

Université de Montréal

Otherworldly Others :
Racial Representation in Fantasy Literature

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Abstract

Despite nigh-limitless potential for worldbuilding and social representation, Fantasy literature has often been rightfully accused of being plagiaristic, unambitious, filled with racist narratives and themes. However, I would instead argue that the genre's most defining generic characteristics and its history of pastiche are the best tools at Fantasy's disposal to address concepts such as race or racism in a dignified way, or even with the intent of promoting social justice. Therefore, the goal of my thesis is both to legitimize Fantasy as an art form worthy of study and respect, all while proving how the elements and traditions that led the genre to earn its racist reputation can be used differently, in order to demolish discourses of racialization or institutionalized racism.

The first half of the thesis will act as a critical examination of how Fantasy's relationship to racial representation and racism has fluctuated over time, as well as explain why racism is so prevalent in this subset of popular literature. The second half consists of a creative writing project that will prove by example that Fantasy can be used to address race and racism without reinforcing discriminatory ideologies, nor appropriating pre-existing racial identity discourses.

The theory portion of my thesis will illustrate how the genre's racist lineage manifests itself within different narratives and historical periods, all while elaborating how Fantasy can involuntarily encourage racist ideologies, as an indirect result of the genre's most defining elements. This part will then explain how these same generic trends can become the foundations of new narratives that reject or upend these same racist discourses. Finally, there will be a detailed summary of the intentions and strategies that informed the creative portion's writing.

The creative portion of the thesis aims to demonstrate how Fantasy literature can address race and racial representation, without over-simplifying the discussion, nor distancing it too much from real-world instances of racism. It is divided into four short stories set in the same imaginary "world"; each tale depicts the institutionalized racism that exists within this Fantasy world from the point of view of a character with unique racial identity challenges, both as an individual as member of a "Tribe". Each chapter acts as a sort of "counter-narrative",

reconfiguring Fantasy literature's unique generic characteristics that, normally, legitimize racisms from the real world, in order to examine, criticize and discredit these racisms instead.

Keywords: Fantasy, Literature, Racism, Race, Racial Representation, Popular Culture, Creative Writing, Science-Fiction

Résumé

Malgré un potentiel quasiment illimité en ce qui concerne la création des mondes fictifs et la représentation sociale, la littérature « Fantasy » a souvent été accusée à juste titre d'être plagiaire, sans ambition et remplie de thèmes ou d'éléments narratifs racistes. Cependant, je disputerais plutôt que les caractéristiques les plus définissantes du genre et son historique de pastiche sont les meilleurs outils à la disponibilité de la Fantasy pour adresser des concepts tels que la race ou le racisme de manière dignifiée, ou même avec l'intention de promouvoir la justice sociale. Ainsi, le but de ma thèse est de légitimer la Fantasy comme forme d'art digne d'être étudiée et respectée, tout en prouvant comment les éléments et les traditions qui ont menés le genre à mériter sa réputation raciste peuvent être utilisés différemment, afin de démolir des discours de racialisation ou de racisme institutionnalisés.

La première moitié de la thèse examinera de manière critique comment la relation de la Fantasy avec la représentation raciale et le racisme a fluctué à travers le temps, en plus d'expliquer pourquoi le racisme est aussi prévalent dans ce sous-ensemble de littérature populaire. La seconde moitié consiste d'un projet de création littéraire qui prouvera par exemple que la Fantasy peut être utilisée pour adresser la race ou le racisme sans renforcer des idéologies discriminatoires, ni approprier des discours d'identité raciales préexistantes.

La portion théorique de ma thèse illustrera comment la lignée raciste du genre se manifeste à travers différents récits et périodes historiques, tout en élaborant comment la Fantasy peut involontairement encourager des idéologies racistes, le résultat indirect des éléments les plus définissants du genre. Cette partie expliquera ensuite comment ces mêmes tendances génériques peuvent devenir les fondements de nouveaux récits qui rejettent ou renversent ces mêmes discours racistes. Finalement, il y aura un résumé détaillé des intentions et des stratégies qui ont informées l'écriture de la portion créative.

La portion créative de la thèse vise à démontrer comment la littérature Fantasy peut adresser la race et la représentation raciale, sans vulgariser la discussion, ni trop la distancier d'instances de racisme réelles. Elle est divisée en quatre nouvelles littéraires situées dans le même « monde » imaginaire; chaque récit représente le racisme institutionnalisé qui existe dans ce monde Fantasy du point de vue d'un personnage avec des défis uniques concernant l'identité raciale, en tant qu'individu et que membre d'une « Tribu ». Chaque chapitre se propose comme « anti-récit », reconfigurant les caractéristiques génériques uniques de la littérature Fantasy qui, normalement, légitiment des racismes provenant du monde réel, afin d'examiner, de critiquer, et de discréditer ces mêmes racismes.

Mots-clés: Fantasy, Littérature, Racisme, Race, Représentation raciale, Culture populaire, Création littéraire, Science-Fiction

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Introduction

In the realm of popular culture, few literary genres are at once as beloved and despised as that of Fantasy. Science-Fiction has earned something of a noble status thanks to authors like Mary Shelley and Isaac Asimov, tales of Horror by Edgar Allen Poe and Stephen King are often cited as prime examples of literature's power to induce affect, and fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson are famous as masterpieces of children's literature, all while being among the most taught and researched works in academia today...But, apart perhaps for the likes of Tolkien, oeuvres that bear the name of "Fantasy" have rarely been privy to this kind respect. If anything, scholars, institutions and authors with "high literature" aspirations avoid the label like the plague, often offering contrived excuses so as to explain why some of literature's most phenomenal, imagination-centric texts, are not deserving of this label¹...Clearly, the genre's name alone carries unsavory reputations in certain circles.

However, despite longstanding reputations of catering only to "comfort zone" entertainment seekers, and of producing naught but unambitious, plagiaristic reiterations of past works, Fantasy stands tall as one of the most popular, experimental and influential forms of fiction today, be it in the form of books, films, comics, video games or television. Frequently dismissed as popcorn entertainment incapable of eliciting affect or studying the human condition by supporters of the "high-literature versus low-literature" dichotomy, due to its obsession with creating imaginary worlds filled with myths and magic, it is this very same obsession that makes Fantasy so relevant today. Indeed, all great Fantasies are akin to mythologies of the contemporary: entertaining us, yes, but also acting as oneiric mirrors of society. Fantasy ponders how imagination shapes the way we understand ourselves and the world around us, allowing it to present a microscopic and macroscopic portrait of the human condition, be it by reimagining escapism as philosophical introspection, creating cosmopolitan allegories of clashing cultures and races, or the use of fictional worlds as speculative, experimental spaces. As a result, Fantasy contains deep interpretative potential and an uncanny power of social representation, hidden beneath its veneer of childlike wonder, and can redefine

¹ This includes *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and many modern-day apologies.

the relationship between culture and society. Fantasies, for all their critics, are among the most primordial, zeitgeist-shaping genres that exist. Fantasy is the foundation of folklore, astrology, religion. It can be visionary, familiar, transporting. It is in the language we speak, the knowledge we seek, the stories we tell. It can be both terrifying and awe-inspiring, both deeply personal and planetary in scale, childishly playful or overflowing with insightful wisdom...

