

By the Oath: A Rough Start

In the pages that follow, you'll find part of the first manuscript I ever finished—the very first version of the book that became *By the Oath*. I'll warn you right now, though. It's bad. Really bad. So bad, in fact, that I'm only providing you with the first few pages.

So why am I letting you see it if it's so bad? Well, if you're a writer, I hope you'll learn a few things from my early mistakes. If that's you, the best advice I can offer is this: Strive to be objective when you assess your own work, listen for patterns in the feedback you get, and never stop learning. Writers who don't do these things aren't able to look at their worst work and realize it's bad. That's a problem.

If you're a reader—especially if you've read *By the Oath*—I hope you'll get a kick out of seeing just how bad the first version of this story was. I also hope you'll enjoy the behind-the-scenes peek at how the story and characters changed and evolved.

Whether you're a reader or a writer, see if you can identify some of the things that keep you from enjoying the story...and be sure to check out the notes at the end that correspond to the highlighted areas. There are some specific things I'd like to draw your attention to there!

—Anissa Stringer

Healer's Journey¹

Chapter 1

Lista was the first to hear the screams. She leapt, without thinking, as she always did, from her perch on a knobby, exposed tree root just inside the imposing barrier that surrounded the village. Her jump startled Tome and Anala, who were sitting nearby with their son; the baby had just drifted off into Anala's arms.²

"I just got him to sleep, Lista! I'll never get him down again in time for class..." Anala's voice trailed off when she heard the cries drifting in from the sea.³

Anala and Tome raced behind Lista, the baby's wail momentarily drowning out the sound of the screams. Anala stopped just long enough to push the squalling

infant into another woman's arms as more of the villagers ran through the wide gate and converged on the well-worn path leading to the sea. Three of the villagers broke away from the room and raced into the forest.

"Get Healer Avery," Tome yelled to his younger brother, Kin. Kin stuck his tongue out at Tome, and then his eyes grew wide and he sprinted to the brick building that served as a teaching hospital. Under normal circumstances Avery was 'father' to them; only an emergency would make Tome refer to him as 'Healer'.⁴

Despite the proximity of the beach, the cry for help was notably fainter by the time the sprinting trio reached the shore. Together, they plunged into the waist-deep and bloodied water where a stranger, now half-collapsed, was fighting to keep from being pulled into deeper water. Lista felt a momentary surge of relief. It was only a shark, not one of the aggressive eel-fish that attacked any creature that entered the water unprotected. She kicked at the shark as Tome unsheathed his short, stout dagger and sunk it into the shark's eyes, twisting and stabbing it into the predator.⁵ A bloody, billowing trail followed the shark as it swam away—and then there was a sudden thrashing at the surface of the shallow water and the shark disappeared, becoming prey itself.

Tome and Lista each grabbed an arm and heaved the stranger to shore while Anala directed the people who had gathered at the shore. "Who are our runners today?"

A youngster from the back of the group edged his way forward and read three names from a small piece of thick, rough paper he held tightly in his hand.

"Are they all here? Or are some of them running supplies or messages to other villages?" she asked.⁷

"Uh...they, uh..."

Anala put her hands on her hips. "You're Bastion, right?"

The boy swallowed hard and nodded.

"You've got to know where the runners are at all times! You know that! You can't be a healer if you can't even keep track of the runners!"

Bastion hung his head, and a girl about his age stepped forward.

"Yes?" Anala said, looking down her nose at the girl.

"Uh, the runners—they ran to the pharm⁸ when we heard him scream," she said, pointing at the man that Tome and Lista were positioning on the warm sand with his head toward the sea to take advantage of the slight slope.

Two young women stepped forward. "We're on the nursing rotation with Lista," the smaller, rounder woman told Tome when he glanced up at them. They squatted in the sand and examined the smaller wounds on the man's body. The dry sand soaked up blood that seeped from the man's right calf and, more dangerously, from a pumping artery in his mangled left arm.⁹ Lista ran her hands along the

man's body while Tome applied pressure on the artery above the wound on the man's arm, just below his armpit.

"Sea leeches," Lista said as she pulled three of the blood-sucking parasites from the edge of the gaping wound on the man's leg.

Tome's shoulders tensed. "What kind?"

"Just the blue ones. We'll need to check ourselves soon."

Tome's shoulders dropped with relief, but only for a moment. "Where are our runners?" he yelled.

The stranger's body was trembling and his lips and fingernails were turning blue.

