ceilings are tall and framed by neon blue light and hanging crystal chandeliers. Waiters in tuxedos prance to and fro. It is just as Mrs. Grimwald had seen online, though much grander than she expected. She touches her fingers to her breastbone to catch her breath.

“Isn’t it nice?” Her husband responds. A doorman is fixing his cufflinks for him, his pea coat hung over their right arm. When they finish, they take the couple’s coats and bags and hurry off. A host at the front greets them promptly.

“Welcome to Osiria! I do hope the weather was not too much trouble.” Her teeth are crystal white and speckled with diamonds. The helixes of her ears are surgically pointed and dozens of silver hoops dangle around her jaw. She blinks, and the piercings in her eyelids rattle and shimmer against her eyelashes. “Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes, we are the Grimwalds.”

“Ah, of course!” She swipes her finger quickly along the transparent glass of her check-in screen. Mrs. Grimwald continues to eye the woman’s piercings and fiddles with her own, wondering if her ears might be prettier if she pointed them the same way. “It is good to see you again, Mr. Grimwald. Back so soon?”

“Had to bring the wife.” He nudges Mrs. Grimwald. She is not paying attention.

“Of course, Sir. If you’ll please follow me.”

The host steps around her podium with a set of menus. Mrs. Grimwald is spinning around in the foyer, her eyes darting up and down the columns of blue fish tanks plenteous with dancing moon jellyfish. Her husband seizes her hand quickly, kisses her knuckles, and pulls her along. The restaurant is one grand sphere with layers like an onion, its center the home of an incredible library, where spiraling white staircases climb hundreds of overpopulated bookshelves, walls of art, plaques for scientific discovery, and the models of genius inventions. The library is shielded from the restaurant by tinted

glass, so the ring of tables around the outside can peer in. Mrs. Grimwald admires it through the windows. She knows from her research what to expect from her appetizer, and she imagines she'd be overjoyed if it was any of these remarkable artifacts.

"Here you are," the host gestures to a table for two, after they have walked maybe a quarter around the circle. The tabletop is covered with a white cloth, lit candles, decadent crystal glasses, and gold-ware. As the couple sits, the host provides their menus. "On top are Chef Welch's recommendations for tonight, and here is your wine list. Is this a special occasion?"

"Yes, it's my wife's birthday." Mr. Grimwald takes her hand. She gives a wide, innocent smile. The host nods and writes this down in her book.

"Excellent. Happy birthday, Mrs. Grimwald. Your waiter will be with you shortly."

"Thank you."

The host closes her booklet and pockets it. Her earrings jingle as she turns and goes. Mr. Grimwald sighs through his nose, losing his smile quickly.

"She really wasn't my type. What do you think?"

Mrs. Grimwald does not answer. She is busy staring through the tinted glass at the infinite library, watching the waiters climb up and down the stairs, their arms full of books and paintings.



It is here that I first began my lifelong work. Though my life has not been long yet—not *per se*—I found myself at the doors of Osiria with the single goal of mastering my craft. Every day, I sit and gaze at the endless halls of the library, thumbing through the thousands of pages from all the writers that came before me, the artists that came before me, the inventors, and the geniuses. I am often told that paradise is not found, but earned. There was a time when I had nothing but my work. Half of New America lives their lives hungry, sleeps cold and wet, wanders the great steel utopia begging for food

and water. I used to write poems and little songs and sometimes short stories over the printed text of discarded newspapers and it would pass the awful time. I tried drawing once, and I was no good. I also tried forgoing my craft altogether in favor of more realistic pursuits. But when I came to Osiria, only thirteen years old, the first thing they told me was that my craft was a hidden treasure—that I wasn't whole without it, and in those times spent ignoring my urge to tell stories, I was only abandoning my purpose. They read through my resume of half-finished stories and naive diary entries, and then they offered me the job. There is purpose in work, of course. But in my work—this work—there is something else entirely.