And yet, it is also well known that the genre can be disturbingly racist. For despite its vast potential for bringing life to entire worlds that bear no resemblance to our own, Fantasy has a long history of creating conservative², Eurocentric, even downright bigoted narratives, that are at best unintentionally racist, at others, reminiscent of the most vile works of white supremacy propaganda. Though there are many exceptions to the rule, a large majority of Fantasy works are reductive in their representations of “the other”, treating non-WASP ethnicities as subhuman, and progressive ideologies as inherently dangerous. Be it Robert E. Howard’s representations of foreign ethnicities as fundamentally animalistic and bloodthirsty in *Conan the Cimmerian*, H.P. Lovecraft depicting non-whites and Jews as abominations on par with cosmic horrors in *The Horror at Red Hook*, or even Tolkien describing the Haradrim as “black men like half trolls³” in *The Lord of the Rings*, Fantasy’s legacy of racist discourse is as extensive and well-documented as it is concerning, to the point that one might rightfully assume that the genre’s aspirations, aesthetics and defining features *make* it racist by default. Worse yet is the fact that, due to the genre’s derivative nature, where authors give their own takes on the tales and mythos of predecessors, many outdated rhetorics of racial hatred and discrimination have been rewritten time and time again. This has allowed these racializing ideologies to endure, both in the realm of Fantasy fiction, and in real-world contexts; a direct result of Fantasy’s uncanny power to reshape collective and popular imaginations through narrative. Even more problematic is how these discourses *transformed* over time. This has led to a situation where real world racist narratives and Fantasy world narratives are perpetually learning from one another, evolving in such a way that both have nigh-irreparably distorted our understanding of race into something more akin to species or scripture. As a result of this reiterative, perpetual

² Creatively and politically speaking.

³ TOLKIEN, J.R.R. “The Battle of the Pelennor Fields”, *The Lord of the Rings*, New York, Harper Collins, 2012, p.1107

cycle of copy-pasting imaginations and racist discourses, many have decried the entire genre as being limited in scope, whose lofty goals of reinventing the entire world only results in oversimplifications of sociopolitical issues, that both promote anti-intellectualism and legitimize real-world forms of discrimination.

However, it is my opinion that Fantasy itself is not the problem: on the contrary, I would go so far to say as it could be a *solution* to the perpetuation of racism and damaging racial representations. Rather than unintentionally and inevitably promote a black-and-white, good-or-evil view of the world that lends itself naturally to supremacist discourse, I hope to demonstrate - through both theory and fiction – that Fantasy’s key elements⁴ do not promote racism in and of themselves. Instead, I want to prove that, if utilized correctly, these same features can not only promote diverse, complex, respectful instances of racial representation, but can potentially redefine the way we think about race on a day-to-day basis. As a result, my goal for this thesis will not simply be to point fingers and decry a few specific works of Fantasy as being irredeemably vile or bigoted. Rather, my aim is to scrutinize the *mechanisms* through which racializing discourse and racist imaginaries take shape in Fantasy Literature, transforming themselves into clichés of the genre, or even spilling over into reality, and distorting existing conceptions of race and racism further. By doing this, I hope not only to help make sense of the at-times vague rules that define and delimitate Fantasy from other subgenres, but also to propose new avenues as to how Fantasy can actively *combat* racism through the power of narrative, by using both theory and creative writing to prove validate my stance. It is my opinion that, by reconfiguring existing devices and tropes of the genre that typically serve to reinforce or defend racist subtext, Fantasy narratives can do more than just avoid succumbing to the threat of endlessly unambitious self-reiterations. Realistically speaking, with careful use of the genre’s most defining tropes, Fantasy literature can actually decontextualize existing racist labels and ideologies, or even disassemble racializing arguments piece by piece, and revolutionize the way entire cultures or zeitgeists comprehend race as a whole.

⁴ Its obsession with large-scale worldbuilding, its focus on the imaginary and the impossible, and its potential to yield mythological representations of the real world that demand readers to reconsider real-world sociopolitical constructs from new perspectives.

For this reason, the first half of the theory portion of my thesis will begin by addressing the conundrum that is *defining* Fantasy literature, and how our understanding of “Fantasy” as a literary subgenre has fluctuated dramatically over time, in tandem with social and cultural phenomena. On one hand, I will identify how Fantasy’s most distinguishing features also happen to be its greatest obstacles regarding the elaboration of a concise, comprehensive definition of the genre. On the other, I will scrutinize elements that differentiate Fantasy from other kinds of “escapist” literatures, like Science-Fiction and Horror, as well as explain how the genre has come to occupy such a large space in international popular culture. This means doing more than just clarifying how the genre draws its derivative habits from mythologies the world over. It means understanding how particular political and historical circumstances led to Eurocentric, conservative Fantasies being considered as the “default” state of the genre across the globe. Moreover, in “Mechanisms of Hatred”, I will attempt to shed light on why themes of race and fantastical stories come to be so intrinsically linked, to the point that racism and Fantasy seem inseparable at such a foundational level. Following sections will be dedicated to studying the hows and whys of Fantasy’s long history of racism, touching on how colonialism, the cyclical homage of famous texts, and even limitations of language have led to the genre promoting a very specific, very disturbing kind of racism over the years: scientific racism. In doing so, I will further clarify how Fantasy’s evolution over time, mediums, and cultural landscapes has caused its at-times racist discourse to be so closely associated to the genre as a whole. This will demonstrate how the continued presence of narrativized racism in Fantasy significantly changed “the Fantasy landscape in the twenty-first century, not just enabling but fostering the repetition of old habits and adding new dimensions to them⁵”, leading to the establishment of a genre monomyth that indirectly promoted totalitarian, racializing dialogue.

That having been said, the section “What has been Broken by Fantasy can be Reforged by Fantasy” will act as a counterargument to the idea that racial discrimination is an unavoidable part of Fantasy Literature. In it, I will describe in detail how genre trends that are normally considered to directly contribute to the presence of racism in Fantasy literature (derivative stories, large-scale worldbuilding, Fantasy versions of real-world ethnic groups, etc.) can be – and have been – updated or transformed by writers, in such ways that they actually allow for the

⁵ YOUNG, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, Routledge, New York, 2015, p.11

genre to avoid reinforcing racialization in narrative, even the elaboration of blatantly anti-racist Fantasies. In the increasingly globalized, mediatized cultural landscape of the twenty-first century, it is essential for Fantasy writers and readers alike to “seek new stories and to represent the diversity of modern society⁶” that are not limited by the imperialist or anti-Semitic doctrines of pioneers like Burroughs and Lovecraft, but rather outright challenge them in their own terms. Fantasy’s habits of pastiche and personal takes on prior author mythologies cannot be an opportunity for the genre to become careless; if anything, the genre’s history of reiteration, coupled with its fascination with creating entire worlds and societies from the ground up, is all the more reason for the genre to avoid over-simplification of complex topics, least of all race. In many ways, this segment will both act as an introduction to the main goals of my creative fiction pieces, and the end goal of my entire thesis: to prove that Fantasy, if utilized correctly, could become the most effective tool at our disposal to dismantle racist thinking in popular imaginations, or even reorient the foundations of racist thinking altogether.