"What's your name?" Anala asked the girl.

"Litta."¹⁰

"Litta, you're on roster duty. Bastion, you're off," she said. The boy's shoulders slumped lower, but the girl stood taller.

"You come with me," Anala said, running toward a small shed at the edge of the beach. "I need help with supplies." She didn't wait to see if the girl followed.

A burly man pushed through the crowd and a woman shot him a dirty look. "Hey, watch it—oh, sorry Healer. I didn't know it was you."

The big man stood over the stranger, watching his healers at work. "You're doing fine, Lista. Keep steady pressure on that leg. "The runners are coming. They'll be here soon." He didn't comment on his son's work or the others on nursing duty with Lista—Tome was a fully trained healer; and the two nurses were only just beginning their training as healers. Lista's training was almost complete. "Are there other serious injuries besides the arm and leg?"

"No." Lista said. She shrugged a long strand of glossy black hair from her face, glancing up at him, startling him with her striking eyes even though he'd seem them often enough: One was bright green, the other bright blue and they were disconcerting, especially against her deeply tanned skin.¹¹

"The arm injury is most serious. I'm concerned about the integrity of his forearm. His leg's pretty bad too. He's already lost a lot of blood and he has deep puncture wounds on both hands—typical defense wounds. "He had blue sea-leeches too—three of them." Lista said. "And he's shocky, of course."

"Coming through! Coming through!" Anala said as she and Litta pushed through the crowd carrying a few small wooden bowls and other supplies. "Where are the runn—?" she started to yell when three people pushed their way through the crowd. The runners were badly scratched from their race through the jungle, and Healer Avery raised a thick gray eyebrow at them.

"Report to the hospital," he sighed as they handed their bundles into eager hands. The first runner blushed and Avery moderated the tone of his voice. "Runners. Good job," he called as they limped away, breathless.

“We should have stopped to get our thistle-sloth ponchos...”

“I know. Healer Avery was mad! I just didn’t think about it when we heard screams—”

“Yeah, me neither. We’re going to hear about it—”

“Maybe—I don’t care though. I’m already starting to itch...”¹²

On the sand, the round woman took charge of the plants brought while Lista gave her directions. “No, you’ve got to shred that coagulum leaf into fine pieces before you mash it with the pestle and mortar. Don’t let yourself get so hurried that you start skipping steps,” and then, “That’s right...now, add just enough sea water to turn the mash into a thick paste.”

Avery scrutinized Lista as she worked. Her fine brows were furrowed in concentration as she worked, but her actions were sure.

While she supervised the other two, Lista examined the surgical needles that Anala had brought back from the shed. She decided she would have chosen the same ones—a j-shaped needle for the deeper work of repairing the blood vessel in the man’s arm and a quarter-circle needle for the remaining work. The needles were among the few surgical instruments the village still had available to them from the Old Times and every year there seemed to be fewer of them. Of course, each Healer earned a set of the precious instruments when they left on their first journey, but surgical instruments weren’t the only items going short. Everything the Old Timers made with their now-defunct technology was harder to come by. Even the teaching manuals in the village’s small library were tattered and worn; a few of the more popular books had been bound with twine to keep them from falling apart completely.¹³

Lista dropped the needles into one of the smaller bowls—this one glass—and she squeezed clear, thick sap from a thick, narrow leaf the runners had collected from the jungle; there was just enough to cover both needles.

The antiseptic sap was a fairly recent discovery and had significantly reduced the rate of infection during surgery, especially when used in conjunction with a tincture made from a blend of herbs that had been grown since the Old Times. Mixing a few drops of the herbal tincture into the sap had a synergistic effect on the active molecules and improved the antibiotic action of both compounds. The mixture wasn’t as effective as passing instruments through a flame to sterilize them, but during a true emergency, it was sometimes the only option.

Lista sat back on her heels for a moment, watching the other nurses as they worked. The third person on nursing duty was a nervous young man who was anxiously trying to decide which suture threads to choose.

[This scene on the beach goes on for a while...I’ll save you from having to read it, so let’s skip to the next scene.]

Chapter 2

The healers were all at various stages of their education and were well settled onto the paved-brick courtyard by the time Avery made his way to the podium, another relic from the Old Times. He scanned the students in the enclosed outdoor classroom and wondered if he should put off this particular lecture. Of all the subjects he taught, this one alone made him uncomfortable.¹⁴ Still, he believed what he taught and knew that future healers, at least, should know the truth about the end of the old civilization. Already, just a few generations since then, legends and myths had cropped up in some villages to explain the changes in their world; many contained bits and pieces of what Avery believed was the truth—others were patently ridiculous.