But this craft is another that I've discovered I am not very good at. In times like these, when I am sprinting up and down the library stairs with a chef's screams on my heels and a tower of dirty plates in my arms threatening to topple over and crush me, I realize I was not made aware of the sheer number of things I would be in charge of before I got here. When the chef hollers for me a seventh time, I am reminded that I left multiple aisles in the upstairs archives un-alphabetized, my bed in the server's quarters unmade, I'd forgotten to tie up my hair, I'd forgotten my apron, I'd forgotten the next stair—and just like that, I am tumbling all the way to the floor below, filthy plates and cups shattering all around me on the way down. Florian, who sleeps three beds from me, is on the last step. He looks down at me with a deep and disappointed frown, silver braids slipping off his collar.

"I told you that would happen someday, didn't I, Jyn?"

I can hear the blood-curdling scream of the chef upstairs, her lips catching over every letter in my name. I laugh uneasily and groan as I collect myself, "Yes, but I heard you tell Tiana the same thing, and she fell last week."

"I guess she didn't manage to save a dish." He

bends to collect a wine glass from the floor that is still miraculously intact. I seize it from him swiftly.

“Exactly, now if you’d please move, I have to run.”

“Actually, I was hoping you’d trade me.” The black gauges in his ears are big enough to see through like windows, so his earlobes drag across his shoulders when he tilts his head at me. “I’ve been in the kitchen all week, I’m desperate.”

“I’m not taking that terrible job.”

“Please? Next time I’ll give you my serving shift.”

I look up at him for a long time, then roll my eyes and sigh. “Fine, but you do owe me.”

“Oh, thank you! You’re a life-saver.”

“Yeah, tell the others that.” I shake my head at him, shove the wine glass into his hands, and start back up the stairs. He laughs as I go.

“Maybe I will, and you’ll finally write a good story about it!”



“Would you like it if I looked more like that?” Mrs. Grimwald leans her chin against her palm, trilling her lips. The couple across the aisle is covered in living tattoos that warp and change with their emotions, flashing new colors every so often, and patterned with the occasional implanted diamond stud. Their ears are pointed and eyes artificially colored. A curtain of sparkly metal hangs from the woman’s eyebrows.

“I was thinking either Amanda or Lorelei, but they might be a bit young for me.” Mr. Grimwald flips through his menu, rolling his lips back and forth in thought. “Although I hear ‘the younger the better.’”

“I don’t know, no one here looks particularly...” Mrs. Grimwald trails off, flicking the edge of her menu up and down with a red fingernail, “special.”

“You want something special, my love?” Her husband smiles, “I have a positively wondrous idea.”



“And what the hell are you doing here?”

“Florian traded me, I’m doing him a favor.” As I lean into the tank to shut the water off, one of my locs catches on a dirty dish and flings back into my white shirt. I cuss under my breath and attempt to wipe away the red stain with a sponge. The other waiter laughs at me.

“Oh, I thought you’d thrown a fit again because a table didn’t specially request you.”

“That only happened once.” Giving up on the stain, I return to the dishes. The other server is taking plates off a conveyor to her right, scraping off the leftover pieces of gristle and bone into the trash, then tossing everything else into the basin for me to wash. She is young, maybe twelve or thirteen, just started getting piercings on her lips and ears and all the open real estate of her skin makes her look like a newborn. She shakes her head at me.

“Probably for the best, anyway. All the specially requested waiters disappear, you know.”

“They’re probably all getting rich off their talents. Like I should be.”

She chuckles at me. As I finish a second wine glass, a chef rounds the corner and slings a kitchen cloth at me. It strikes my cheek and lands folded on my right shoulder.

“Jyn! You’re on station inspection!”

The young waitress gasps next to me. “Come on! Trade me?”