A large percentage of my theory portion will consist of a condensed survey of the Fantasy genre. In it, I will detail how Fantasy literature’s sensibilities, defining features and goals have evolved over time, all while pinpointing how certain landmark texts established many of the genre’s current tropes or reputations, and in turn cemented most of the genre’s racist tendencies. This will include the genre’s medieval and Gothic predecessors, fundamental works that had huge influences on the aesthetics, formats and goals of modern Fantasy, but the majority of this section will focus on what we today call “modern Fantasy literature”, beginning with the publication of MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, and ending at today’s most recent and influential Fantasies, such as *Harry Potter* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Special consideration will be given to the likes of Tolkien, *Weird Tales* and *Dungeons and Dragons*, in order to clarify how many of the genre’s most influential voices and oeuvres were also those that established some of its most problematic habits in regards to racial representation – most notably, the genre’s documented history of “Tolkienism”. By charting a critical course through the genre’s troubled history, detailing the trends, tropes and external circumstances that led to the development of its modern forms and treatments of race, I hope to validate my prior arguments about racism in works of Fantasy, revealing how the subject can be easily and unknowingly

⁶ *Idem*, p.12

mishandled, just as simply as it can be tackled from the perspective of social justice or counterdiscourse. That said, I also aim to give positive examples of racial representation in Fantasy, detailing how certain works were able to use Fantasy most damaging tropes against themselves to great effect, as proof of the latter. Doing so will demonstrate that Fantasy's unsettlingly long lineage of racism is not inherent to the genre itself, but rather the enduring consequences resulting from a variety of poor choices and complex sociopolitical circumstances. This particular stance will be by no means serve as an excuse to undermine the racial bigotry that has been perpetuated, institutionalized or popularized by these works, but nor will it be used as an opportunity to dismiss the entire genre as deserving of its most unflattering or generalizing reputations. Rather, I want to reveal the oft-overlooked and misunderstood complexities of a genre, whose history of racism and reiteration is often belittled, oversimplified or outright dismissed as inevitable. My argument is not that Fantasy literature needs to change outright, if ever it hopes to grow past its traditions of cyclical, supremacist escapism narratives. On the contrary, I contend that Fantasy needs to reconnect with its most escapist roots, and capitalize on its most unique traits when it comes to approaching racial representation tactfully and tastefully. Not by continuing to move into the familiar territory of medieval whiteness, but to return to Tolkien and Lovecraft's auteur mythologies, armed with knowledge, ethics, and appreciation of the genre's unique capabilities: only then will Fantasy truly be able to tell us and teach us about racial identity in ways no other art form can.

The theory portion will conclude with a brief introduction and explanation of the creative component. It will detail how each chapter uses Fantasy's defining features to address racism, emulating and criticizing the Fantasy of a specific era, and will also examine how themes of racial identity intersect with issues like gender and war. The creative portion itself will consist of four short stories (all of which are set in the same Fantasy world) that reconfigure known Fantasy trends and tropes so as to address racism without enforcing it; in other words, a practical application of the theory portion's arguments. Each story will also be told from the perspective of a character belonging to a different "Tribe", and will focus on their personal experiences with institutionalized racism, both as the member of a discriminated collective, as marginalized individuals whose identities extend beyond mere "racial signifiers" or culturally ingrained archetypes. Thanks to these Fantasies *about* Fantasy, my goal is not only to demonstrate that the

genre can benefit from emulating the aesthetics and ideas of past works, but can also do so without blatantly copy-pasting prior authors' less savoury ideologies or worldbuilding ideas. What's more, though each story can be read individually, each one is meant to add depth to the others, filling in blanks in the story, adding depth and moral ambiguity to each character's personal account with racial discrimination, and allowing for a novella-length project to have a scope and scale more appropriate to that of an actual Fantasy novel. In addition, by no means are these stories mere allegories of the theory portion's arguments. All four chapters are legitimate works of Fantasy in their own right that meet my previously established definitions, and address themes of race and racism without resorting to outright pedagogic exposition, allowing me to provide proof of my arguments about racial representation in Fantasy, that would not be possible by using academic writing alone.

THEORY PORTION

RACIAL REPRESENTATION IN FANTASY

Understanding *Fantasy*

Perhaps one biggest obstacles to analyzing race in Fantasy is that we lack an adequate definition of the genre, let alone one that allows us to explain how a phenomenon as complex as racism manifests within it. Moreover, Fantasy is often confused or equated with similar kinds of generic literature such as science-fiction, *le fantastique*, horror, and surrealism, or inaccurately used as a portmanteau referring to the *aesthetics* of the authorial imaginary at hand, much like Science-Fiction. Sci-fi is often equated with science and technology, and Fantasy with the magical and faux-medievalism, but these are bastardizations that ignore fundamental differences between the genres' distinct structural characteristics and goals. This is also why most attempted definitions either render Fantasy's defining characteristics and goals "hopelessly vast" to the point of encompassing the entirety of creative fiction, or make themselves "too narrow to cover actual usage."⁷ The reality is that imagination and creativity in Fantasy take on very specific forms, situated midway between pure escapism and experiment in logical reasoning. Unlike surrealism, Fantasy is not an illustration of the oneiric, ignoring logic in the name of astonishment. In fact, according to J.R.R. Tolkien, Fantasy:

"does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make [...] creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun: on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it."⁸

What's more, Tolkien explains that, unlike horror, Fantasy's unrealistic elements are not solely intended to provoke terror, or other predetermined emotions in a reader's mind. Fantasy is "the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder"⁹, of a complete world animated by its own set of rules, or a context where the unreal serves a concrete purpose

⁷ TOLKIEN, J.R.R. "On Fairy-Stories", *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (ed. Christopher Tolkien), London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1983, p.110

⁸ *Idem*, p.142, 144

⁹ TOLKIEN, J.R.R., *Tree and Leaf*, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1988, p.18

in the narratives, settings and themes of the story, beyond just the affect the author means to induce in readers.

Thus, there is a logic that explains the presence of sorcery and monsters in Fantasy, a rationale that dictates the rules the magic of its universe must obey, rules *never* seen in folk or fairy tales¹⁰. This is why Clute and Grant's definition of Fantasy is among the best available, as it openly acknowledges the importance of the fictional universe and the internal consistencies that distinguish the genre: "A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms."¹¹ Differently put, Fantasy is centered around *worldbuilding*: an experiment in large-scale artistic conception, where laws of science need not apply, so long as the universe obeys an internal constancy established by the artist. Here, readers are both spectators and participants, responsible for bringing these otherwise impossible worlds to life, passing judgment on the validity of the author's established rules. In a way, reader and author create the Fantasy landscape cooperatively¹². The problem is, this definition could just as readily apply to science-fiction as it could to Fantasy, leading to the renewed suspicion that the generic distinctions between the two are just a matter of setting, not of guiding philosophy. Yet, many rightfully consider *Star Wars* Fantasy *despite* its space-opera format and futuristic technologies, and *The Dragonriders of Pern* science-fiction *despite* its portrayal of a medievaesque world filled with dragons and beings with mysterious powers. This is because, at its core, the issue remains a matter of narrative focus.

Again, according to Clute and Grant: "By contrast with fantasy [...] the label S.F. normally designates a text whose story is explicitly or implicitly extrapolated from scientific or historical premises. In other words, whether or not an SF story is plausible, it can at least be argued."¹³ Put simply, science-fiction always portrays the narrative's fictional universe as a

¹⁰ HUBBLE, Nick and Aris MOUSOUTZANIS. *The Science Fiction Handbook: Key Theoretical and Critical Texts in Science-Fiction Studies* (Literature and Culture Handbooks Edition), Delhi, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p.109

¹¹ CLUTE, John and John GRANT, "Fantasy", *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Online), 1997. HTML: <http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=fantasy> (Consulted 2016-09-19)

¹² SEED, David. *Science-Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, 147 p.

¹³ CLUTE, John and John GRANT, "Science-Fiction", *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Online), 1997. HTML: http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=science_fiction (Consulted 2016-09-19)

(however unlikely) probable faraway future, alternate reality, or speculative evolution of society and technology, justified using real-world logic, data, rationale. Fantasy, however, willfully makes its world seem wholly impossible¹⁴, and, despite its most unbelievable fictional elements, is justified in its choices, thanks to a self-contained and self-justifying logic, data and rationale that remains integral to the narrative. Thus, in some ways, it would be correct to assume Fantasy is more creatively complex and conceptually profound than Science-Fiction, just as the latter is far more creatively complex and conceptually profound than most authors or critics of “high” literature give it credit for.