Anyway, he **thought**¹⁵ to himself as he cleared his voice to warn his students that he was about to begin, the story's got to be told.

A few side conversations trailed off as the leader of Healer Village began to speak. "Today we'll be taking a break from the practicums of the past few weeks to discuss our history; the history of this village and of the Old Times in general." There were a few groans in the audience.

"First, who can summarize the history of our village?" He scanned the group and called on a slight man who looked anywhere but back at him. "Jaymes. How about you?"

The young man, not much more than a teenager, had a mop of curly blonde hair and grey eyes that were normally mischievous. He started when his name was called and blushed. He took a deep breath, sat up straight and answered, tentatively at first.

"Uh...well, the explosions marked the end of the Old Times and the beginning of our time, and there was a thing called a conference near here when the explosions began. Doctors—that's what they used to call healers—went to them to learn more about different diseases and treatments and to meet with other doctors. Sometime during the meeting, the technology they relied on—things called cell-ular tela—telephones and com...computers, stopped working. So did a lot of other things."¹⁶

Avery nodded, trying not to show his impatience; Jaymes wasn't really any different than any of the other younger students. He was only repeating back what he'd learned; he didn't understand it. How could he? Under the simple light microscope the village owned and used, they could see single cells and the devastation that viruses and bacteria could cause, if not always the organisms

themselves. But they just couldn't visualize a gadget that wouldn't let them talk to someone miles away. I have a hard time with that too, Avery thought.

Jaymes **slowly**¹⁷ continued, "We have evidence, journals and other records, that show that the doctors thought that their generation would be the last, that humans were about to become extinct. They were too reliant on those things that broke. A lot of people couldn't even get food once their technology was ruined. And the explosions had a poison in them called radiation. The radiation should have poisoned everything. When the doctors realized what was happening, some of them committed suicide. The rest just resigned themselves to their fate."

Healer Avery nodded to him to continue. "According to Dr. Sarah Stafford's personal journal, it wasn't until several years passed that the doctors, who had become **very busy just**¹⁸ trying to stay alive in a world where they had suddenly had to learn to find their own food, realized that they should have been long dead from radiation poisoning. That's when some of them, the ones who were most far-sighted, created our village. Doctors of the time specialized in certain aspects of medicine. They had doctors who dealt with only foot problems, for example." He shook his head as if the idea of focusing on something so specifically was beyond his understanding.

"They created committees to outline what it was possible to treat and diagnose in their fields without the sophisticated technology they no longer had available to them..."

"Thank you, Jaymes," Avery **said**¹⁹, giving him a ghost of a smile as Jaymes sat back, clearly relieved when Avery took over again.

"That's all true, but needless to say, there were some disagreements between the doctors and their committees; they all believed their own specialty was most important. There were so many disagreements, in fact, that some doctors began to leave, preferring to search out and treat patients rather than sit around and talk about what to teach the next generation of doctors. This turned out to be rather fortuitous as it's likely one of the reasons everyone seems to know about our village; it's also protected us from the raids and attacks that others face."

Avery segued into the next part of his lecture with a misleading appearance of calm. He'd seen some of the places he was about to describe and even his memories, now faded by the years, filled him with disquiet. "As doctors returned from these first journeys, they began reporting remarkable changes in their world. Some, they expected. Bare craters miles across and equally as deep; entire cities gone in some places; twisted skeletons of buildings left in others. All things that are consistent with multiple nuclear explosions, one of the poisonous weapons they'd made.

"For several generations there were nearly constant earthquakes and massively wild storms. Volcanoes grew overnight. Whole mountain ranges disappeared and

others thrust through the earth. We live by the sea, but where we are now was once only land. Beyond that there was a sea, called an ocean, which was miles deep in places, not shallow like ours. The climate here was much different, too. Healer Village was nearly destroyed by the storms and the changes in the Earth more than once, and people were frequently killed and injured during the Time of Storms. Many doctors abandoned the village, seeking safer places, but some always chose to stay and rebuild, and those who survived their journeys often came back here as well.”