“Not today.” I wink at her, wipe my hands on the washcloth, and follow the chef through the aisle. All around are the white and stainless steel stations of dozens of chefs, configured in an almost snake-like fashion, coiled in the belly of the library. It smells like fresh cut pork tenderloin in a frying pan, sautéed carrots and asparagus, red and white wine sauces, thyme and paprika, and fire. I stand over the shoulder of a younger chef, watching him prepare tripe. He has already cut the fat off and boiled

the rest, and is now scraping away dark residue, scrubbing it clean, and preparing to soak it. I watch his knife work cleanly through the lining, until the shape of a stomach turns into neat, thin strips. I then check his station, note it as tidy, and move on.

I skip through the rest of the kitchen quickly, noting the cleanliness and ignoring small spills to speed up the shift. I approach the final station with a grin I can't hide, standing beside the chef silently as he works through the skin of a heart, quarters it neatly, and salts it on all sides. Thick blood spills off the end of his cutting board.

"I see you're breaking hearts again, Chef Welch."

He exhales through his nose, focused, "As always, Jyn."

"You know you've broken two hearts today?"

"Is that so?"

I lean into his ear, whispering, "Mine. Because your station is vile, Chef."

He flicks me off with his shoulder, "No one asked you, busboy."

"Actually, I'm on inspection today." I shrug, combing between my locs with my fingers, feeling the silver rings and tiny daggers slip around on them. I watch the living tattoo around his neck shift from an angry red sky into a passive, gentler pink, the clouds becoming full and welcoming. He sighs at me.

"I s'pose after three years, I should expect the inconvenience." He pokes at the stain on my shirt, so I swat at his finger.

"Yes, you should."

"How's your book coming along, then?"

"Oh, you know." I rub my face bashfully, feeling the warmth of my cheeks under my hand. "It's going."

"You haven't written anything."

"I have! Just... nothing good. Not good enough for the archive, anyway."

"You're too afraid of what these folks'll think of you." He shakes his head, sets the sliced heart to

the side, then selects another whole heart from the ice bucket beside him. They're the size of his entire hand, and I swear I see the muscle walls still slightly pulsating, the blood running down his forearm in long streaks and coloring his tattoos. "Overthinking kills art. And anyway, they hardly ever pick waiters as it is. Too personal."

"But if it isn't good, I'll never get chosen."

"It's going to be good, Jyn. Whatever you write, it will be good."

I scrunch my nose, "Not if I write about you."

He laughs, "I think even that."



"And of course, Kingsman is such a wise guy, he tells them, 'What good possibly comes from ignoring the clear evidence of genetic superiority?' And these guys are gobsmacked, you know! And they're arguing and arguing, and I tell them, 'The fact that you're all asking this is the evidence. The genetically superior don't ask questions, they already know the answers.' Isn't that genius?"

"How many people do you think have something in that archive?" Mrs. Grimwald continues to gaze into the library. She'd learned the faces of a few waiters and began to wonder about them, even debated whether or not to request any. "I wish I could see it all."

"You're such a scatterbrain, my love, did you even hear my story?" Mr. Grimwald rolls his eyes, fiddling with the gold fork on the table, twisting it between his fingers. "Anyway, they're fired now, Kingsman is writing a long excuse letter about it, and he took me to dinner here afterwards. What a nice guy, right? But after that first time, I swear something in me is growing. I think the rumors are true. I'm having these ideas and these feelings and I—"

"Would you choose me if I worked here?" Mrs. Grimwald interrupts him, focusing her gaze. His slicked-back black hair catches the blue hue of the

lights above, dark eyes somewhat bottomless—not in the way that you could take a swim in them, but that they swallow you before you can decide. In what appears to be irritation, he licks at the piercings in his dimples so that they roll around in the flesh of his cheek, narrowing those empty eyes.

“Probably not,” he says, finally. “What would you even put in the archive? You don’t do anything.”

“Maybe some of my poetry?”

“But your poetry isn’t good.”

“Does it matter?” She gives an eager, almost daring smile. “I’m pretty to look at, aren’t I?”