Therefore, while a commonly-held belief that Fantasy has only existed for a few decades as endless sequences of Tolkien derivatives, this only approximates truth if one solely considers the genre’s 20th-century incarnations, meant to encompass the pseudo-medieval Fantasies of a paltry few. The reality, no matter how painfully clichéd the claim, is that Fantasy is as old as imagination itself, predating even the invention of writing. The original source material of today’s “plagiaristic” Fantasies are themselves part of millennia-old traditions of imagination re-appropriation, from tribal mythos to Greek legends and Norse sagas. Fantasy is in every known mythology, every religious text ever written, and forms the baseline of all human cultures. Fantasy is the ancestor of folklore, and the primordial format of most racial myths and discourses. In fact, in the broadest sense, the earliest appearances of “Fantasy literature” date back to the Lower Paleolithic¹⁵, in the form of cave-paintings depicting impossible creatures and illustrated tales of magic or spirits; this makes the genre older even than *homo sapiens*, roughly coeval with the earliest known appearances of oral language¹⁶.

¹⁴ Unlike fantastic literature, where the imaginary is made to only inspire *doubt* about reality.

¹⁵ Roughly two million years ago.

¹⁶ HARROD, James and Vincent W. Fallio. “Odolwan Art, Symbols, Religion, Mind”, *OriginsNet* (Online), 2001. HTML: <http://www.originsnet.org/mindold.html> (Consulted 2016-10-01)

Mechanisms of Hatred

Modern Fantasy's widespread eurocentrism, obsession with whiteness and at-times explicit racism was mainly popularized in the 20th century, but author Charles R. Saunders actually argues that “the roots of the fantasy we read today: action, adventure, imagination - and racism¹⁷”, have existed since its inception. While this initially seems hyperbolic, the troubling, unsatisfyingly straightforward truth, is that racism and Fantasy have, in many ways, identical origins and purposes, *awe* of the Other appearing roughly at the same time as *discrimination* of the Other. Müller refers to the development of mythology, folklore and Fantasy not just as rationalizations of then-inexplicable phenomena, but as an inevitable “disease of language”¹⁸. In Saussurean terms, this would be the almost instinctive process of fusing known *signifiants* and *signifiés* together to produce new, imaginary *signes*, with no real-world *référénts*, like fae or demons. These, in turn, became tools of comparison to which foreign cultures – namely African and Asian peoples – were sometimes associated.¹⁹ For, obviously, when “a culture is accepted as racist, then one would expect its language – an indispensable transmitter of culture – to be racist as well.”²⁰

Though one could argue this theory as far-fetched, let it be known that some of the oldest and most famous creatures of Fantasy, Folklore and popular culture are intended as diabolical dehumanisations of human sins, characteristics or values²¹. And while none of these creatures can truly be described as *racialized* metaphors of human nature, the description of non-white bodies or non-Christian beliefs as inherently Other or horrific throughout history strongly mirrors language's relation to fantastic imagination. Whereas the inherent evils of “civilised”

¹⁷ SAUNDERS, Charles R. ““Die, Black Dog!” - A Look at Racism in Fantasy Literature”, *Toadstool Wine* (ed. W.P. Ganley). A.S.P. Publishing, Buffalo, 1975. p.178

¹⁸ STONE, John R. *The Essential Max Müller* (New Edition). Saint-Martin's, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2002, 367 p.

¹⁹ SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de. *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Paris, Payot Éditeur, 1972, 509 p.

²⁰ CHENEY, Carol, Jeannie LAFRANCE and Terrie QUINTEROS. “Racism in the English Language”, *Tri-County Domestic and Sexual Violence Intervention Network: Anti-Oppression Training for Trainers* (Online), 2006, p.1. HTML: <https://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination/documents/racism-in-the-english-language.pdf> (Consulted 2016-10-01)

²¹ Vampires are commonly associated with rampant lust, lycanthropes with man's repressed animal urges, dragons with corrupting greed or power, aliens with fear of the unknown, zombies with the fear of mortality, and so on.

humans are made flesh in the form of imaginary monster *référents*, early instances of colonial racializing dialogues describe “coloured” bodies as real-world, physical equivalents of these same *référents*; monstrous or sub-human variations of “normal” white bodies. This has, in turn, established a vicious cycle where the depiction of an *imaginary* other inspires new depiction of *real-world* others, and vice-versa; a devolving chicken-or-egg situation where it becomes increasingly difficult to determine if racial allegories in modern Fantasy are inspired by current social perceptions of race, or have instead created new methods of alienating these same institutionally othered bodies²². Some argue that this is because racist dialogues and myth-making processes are both forms of crisis management, “means of containing the threat of the diverse and the different²³” by very different means. By that consideration, Fantasy and racial identity discourse are both intimately linked at a foundational level, which goes a long way in explaining the genre’s issues when it comes to dealing with themes of race and racism.

²² HIGGIN, Tanner. “Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games”, *Games and Culture*, Vol.4, No.1, SAGE Publications, January 2009, p.3-26

²³ CARTER, Bob and Satnam VIRDEE. “Racism and the Sociological Imagination”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.59, Issue 4, 2008, p.673.

Fantasy Racism and Scientific Racism

Disingenuous as it is to claim Fantasy literature has *never* entertained racist dialogue in its pages, or that it has *never* allowed for potentially offensive racial representations of real-world minorities, this does not mean the presence of racism in Fantasy literature is, in and of itself, an inevitability. Rather, the phenomenon is the ongoing result of unfortunate, oftentimes unavoidable creative choices and trends, institutionalized by authors and readers alike, instilled into the genre's DNA during the era of its earliest European incarnations; works which later became the "blueprints" for almost all modern Fantasy. Though later portions of this chapter will examine in greater detail specific pitfalls and triumphs of the genre regarding racial representation throughout history, let us first outline three recurring culprits behind Fantasy's long-lived racism problem.

The first two culprits are practically impossible to approach as separate entities, for the problems caused by one are almost always the echoes of those caused by the other: that is to say, that early Fantasy's roots lie in European colonialism, and modern Fantasy's reputation of cyclical derivation, respectively. Though these phenomena are hardly exclusive to the genre, the *ways* in which they manifest within Fantasy's primary generic tropes are rather unique. Simply and briefly put, most works of modern Fantasy are still based on narratives that are *themselves* based on 18th and 19th century Fantasies, "which provide naïve solutions to the [white male] subject's basic problems" and "tend to center themselves on plots that end with the elimination of the offending²⁴" Other. Indeed, many oeuvres of early or pseudo-Fantasy barely differ from colonial literature that engages in a damning "fetishization of the Other²⁵", save for their aesthetics. For instance, rather than the inherently savage natives of colonial narratives, older (or less reputable) works of Fantasy often depict inherently savage, foreign cultures, sometimes

²⁴ JANMOHAMED, Abdul R., "The Economy of Manichean Allegory; The Function of Racial Difference in Colonial Literature", *Race, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.86

²⁵ *Idem.*

(but not always) in the form of inhuman creatures²⁶, and use the same white-and-black, good-and-evil descriptors as imperialism. By doing this, both narratives fail “to create ‘real people’ so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes²⁷”. While not inherently bad, in the context of racial representations made by non-racialized individuals, the end result can contribute to dehumanization of the racialized Other, as well as the establishment of a definition of race that “pretends to be an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope²⁸” which “delimit[s] and predetermine[s] the lives and choices of human beings who are not ‘white’²⁹” within the social imaginary. This goes double for Fantasy, for while a work may not necessarily repeat a racist discourse targeted at a specific real-world demographic³⁰, it *can* sometimes mirror the *structure* these same racializing discourses adopt, inscribing these problematic understandings of race at a broad, fundamental scale, into the cultural zeitgeist of escapist imagination. This, coupled with the genre’s tradition of homage, has led to the revival and reaffirmation of outdated tropes and conceptions of racial representation that have lasted well into the 21st century, made only more problematic by the fact that these same discourses and narratives have been emulated by Fantasy authors around the globe, helping to enshrine that specific brand of Eurocentric, colonial racism into international imaginations both fantastic and sociopolitical. In this sense, though one can rightfully argue that Fantasy has allowed outdated modes of racial representation and racist ideologies to endure past their prime in the realm of popular imagination, the genre’s lineage of racial representation is not so much a disease as it is a symptom of latent Eurocentrism and colonialism, in the Western World and beyond.