In fact, while the Healers were accustomed to the severe weather patterns and climate they experienced, the scarred planet, though recovering, had not yet calmed. Volcanoes continued to erupt across the planet’s surface, spewing ash and debris into the air, affecting both air and water currents. Earthquakes that accompanied the eruptions laid further waste to the land. At the same time, lava flow and other geologic formations created it anew. Together, the forces often triggered sudden violent storms, sometimes thousands of miles from an epicenter or eruption site, and occasionally, in turn, the powerful storms themselves would trigger a new eruption or earthquake as the unstable crust sought to release building pressure.

Avery continued his lecture. “The doctors of that time would be stunned by our world today. During the Old Times, before the Time of Storms, there were only a few species of plants that were mobile. The sensitive plant would fold up its leaves when stroked; and a few carnivorous plants could digest small insects that got stuck in their sticky sap. But these plants were the exception rather than the rule. Even the sea creatures we know now are different. Shark attacks like the one we experienced first-hand today were rare, even rarer than being struck by lightning. As you know, our experience is different. Many creatures, like sharks and predatory cats, actively hunt anything now, including us.” Many students nodded in solemn agreement at the reminder of the accident they just witnessed.

“And humans have changed too,” Avery added with a pause. That innocuous statement silenced the quiet chatter that invariably picked up during lectures. The silence became palatably more expectant as he gathered his thoughts before he began again.

“Yes, we have changed too,” he said with a nod. “We still look the same, more or less. We’re all much slimmer than they were, I’m sure, seeing as how obesity was the leading cause of many diseases back then. But that’s a behavioral change. It’s on a cellular level that there have been the most significant changes.”

[I’m going to end this scene here...it gets a bit long winded! I hope you enjoyed this peek into the original version of this story. Also, please reach out

to me on the Contact tab on my website (<http://www.StringerStories.com>) and let me know if you enjoyed this insight.]

Commentary

- 1 This was the original title of the book. It's not great, but I kind of suck at titles anyway.
- 2 The final version of this opening puts more focus on Lista as the protagonist. The version here and the paragraphs that follow put more emphasis on Tome and Anala. That would be okay...if Tome and Anala had a bigger role in the story, but they never do. Their baby did play a small role at the end of this original version, but the ending changed dramatically in the final version. In fact, I'm not even sure if the baby appears at the end in the final version!
- 3 This line introduces a problem I had throughout this first version of the book without ever realizing it. It used to be much more common to see books written from the third person, omniscient point of view (POV). In that POV, the narrator may jump into the head of any character, any time.

This is much less common today, and is even frowned upon if it happens within a single scene (it's often called "head hopping" then). Whatever POV a writer uses, it's important to be consistent—and I was not. In this version, I seem to jump between third person omniscient to third person limited omniscient (where we're in a single character's head) and third person objective/dramatic (where we only see the characters' thoughts through the lens of their behavior/dialogue). As you continue to read, see if you can catch where my POVs switched...and ask yourself how it affected your enjoyment of that passage.

- 4 You've already met a lot of characters in this book. Too many, in fact. Especially since Kin doesn't actually have a role in the story. (Yikes!) So why is he in the book at all? The answer: He shouldn't be! And he's not in the final version at all!
- 5 Well, it's about time. We're finally in Lista's head...or are we? We know she's relieved, but we don't know anything else. Writers are directed to hook their readers on the first page (and preferably in the first paragraph) by helping them identify with the main character.

How much do you identify with Lista right now? My guess is that your answer is, “Not much.” And why should you? You don’t know anything about her—what she wants out of life, what she’s afraid of, nothing. When you read *By the Oath*, I hope you identify with Lista’s hopes and fears right away.

- 6 Huh. Lista is the main character, but if I weren’t the writer, I might actually think the main character was Anala!
- 7 Originally, Healer Village was very tightly organized and there were many different roles that the healers-in-training were assigned to. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but it resulted in a lot of world-building that didn’t go anywhere since most of the story takes place outside of Healer Village.
- 8 Some background: The “pharm” was a play on words and it was meant to describe the pharmaceutical “farm” that the healers maintained. It was in the jungle, which was just as dangerous in this version of the story as it was in *By the Oath*. (Predatory animals weren’t the only danger in the jungle; poisonous and carnivorous plants were just as dangerous.)
- 9 Ryk’s injuries were very serious in *By the Oath*. In this version, they were so serious he was unable to travel back to his village with Lista. But then again, in this version, Lista fell in love with Ryk! (Yes, you read that right: Lista and Ryk!)
- 10 Litta and Lista? Those names are way too similar. I find it challenging to name characters and often have to go back and change names when I realize I’ve done this kind of thing. Silly me!
- 11 As I mentioned before, this was the first manuscript I ever finished. You’ll read about how and why the world changed soon, but this was originally a stand-alone novel. To that end, I gave Lista these unusual eyes to make her features a little more memorable. I was well into the revision of this story before it occurred to me that—duh—this story should take place in the distant future of the universe I created for The Glare series.