“Well—” he starts, but they are interrupted by their waiter, who comes around the bend swiftly, his head covered in silver braids. He smiles with electric purple teeth.

“Good evening Mr. and Mrs. Grimwald, my name is Florian, and I will be your waiter this evening. Welcome to Osiria. Have you dined with us before?” He folds his hands politely in front of him, bowing slightly to hear them over the noise. Mrs. Grimwald believes he smells like heaven—the scent of whatever meat they are cooking back there. It makes her stomach whine.

“I have once, she has not,” Mr. Grimwald answers. The waiter nods pleasantly and adjusts his attention.

“Well let me give you the speech, Mrs. Grimwald.” His metal curls clink against each other like a wind chime. He taps his bow tie as if fixing it, but does not remove his fingers. “All of our cuts come with a complimentary wine, though you may choose any you like. Our special deals tonight include: Alison’s, an excellent balsamic pork tenderloin from 2040 with truffle shavings over creamy burrata and heirloom tomatoes; Xavier’s, a vintage 1990s herb-infused butter-poached tripe with spinach risotto; and of course, a decadent Renaissance 1881 crown roast we call Desdemona’s, finished with cognac *crème fraîche*. I also hear we have a birthday, so any dessert you choose is on the

house. Are there any crafts you have an interest in this evening?”

Mrs. Grimwald feels breathless with amazement, her hand on her chest again, “Well, we love artists of course—”

“Actually, I have something very particular in mind,” her husband interjects. She looks at him.

“Theron, don’t make a scene.”

“Nonsense, my love, this is common practice.” He waves her off, dodging her embarrassed gaze. He brings the waiter in with a beckoning finger and whispers in his ear. Florian’s eyes widen for a moment, either with surprise or joy, and he pulls away with a grin.

“Absolutely, Mr. Grimwald. I will bring you the chef right away.”

“No need. I understand Chef Welch is the only chef that handles these special requests?”

“Yes, Sir. The majority of our collection is outsourced. We deal in art from all over the world,” Florian tops his speech with a toothy purple smile. “But for special requests, such as that of our waiters and other staff, Chef Welch handles those personally.”

“Well no need to spoil the surprise any further. I trust you will make my wife’s birthday dinner extraordinary.”

“Of course, Sir. I will discuss this with the chef right away.” Florian bows lightly toward him, takes his menu and his wife’s, then bows to her too. “Mrs. Grimwald.”

He hurries off without another word. Mrs. Grimwald finds herself elated by the flutter of the waiter’s smile, the way his silver hair falls around his face with glee, and his unyielding speedwalk as though something wonderful is afoot. She eyes her husband with curiosity.

“What did you tell the poor boy?”

“Oh don’t worry, my love, I’ve found you the very best.” He shrugs to match his wealthy grin, folding his hands in front of his lips. “Last time I

was here, I saw her out there in the library, and I just knew it'd be love at first sight."

"What is she?"

"A writer."

Mrs. Grimwald is suddenly smiling, "Oh, honey, you know me too well."



After finishing in the kitchen and having time for a small break, I decide to wander the library. Every once and awhile, in between several famous novels by people I've never met, I catch the name of a waiter I used to know. There are paintings on the walls, plaques with their signatures, patents with their names in print on the top. Sometimes, I let my fingers trace over the titles, hover just beyond the paint on the canvas, or cradle the book so I can read it. It is the greatest collection of artistic minds, in a world where art is now so scarce, and the no man's land between wealth and poverty stretches ever wider, leaving no space nor time for such hobbies. It makes these pieces all that more priceless. I've found that in my efforts for survival, I wrote stories to maintain sanity. Like a diary for my pain, every page an ode to my suffering, every sentence a bleeding heart—but was it ever good enough to be admired by others? Was it even good enough to be admired by myself? "Osiria collects and redistributes brilliance," is what they told me on my first day. "Like a crystal glass of knowledge, waiting to be sipped."