However, it is the third culprit that has proven to be, if not most dangerous, most difficult to address regarding the genre’s unique history of racism; an issue I will call the “race-as-

²⁶ Tolkien’s Orcs and dark-skinned men in Howard’s *Conan* stories as examples of older works, the Gurkish of Abercrombie’s *The First Law* trilogy and the Mud-People of Goodkind’s *Sword of Truth* as examples of mediocre ones.

²⁷ FRYE, Northrop, “Anatomy of Criticism”, *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000* (ed. Dorothy J. Hale), Wiley-Blackwell, New Jersey, 2005, p.99

²⁸ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference it Makes”, *‘Race’, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.5

²⁹ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., “Talkin’ That Talk”, *‘Race’, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.403

³⁰ Be it word-for-word or in the form of an imaginary allegory.

species” delusion. By this, I refer to how almost all Fantasy novels use the word “race” to refer to different human civilizations and ethnicities, but also to *non-human* Fantasy creatures that should not be considered the same *species* as humans³¹. At a cursory glance, a reader usually assumes this to be a trivial detail, or a side-effect of the genre’s predisposition to use “faux olde-English” in its writing. However, Gates believes this misuse of language is extremely problematic, since “‘race’ is a metaphor for something else and not an essence or a thing in itself, apart from its creation by an act of language³²”, and racism only “exists when one generalizes about the attributes of an individual (and treats him or her accordingly) [...] based upon a predetermined set of causes or effects thought to be shared by all members of a physically defined group”³³. Therefore, to misconstrue the term as a substitute that designates biological difference, can do irreparable damage to our understanding of “race” in Fantasy and real-world contexts, because “certain forms of difference and the *language* we employ to define those supposed differences not only reinforce each other but tend to create and maintain each other.³⁴” By treating “race” not as designator of ethnicity, but as designator of something akin to genus, some works of mainstream Fantasy, and more importantly, the societies that *read* them, can contribute to justifying racism by means of “*racialism*”; the outdated theory that racial signifiers and racial hierarchy are validated by science. This is made all the more dangerous when one realizes “racism uses racialism to justify itself”, and that “we attribute to ‘race’ what we no longer have the right to attribute to social difference”³⁵, and, as a result, many fantasies that mean to reiterate on proven tropes instead, intentionally or otherwise, implicitly encourage us readers to “carelessly use language in such a way as to will this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations³⁶” of race, both in fiction and in reality. This constitutes a devastatingly “pernicious act of language [...] which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic

³¹ This grows increasingly problematic when one considers “races” like animal-human hybrids, or species like dwarves, which are already problematic due to the fact the name is synonymous with a medical condition.

³² GATES, Henry Louis Jr., “Talkin’ That Talk”, *‘Race’, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.402

³³ *Idem*, p.403

³⁴ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference it Makes”, *‘Race’, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.15

³⁵ TODOROV, Tzvetan. “‘Race’, Writing and Culture” (translated by Loulou Mack), *‘Race’, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.372

³⁶ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., “Talkin’ That Talk”, *‘Race’, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.404

difference³⁷” even further by re-legitimizing the provenly false edicts of 18th and 19th-century scientific racism. As consequence, many Fantasies reiterate on tropes that reinforce extremely volatile modes of racism, and give credence to existing conceptions of race that have proven to be equally malignant, if not downright lethal.

³⁷ *Idem.*

What has been Broken by Fantasy, Can be Reforged by Fantasy

And yet, almost always, authors are not even aware that they are reinstating these outdated modes of thinking in their writing, or creating narratives that might alter sociological understandings of race in some problematic way. In fact, much like Gates, who believes the “racist’s error is one of *thought*, not merely, or only, of behavior³⁸”, I would argue Fantasy’s longstanding history of racism is not inherent to the genre, but rather the result of ignorance on writers’ parts; the problem lies not in the genre’s defining characteristics or in its lineage of pastiche and homage, but in *how* these tropes and features have been consistently misused by creators. This is because good Fantasy does more than offer mimetic representation of real social constructs and ideologies, painted over with imagery of kobolds and wyverns³⁹. Good Fantasy tears reality apart from every angle, undoing social, political, and ideological traditions so that they can be removed, rearranged, or recontextualised in unfamiliar, unrealistic, but rational contexts. This allows these narratives to demand that readers re-examine and re-consider their preconceived notions about issues like racism from unconventional angles, all while demanding we dismantle their real-world equivalents as well, using their Fantasy versions as a lens.

Fantasy, in this way, is not merely escapist; it is an activist, grassroots literature with nigh-limitless potential for changing the sociopolitical dynamics dictating our modern institutions, an artistic genre that can allow us to understand the world as a collection of unique, individual localities that all experience “the global” from different optics, as opposed to a singular, white Eurocentric perspective⁴⁰. Much like how Tolkien clamored that the genre must not remain ignorant of reality, Gates claims that “perceptions of reality are in no sense absolute; reality is a function of many variables. Writers present models of reality rather than a description

³⁸ *Idem.*

³⁹ This was the methodology of most mainstream Fantasy authors published between the 60’s and 90’s, when the genre’s popularity skyrocketed, and this reputation of racist, blandly reiterative writing gained popularity and legitimacy.

⁴⁰ APPADURAI, Arjun. “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination”, *Globalization* (Collective publication; Ed. Arjun Appadurai). Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2001, p.1-19. [ONLINE] - HTML: <http://depts.washington.edu/cirgeweb/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2008/01/appadurai-grassroots-globalization-and-research-imagination.pdf> (Consulted 2015-11-30)

of it”, and most importantly, their “fiction often contributes to cognition by providing models that highlight the nature of things precisely by their failure to coincide with received ideas of reality. Such, certainly, is the case in science fiction,⁴¹” he adds. Thus, the same could be argued in the case of Fantasy, to perhaps an even greater degree, due to the genre having even fewer “realistic” limitations than its speculation-oriented sibling. Therefore, it would seem that, if it is used *properly* and *carefully*, Fantasy can be one of the single most accessible, most powerful weapons at our disposal in the battle against racism, as it is capable of both acknowledging the innumerable evils of racism’s reality, and offering unimaginable escapes from them simultaneously.

This is because relations connecting ideology to fiction “are not unidirectional: the ideology does not simply determine the fiction. Rather, through a process of symbiosis, the fiction *forms* the ideology by articulating and justifying the position and aims⁴²” of the racist. Fantasy is unique in that it can accomplish this process in reverse, or, at least, do so more easily than conventional fiction. Adding to this, Stepan and Gilman suggest the abolition of racialism in society and in fiction will be:

accomplished not through the appropriation and reassemblage of elements of the existing science, but by positing a radically different world view, with different perceptions of reality, goals, and points of reference. It effectively dissolves the relevance of the stereotyping discourse of science, by conceptualizing the issue of human variation in different, and essentially egalitarian, terms.⁴³

What, in theory, could do this better than a literature, that, by definition *must* offer readers an entirely new world, unmarred by the constraints of reality, be they physical or not? In that sense, Fantasy, by means of deconstructing the real world and *reconstructing* an artificial one that is not bound by the laws and conventions that dictate our own, can effectively *re-dictate*

⁴¹ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., *Figures in Black*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p.40

⁴² JANMOHAMED, Abdul R., “The Economy of Manichean Allegory; The Function of Racial Difference in Colonial Literature”, *Race, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986 p.102.