To that end, Lista’s appearance changed. As a descendant of Jenna and Josh, she’s inherited some of Josh’s coloring and Jenna’s slight frame. (Though this heritage is not explicitly stated in *By the Oath*.)

- 12 I'd like to believe I've continued to grow as a writer over the years. You've encountered a few other lines of dialogue thus far, but I find that I tend to lean more on dialogue and less on narrative to tell my stories now.
- 13 This bit about surgical instruments being hard to come by is true in the *By the Oath*, too. It's just explicitly stated here.
- 14 Have you caught some of the shifts in point of view (POV) I mentioned earlier? In this scene, we're fully ensconced in Healer Avery's head. Again, this isn't a bad thing...except that this is the only scene in the whole book where we're in his head and where he plays a major role!

You'll note that even though the details of Avery's lecture change, this lecture still has a lot in common with the lecture in *By the Oath*.

- 15 Words like *thought*, *felt*, and *wondered*, are sometimes called *filter words* because they distance the reader from what a character is thinking or feeling. While some instances of these types of words is fine, too many can reduce the intensity of the reader's involvement in the story—often without the reader even knowing why they feel that way.
- 16 This is where the world-building of *By the Oath* departs from this original. In *By the Oath*, the changes that happened on Earth occurred because the light from *The Glare* affected plants and animals in a manner that went beyond blinding most humans...it just took a few generations before the humans in *The Glare* realized what was going on—they were simply too busy trying to survive the apocalypse to understand at first! In this original version the cause was entirely different.
- 17 Using adverbs with dialogue (and often in narrative) is something of a sin in the writing world, and there's a good reason for it. "Jaymes slowly continued," is awkward, isn't it? It would have been better to say something like: "Jaymes stammered," or "James hesitated, then said..."

Either one of these substitutes gives you a better idea about how Jaymes was speaking. Of course, it's not necessary to remove all adverbs, but as a writer I try to cut back on them when I can.

- 18 Words like *very*, *just*, *really*, and *only* are sometimes called *filler* words (not to be confused with the filter words we discussed in No. 15). They're called filler words because they take up unnecessary space without adding meaning. That doesn't mean they have to be eliminated completely, but they often can be eliminated without affecting the intention of a sentence.

It's important to note that most writers have words they tend to rely on too heavily; those become their own filler words!

I often go through my work and search for many of these words; I don't worry about eliminating them all, but I do try to cut back on them when I can! I also look for my nemesis, the em dash. Because that sneaky devil tends to take over my writing if I'm not paying attention. Many em dashes remain in my finished manuscripts...but I remove many more before I send my work to my editor, and my editor notes even more that can be removed. Like I said: They're sneaky little devils!

- 19 There are a couple of schools of thought about dialogue tags like *said*. Some authors will tell you to avoid other words (responded, answered, shouted, laughed, etc.) and stick with *said*. Their rationalization is that *said* is like *a* or *the*. It's necessary, but almost invisible, and when you substitute other dialogue tags, you draw attention to the word.

Another school of thought says that you should also avoid using *said* whenever possible as well. In this example, “‘Thank you, Jaymes,’ Avery said, giving him...” could become, “‘Thank you, Jaymes.’ Avery gave him a...”

My personal preference now that I've been writing for a while is to mostly stick with *said* and remove it entirely when I can. I'm not a fan of books with no dialogue tags at all; I find I get confused too easily so in my own books, I try to make sure the reader always knows who is saying what!

That's it, my friends!

I hope these pages provide you with some insight about how *By the Oath* started. And if you're a writer, I hope you haven't seen your own mistakes reflected here...or if you have, that you have a better understand about how to resolve them!

Oh, and one last comment for those of you who are reading this. We all have different writing styles and writing voices. The notes above are **my** writing truths. They aren't gold standards, and you're free to disagree with them. I would urge you, though, to do some research so that when you make different choices, you're doing so mindfully and with purpose whenever you write (or read) something!

As always, thanks for taking the time to read this. If you'd like to make copies, please reach out to me for permission. I usually give it, but it's helpful for me to know how you'll use it. (And sometimes I may have some other resources you may want to use, too!)

--Anissa Stringer