I sit at the top of the stairs, looking down into the restaurant through the tinted glass, watching all the guests eat. A small number of them are very wealthy and attend often, but most of them have saved up months for this. I hear Osiria is a household name, once gatekept by the rich but now an enthralling gift to be experienced by all. Before every meal, they enjoy the work of an artist, and I watch their eyes grow big with delight and their fingers dance on the page, and I wonder how it

would feel to have my name under their fingertips someday. I've seen waiters younger than me have their work taken from the shelves and placed in the hands of the people below, their creations admired and held like they are made of gold. And the people smile as they eat, filled with joy, inspired perhaps, moved. I imagine how it must feel to be held like that. To be loved, and have my art be loved, like a delicious meal.

I am suddenly awoken by a frantic Florian sprinting up the spiral stairs, his steel hair filling the silent library with noise. He reaches me out of breath, panting, "Jyn! It's happening!"

My heart in my throat, journal clutched tight in my fingers until they flash white, I breathe, "What's happening?"

He laughs like he's never been more alive, "I hope you've got something good written in that ugly little diary!"



Mrs. Grimwald watches the other groups around her table, inspecting their plates for hints as to what hers might look like. She always hated when her husband made special requests on her behalf—she did not like to be the center of attention, nor to be a burden to anyone else. He did not often take her out in public, but when he did, she felt she was the lamb on his arm, dancing in front of the wolves. What could be the balance between wanting to be loved by him, but not to be loved like she was weak?

The couple beside them shares a massive plate with braised liver, herbs, and stewed carrots. Mrs. Grimwald watches the golden knife sever through the lobes, and they come apart in excellent slices like butter, making puddles of wine and blood on the white porcelain. The meat gnashes between their teeth, and when red dribbles down their chins, they laugh and wipe it with their napkins. Beside them is a stunning painting of the city: on top, wet metal towers cutting up through the night sky, intersecting

highways filled with hovercars, and people on the streets arm-in-arm wearing stunning suits and dresses and elaborate feather hats and black shoes. But on the bottom, a brown and grey wasteland, dim golden windows blurred by the hint of rain, ripped umbrellas, people with hunched spines and withered hands, fires in metal cans to keep warm. Mrs. Grimwald grimaces at that bottom half, then returns her gaze to the food, its contents rapidly diminishing. Then she looks at her husband.

“Theron?”

“Yes?”

“Why did we ever decide to eat people?”

“Simple,” her husband shrugs, staring at the pretty waiters on the other side of the tinted glass, “because the poor did it first. That’s how it always is.”

“Is that all?”

“And because they’re positively delicious.” He chuckles to himself. “You’ll see, my love. It’s quite the delicacy.”

She returns the laugh nervously, “I’m sure it is.”

At that moment, Florian returns, his arms full of plates: a heart, flanks, thigh meat, and most importantly, a brain. They are speckled in green herbs, drizzled with red jus, and framed by an assortment of expertly roasted vegetables and lemons. Under his arm, he carries a pair of small notebooks for each of them. The plates clink gently when he sets them down, and he passes out the books expertly. “Here is your appetizer, we recommend you read it before eating. We have paired a wine that we believe best suits your meal. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, this is absolutely exquisite.” Mr. Grimwald licks his lips. “Thank you, Florian.”

The boy nods, still alight with excitement, then hurries off faster than before. In the distance, Mrs. Grimwald swears she sees him pause to watch, hidden discreetly behind the bend in the walkway.

“Dig in, my love.” Mr. Grimwald has already seized his gold-ware, the blade of his knife dipping

below the surface of the pan-fried brain while he peels back the meninges with the prongs of his fork. They are translucent like plastic, crackling and snapping free from the cranial nerves as he pulls them away. With a deft plunge, he separates the lobes in two, cuts himself an ample slice, and pops it between his lips. The rubbery texture squeaks under his teeth while he chews. His wife watches, puzzled.

“You aren’t going to read the appetizer first?”