⁴³ STEPAN, Nancy Leys, and Sander L. GILMAN. “Appropriating the Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism”, *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (ed. Dominick Lacapra), Cornell University Press, New York, 1991, p.99

the forms that ideologies surrounding race can take, by dismantling existing racist theories, or proposing wholly new ones; not unlike Esposito's ideas concerning biopolitics, and how the dynamics that dictate the relationship between life and social constructs would affect our worldview if their positions were exchanged⁴⁴. In doing so, certain Fantasy narratives are able to reformat our "fantastical" imaginations in such a way that they extend to our sociological or political imaginations as well, thus transforming our perceptions of issues such as race in the context of reality *and* Fantasy.

This does not mean *all* Fantasy must *always* address such themes in such a way. But neither does this mean works in the genre ought to deny the very existence of racism, or make distinctions so broad between the real and the fictional varieties, that neither are relevant to one another anymore when attempting to address problematics of racial representation, especially from the outside perspective of a non-racialized author. Such an act consists of the "dramatic symptom of an ideology of difference oedipally blind to the origin which has brought about the present horrors⁴⁵", and can easily result in the polar opposite taking place: a situation where the very idea of racism or discrimination is trivialized or completely dismissed. Just the same, Fantasy should not merely "copy-paste" existing ideologies, signifiers or stereotypes of race identity into its world in a near-identical fashion, without addressing their presence in some way; doing so is often how Fantasy comes to enforce, wittingly or unwittingly, racism within and beyond the realm of narrative. The key, rather, is found in a delicate balance between accurate portrayal and empathic criticism, found in what JanMohamed calls "symbolic authors". These writers "tend to be more open to a modifying dialectic of self and Other. They are willing to examine the specific individual and cultural differences between" themselves and specific racially-labelled communities, "and reflect on the efficacy of European [or Eurocentric] values, assumptions and habits in contrast to those" of institutionally othered bodies⁴⁶. By approaching

⁴⁴ESPOSITO, Roberto. *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008. p.13-44.

⁴⁵ SAID, Edward W. "An Ideology of Difference", *Critical Inquirer*, Vol.12 (Autumn 1985), University of Chicago Press, p.52 [ONLINE] HTML: <http://courses.arch.vt.edu/courses/wdunaway/gia5524/said85B.pdf> (Consulted 2017-01-16)

⁴⁶ JANMOHAMED, Abdul R., "The Economy of Manichean Allegory; The Function of Racial Difference in Colonial Literature", *'Race', Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.85

the portrayal of race in Fantasy from the perspective of the Other, and not only from Eurocentric standpoints, authors are not necessarily indemnified from perpetrating racist discourses in their narratives⁴⁷, but they *do* avoid the blind reiteration of outdated colonial thinking or scientific racism through Fantasy. Thus, the more imagination-centric features of the genre cannot simply remain passive set-dressings that decorate existing discriminatory dialogue. Rather, they must make constant efforts to remain active, *necessary*; not only to the narrative at hand or to the escapist nature of a text, but to Fantasy's challenging of established sociopolitical conventions about race, in physical and metaphysical terms.

However, we must similarly be careful not to remove the fantastic from Fantasy; doing so not only limits what the genre is capable of achieving, but abolishes its *raison d'être* as a source of escapism. Fantasy's troubled history of addressing racial representation and racism does *not* lie in its fascination with the unreal. I *cannot* stress this enough. What is far more important is the *way* a Fantasy narrative frames depictions of race within its fictional universe. This is why Gates states that "correspondence of content between a writer and his or her world is less significant [...] than is a correspondence of organization or structure." An author's depiction of race or racism in narrative, in terms of content, "may be a mere reflective of prescriptive, scriptural canon." This certainly is the case for Fantasy, which has a tradition of continuously drawing from and reimagining the ideas of its predecessors, cyclically and continuously. "A relation of structure, on the other hand", Gates argues, citing Raymond Williams, "can show us the organizing principles by which a particular view of the world, and from that the coherence of the social group that maintains it, really operates in consciousness."⁴⁸ In short, *how* Fantasy frames its depictions and characterizations of beastmen or orcs, is far more relevant than these potentially offensive non-human species' mere inclusion.

In general, problematic works of Fantasy often construct their in-universe versions of racism or racial representation either in terms of "internalization" or "transvaluation". "Internalization" in this context refers to "the very profound psychological and social introjection of negative images and meanings contained in the stereotypes, in the construction

⁴⁷ In large part due to issues of appropriation and poor depiction, especially in the case of white male writers.

⁴⁸ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., *Figures in Black*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p.41

[sic] and understanding of one's self-identity" as a racialized other⁴⁹. In practice, this means entire Fantasy species are made into broad archetypes, whose uniform personalities and individualities are founded more on *nature* than *nurture*, and these same species are typically depicted as being aware and accepting of these labels. This is doubly problematic when one considers many Fantasy species are based on stereotypes of ethnic or religious groups, which can potentially lead problematic Fantasy race interpretations to be extended to their real-world counterparts more easily. "Transvaluation", on the other hand, takes place when "the significance of biological race differences" (drawn from Fantasy or reality) is accepted, but the roles of "inferior" and "superior" are "revalued and renamed" in terms "similar to the dominant discourse, so that one mythology" of racial identity can be "replaced by another"⁵⁰. This approach can be extremely effective in regards to creating positive representations of race⁵¹, but can backfire quite easily as well: even more so in a genre like Fantasy or Science-Fiction. For instance, these "reverse stereotypes" remain, however positive, stereotypes. This can lead to Fantasy creatures or "races" based on existing stereotypes seem even more insensitive, to the point of appearing parodic, or comparable to instances of white supremacist discourse. In these situations, white heroes are put into situations of oppression that mirror those of real-world discriminated minorities, only to be stereotyped as heroes that will righteously rebel against their (still racialized) oppressors – a narrative format that can consist of an extremely insensitive appropriation of slavery narratives by white authors, for the sake of further preaching their own racial "superiority". Second is the fact that transvaluation still operates according to the oppositions "upon which the dominant terms themselves depended": this approach simply inverts the "normal" and "Other" binary's poles without actually addressing the core issue of discrimination⁵². In a structure like this, Fantasy authors often generate new ways of looking at

⁴⁹ STEPAN, Nancy Leys, Sander L. GILMAN. "Appropriating the Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism", *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (ed. Dominick Lacapra), Cornell University Press, New York, 1991, p.89

⁵⁰*Idem*, p.92

⁵¹ As seen in Saunders' *Imaro*, which stars a Conan-like black protagonist, and Nicholls' *Orcs*, which places the titular, traditionally villainous species in the position of heroes, and white humans adopt the roles of villains.

⁵² STEPAN, Nancy Leys, Sander L. GILMAN. "Appropriating Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism", *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1991, p.92

existing formats of racism that can inform or reframe understandings of the issue⁵³, but there have also been instances where transvaluation has had the opposite effect⁵⁴.

Where Fantasy truly excels – and is also, ironically, truly underutilized – is in its capacity to *recontextualize*, not ideas of racial representation, but entire ideologies or conceptions of racism, thanks to the sheer scale the genre’s focus on expansive imagination entails. By creating entire worlds that only require tangential connections to the logics that govern our own, Fantasy can effectively create “new interpretations, new narratives of self and identity” surrounding the issue of racial representation, and offer explicit “counterdiscourse” that can disrepute the real-world racism it has deconstructed, or even shed light on the damaging traditions instilled by the Fantasy genre’s continuous self-pastiche of racist trends, structures or elements. After all, Fantasy’s goal is to yield an escape from reality by means of reinventing reality, along with its defining laws and rules, both biological and political, allowing “rejection of the *meaning* of the dominant scientific discourses of difference” that discredit racism *and* racialism. This also allows for efforts at explaining and redefining current conceptions of race representation and identity to “be steered in innovative directions.”⁵⁵ Due to Fantasy’s nature, the genre has the potential to, perhaps more than any other category of literature or art, accomplish such a process at a fittingly epic scale...and not only in regards to race. Though never wholly “free” from reality, Fantasy ought not aim to be, for it is precisely *because* it is made to be so realistic in its unrealism that the genre can rethink existing perspectives of the real world so thoroughly, or reinvent an entire zeitgeist in a span of decades...for better or for worse. In order to understand how and why these established traditions of the genre appeared, what led them to be so horribly misused, and how I myself hope to challenge them and use them effectively, I will chart a very brief genealogy of Fantasy, meant to demonstrate genre has evolved from its earliest beginnings into its current incarnations, and how its relationships with race, racism and racial representation have fluctuated alongside the genre’s most pivotal works.

⁵³ *A Song of Ice and Fire’s* illustration of feudalism and immigration, *Tales of Symphonia’s* depiction of mass discrimination towards half-elves, *The Witcher’s* complex map of tense race relations, etc.

⁵⁴ David Eddings’ *The Tamuli* (1995-1996), for instance, places western-world stand-in heroes in a position of weakness, only to have them rise up and defeat the corrupt nations and half-breeds of the world, some of which act as fairly obvious references to Jewish and Chinese cultures.

⁵⁵ STEPAN, Nancy Leys, Sander L. GILMAN. “Appropriating Idioms of Science: The Rejection of Scientific Racism”, *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1991 p.98

The Skeleton of the Genre has Skeletons in the Closet

The precursors of Fantasy's actual literary forms appeared mainly during the Mesopotamian Empires⁵⁶ and Greek Antiquity⁵⁷, which established many of the fundamental story structures in Fantasy still used today. But the first texts that truly helped define conventions and aesthetics of the genre were romances and epic poems from the Middle Ages. Not only do these texts form the bedrock of most Western Fantasy imagery, they also helped define fundamentals of our current understanding of literary genre and narrative structure. The oldest and possibly most influential of these medieval predecessors is, without a doubt, the anonymously-written *Beowulf* (circa 1000). Not only was this one of Tolkien's main sources of inspiration when writing the lore of Middle-Earth, *Beowulf*'s rewriting of mythology, filled with great battles, warrior heroes and terrible monsters essentially set the standard for today's adventure and action-focused Fantasy. Other works of foundational importance include Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*⁵⁸; Thomas Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur*⁶⁰, the *Nibelunglied* and the *Völsunga Saga*⁶¹. Meanwhile, even some of Shakespeare's plays – such as *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1590) and *The Tempest* (1610) – prove Fantasy has a far lengthier and more complex history in literature than most realize, not only limited to prose novels.⁶²

⁵⁶ *The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Ramayana*

⁵⁷ *Odyssey, Iliad, Aeneid*

⁵⁸ Which cemented the popular imagination's understanding of Hell, and proposed a much darker, philosophical understanding of narrative steeped in the fantastic (reference below).

⁵⁹ RAMSDELL, Kristin. *Romance Fiction: (Second Edition)*, Libraries Unlimited, Denver, 2012, p.315

⁶⁰ Not only became the first "official" version of Arthurian mythos, dictating today's popular culture's understanding of knights and medieval society almost singlehandedly, but also offered a sweeping chronicle of a king's kingdom, and multiple debates about morality, thus shaping modern Fantasy's style, subject matter and subtext considerably.

⁶¹ These works introduced us to the elves, dragons, dwarves and magic of pre-Christian Nordic mythology that still influence most of modern Fantasy's aesthetics, from fierce monsters to warrior lineages...not to mention legendary blades and enchanted rings that will sound familiar to anyone with a passing interest in unreality.

⁶² While Fantasy is considered to be an exclusively Western genre, in the same era, similar pivotal works of "proto-Fantasy" appeared across the globe, resulting in one of the earliest global literary phenomena ever. These include China's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (1321) and *Journey to the West* (1592), Japan's *Tale of the Bamboo-Cutter* (written in the 10th century, oldest remaining manuscript dated 1592), India's *Puranas* (beginning in the 3rd Century, but edited well into the 16th Century), the Mali *Epic of Sundiata* (oral poem from the 1300's, put into writing by 1967), the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, (circa 1500, only surviving transcript from the 1700's), and even the original *Arabian Nights*.

Yet, genre-shaping as these works may have been, it is often considered inappropriate to refer to them as “true” works of Fantasy. The common argument here is that most of them are written transcriptions of regional folklore, mythologies or legends, meant to either preserve them from entropy or legitimize them as more than a product of collective imagination: a far cry from Fantasy’s prerequisite “auteur mythos”. Not only that, but the fantastic in these original works is never included simply for Fantasy’s sake. Rather, elements like monsters, magic or myths are fused with the more realistic portions of the stories so as to hyperbolize the importance of actual acts of heroism present in these tales...or, alternatively, to *excuse* leaps in logic or ridiculous situations, rather than *encourage* readers to immerse themselves in said impossibilities. That said, the more historical-minded of these works – romances, mainly – work in reverse, writing history as though it were a mythic tale, likely in an attempt to disguise absent information that would result in cavernous plot holes, or as a way to patriotically illustrate a nation’s culture and heritage as a legend-worthy entity, as substitute for an actual regional mythology. This likely explains why most romances recount – and appear in the wake of – triumphant wars. While similar to modern Fantasy⁶³, this type of writing differs in that it does not employ existing mythology in a new way, nor is set in a fantasized version of a historical period⁶⁴. *Beowulf* and the likes do not transcribe elements from the collective imaginary, or use fantasy elements to bolster history or pre-existing mythology like modern Fantasies would; rather, they use the historical or the mythological as a way to justify the presence of unrealistic elements, as opposed to allowing the unrealistic to exist as is. Still, one could rightfully argue that these oeuvres are among the very first *legitimate* works of literary Fantasy based on these traits alone, yet they are practically never referred to as such. This is partly because most scholars consider the label of “Fantasy” as demeaning (an indicator of delusional or Ivory Tower literary conservatism), and partly a result of their significant differences in form, style and overall creative philosophy, when compared to what we have currently come to understand as Fantasy.

Despite this, we can see that these works of “pre-Fantasy” already contain traces of (what we might today interpret as) racist dialogues, comparable to those in recent Fantasy novels. The

⁶³ In great part due to how similar the monomythic forms of Romances and conventional Fantasy line up.

⁶⁴ Such as in Bryan Perro’s *Amos Daragon* (2003-2006) or Guy Gavriel Kay’s *Under Heaven* (2010)

plots of texts like *Beowulf* and most European romances often speak about a lone hero of the people, of the nation fighting off invaders; these heroes are made, either retroactively or intentionally, into national patriots of epic proportions, whilst villains act as stand-ins for foreign nations, depicted as inhuman and supernatural to a certain extent, monstrous or inhuman corruptions of what “correct” humanity should aspire to be⁶⁵. For this reason, pre-Fantasy’s use of othering and dehumanization is comparable to the tone of early colonial racist rhetoric, where all that does not fit a society’s definition of “good” or “proper” is deemed inferior, evil, or barbaric. This isn’t much different from the “free races” of Middle Earth defending against the Dark Lord Sauron’s invasions, the animals of Narnia defending against the White Witch’s crusade, or even Harry Potter creating coalition of like-minded Hogwarts students to organize a counter-offensive against Voldemort’s forces. Thus, even when modern Fantasy narratives do not center around demonization of an “Other”, their structures almost always follow the outlines of these foundational narratives, of the heroic “normal” versus the diabolical “abnormal”...A general outline which has since become the monomythic foundation of the majority of Fantasy narratives: a formal skeleton that still defines the very shape and nature of most Fantasy written today, and greatly limits the types of stories and themes the genre is capable of producing, due to its motif-like structure being both broad and oftentimes inflexible⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ Mordred and Grendel fit this mold especially well, both in overall character and in the roles they occupy in their respective narratives as antagonists.