“I don’t care about those,” he says, his mouth full. “You have to pay extra to keep them anyway. They’re better off rotting in the archive.”

“Well, I’m going to read it.”

“Do what you want.”

With a decided huff, Mrs. Grimwald cracks open the spine of her book.



I discovered, in writing all of this, that there is no greater story to share than my own. Sitting on the steps and looking down at everyone, I see a hundred faces different from mine, bathed in the hues of their own stories, and I think if I were to archive each of these people forever, I’d leave them just as they are. All of the paintings around me are the colors of an artist’s soul. Inventions and mathematical dilemmas, novellas and beautiful poetry—every piece makes a quilt of the human psyche. If I am to be part of the quilt, I’d like to be part of it just as I am. To the couple that has chosen me, I have nothing grand to give—no excellent masterpiece, nor novel of tears. And yet, I find the essence of my soul is held in the raw pages of this journal, and what could be better suited to a tower of art than my honest humanity? After all, what is the point of humanity if not to consume art—and art, if not to consume humans?



Mrs. Grimwald puts down the book. Her hands are trembling, consciousness slipping from her own body and flying loose behind her, unable to do anything but watch. Her husband has finished his

half of the brain and moved on to the heart. He has become ravenous and disorganized, cutting away chunks and devouring them in the same motion, his teeth screeching across the fork as he yanks it greedily from his mouth. Blood and jus dribble from the corner of his lip, catch on the stubble of his chin, and fall on the white napkin fastened to his collar. All around her, the unyielding sounds of consumption, utensils squelching through human flesh, organs sloshing in the bowls of tongues, slipping down throats, and digesting. Hearty conversation, laughter, chewing, and swallowing. Again, and again, Mr. Grimwald hacks at the heart and shovels it into his mouth. He stabs at the thighs, sharing the fork with chopped carrots and parsley; cuts at the flank steak and slurps it down with his red wine; sics on the heart and tears it between his teeth and swallows it without chewing—and Mrs. Grimwald watches it slide down his throat, over and over, until he's devoured the entire heart. He wipes his face on his sleeve, and laughs at the horror on her face.

"Sorry, my love, the heart is my favorite. But I left you some brain."

Mrs. Grimwald stares at him, so ill with shock that she doesn't even feel disgust yet, just fear.

"Are you going to eat, my love? There's plenty."

Her breath shudders, and she squeezes the notebook tight between white knuckles, "I don't... well, I don't think I'm very hungry, Theron."

"Nonsense, my love, I know you have the appetite of a horse. Just eat."

"But she's just a little girl, Theron."

Suddenly, he slams his fists down on the table, startling her enough that she winces. He points his knife at her, "I told you not to read that damn book."

"But Theron—"

"Don't you see it is a privilege to eat artists like this?" He throws out his arms violently, gesturing, his hair slipping over his eyes. "Every bite fills you with their knowledge. All these people here? They come to this place to eat the bodies of the genetically superior, and what do you think that does? It makes them geniuses, Alyxia. Just like those rich pricks, just like we were always meant to be. So eat it."

"But her book, it's—"

"Eat, Alyxia."

"But the book, Theron!"

"Eat your fucking dinner!" He strikes the table again, and this time everything on it clatters, and the whole restaurant turns to look at them. Mrs. Grimwald shivers uncontrollably, hugging the book to her chest. Her wine glass has fallen over, and is now spilling red across the white table cloth and dripping onto her lap. Her husband sighs, fixes the glass, and shakes his head, "You know I didn't want to cause a scene, my love. But you always do this to me."

She hides her face from the other guests, "I know."

"I did this for you."

"I know."

"So what'll it be?"

At the question, she turns to look at him, a quiet hurt in her gaze, "If I was a waitress like Jyn, and I wrote beautiful things like this, would you eat me too?"

Her husband scoffs, shakes his head, and returns to cutting up his meal, his knife slipping easily through the meat. "I already told you, my love. You aren't good enough to be eaten."