⁶⁶ CAMPBELL, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, San Francisco, New World Library, 2008, 432 p.

The Fall and Rise of Imagination

Regardless of semantics, the publication of *Don Quixote* (1605) brought “an ignominious end” to these maybe-not-so-“pseudo”-Fantasy epics, Cervantes’ text having “so hilariously burlesqued the medieval romance that nobody thereafter dared to write one⁶⁷” for centuries. It is only towards the end of the 17th Century, midway between Europe’s Renaissance and Enlightenment, that we see Western literature resume interest in the fantastic: this time, in a way that goes beyond its potential as a plot device or extensive hyperbole. Although phantasmagoric-minded literature was rare in this period, due to extreme criticism towards anything that strayed from ideals of logic and reason⁶⁸, in the late 1600’s, authors like de la Fontaine, Perrault and d’Aulnoy created the first wholly original fairy tales and fables, as opposed to predecessors who simply “collected” existing ones. These works not only legitimized imagination for imagination’s sake in literature, but also defined our modern understanding of the fairy tale as a work of *imaginary* proportions, helping to cement its current format: a simple, occasionally eclectic narrative with a heavy emphasis on educative, moral or political subtexts, discussed from metaphorical distance thanks to the narrative’s imaginary elements.

By the 19th Century, these fairy tales’ popularity prompted the creation of texts like Macpherson’s “Ossian” ballads and *The Kalevala* (1835), which essentially “fabricated” national folklores singlehandedly, meant either to fill the gaps in existing cultures, or make them seem on par with the wealth of legends from neighbouring countries⁶⁹. This likely played a part modern Fantasy’s obsession with world-building and creation myths. These texts also renewed interest in written transcriptions of regional folktales⁷⁰⁷¹, but at this point in time, more care was

⁶⁷ SPRAGUE DE CAMP, Lyon. *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*, Sauk City, Arkham House, 1976, p.9

⁶⁸ *Idem*, p.10

⁶⁹ MOORCOCK, Michael. *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy*, Austin, Monkey Brain Books, 2004, p.35

⁷⁰ Beginning with Straparola’s *The Facetious Nights* in 1555 (resource below).

⁷¹ SPRAGUE DE CAMP, Lyon. *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*, Sauk City, Arkham House, 1976, p.11

given to preserving the oral features of the tales in writing⁷². Meanwhile, writers like E.T.A. Hoffmann and Hans Christian Andersen continued writing original fairy tales in more traditional forms, whilst others demonstrated interest in creating some of the first “adult-only” fairy tales⁷³. However, it is Sara Coleridge’s *Phantasmion* (1837) that remains one of modern Fantasy literature’s most influential and earliest “prototypes”, as it marks the first instance of a fairy tale written in novel form⁷⁴.

Lang also proposed an early, if surprisingly prevalent theory on the nature of mythology, a rationalization of the presence of otherwise “barbaric *Marchen*” in allegedly “civilised” white cultures, directly opposing Müller’s prior theories. Lang argued that folk tales, fairy tales, myths and the likes were remnants of European civilization’s “ugly scars”, and that these irrational stories were products of a “savage state of society” and of “mental peculiarities observed among savages in all ages and countries”, such as in Native Americans, in his eyes. In other words, Lang believed Caucasian races outgrew the need for Fantasy as they became more cultivated, and abandoned the supposed animal bents of non-whites⁷⁵. One *could* see this as reference to fantastic imagination being older than the “human” race, but it is obvious something else entirely is implied. Still, despite all its Eurocentric toxicity, Lang’s statement still warrants deconstruction, as it tells us many things about the evolution of modern Fantasy. First, we are once again shown that, to a certain extent, racializing imaginations and fantastic imaginations are intrinsically linked, reiterating that ideas of race and otherness are integral to Fantasy at a primeval level. Second is the idea that the genre acts as an *escape* from institutionalized modes of “civilised” thinking, and is not necessarily wholly bound by the influences or rules imposed by a social environment. Meaning, one could interpret Fantasy as being one of the root causes behind the propagation of racist imaginaries and racializing dialogue in culture. Alternatively, this just as easily suggests the genre is capable of deconstructing institutionalized modes of thinking (such as forms of racism) from the inside out, either supporting or discrediting the ideas imposed by them. After all, as mentioned previously, Fantasy is just as capable of dismantling

⁷² I.E., *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* (1812), *Lang’s Coloured Fairy Books* (1889-1913), *Ozaki’s Japanese Fairy Tales* (1908).

⁷³ These include Voltaire’s *White Bull* (1774), Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle* (1819) and Thackeray’s *Rose and the Ring* (1855).

⁷⁴ CLUTE, John and John GRANT. “Coleridge, Sara”, *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Online), 1997. HTML: http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=coleridge_sara (Consulted 2016-09-20)

⁷⁵ LANG, Andrew. “Recent Mythology”, *Modern Mythology*, London, Longman Greens and Co., 1897, p.1-8

racist dialogue as it is of reinforcing it, so one could read this statement as indicative that Fantasy can be wielded as a way to escape the civilizing – that is to say, colonializing – miasma of Eurocentrism that, to this day, still influences our most damaging interpretations of race and racial identity issues.

Besides, the cyclical rewriting of foundational myths is nothing if not a reinterpretation of old ideas, translated to fit an author's view of society, be it wholehearted agreement or vehement critique. We can therefore draw a parallel between the past's recurrent "pastiche" of established regional fairy tales, and the present's recurrent "pastiche" of successful works of Fantasy; a pattern that already existed in most mythologies, where more and more stories would be created, based on an existing pantheon of deities, then modified over and over. Differently put, if Roman mythology is not a blatant copy of Greek mythology, and Grimms' version of *Little Red Riding Hood* is not a rip-off of the original, why should the likes of *The Stormlight Archive* be equated to *The Lord of the Rings* as though it were plagiarism⁷⁶? Clearly, this pastiche phenomenon is not exclusive to Fantasy, but rather to the arts as a whole. Those that dismiss the genre for its redundancy are either oblivious to the bigger picture, or simply hold a single subset of the entire corpus of literary history to a different, arbitrary standard, in a bid to protect the fragile deification of a select few authors and oeuvres.

⁷⁶ CARTER, Lin. "Neomythology", *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*, Sauk City, Arkham House, 1976, p.xi-xxix

Welcoming Fear of the Unknown

That having been said, the closest modern Fantasy comes to having a true predecessor, is, without a doubt, Romanticism's Gothic novel, which reinvigorated literature's fascination with the imaginary, oftentimes by making the unreal *integral* to the story being told, rather than just a means to an end. Many of these now-famous classics did not focus exclusively on the fantastic, but used the imaginary, the uncanny or the impossible to tell stories or address themes that religious adherence to realism could not, thus legitimizing exploration of the unreal in literature as worthwhile⁷⁷. By distinguishing works that tackled the fantastic as *subject matter* from those that employed it exclusively as *device*, Gothics both demarcated the difference between Fantasy as aesthetic and Fantasy as genre, all while ensuring that *le fantastique* could stand on its own as an authentic literature. Still, these works do not match our current understanding of Fantasy, and are today more closely associated to supernatural fiction, which is more concerned with making us *doubt* reality than it is with defying, escaping, or dismantling it. This is because the fantastic always exists "in a contingent relationship to base reality⁷⁸" in the Gothic novel, meaning the narrative is never meant to be completely imaginary, as is the case with Fantasy. Instead, it is meant to inspire hesitation as to whether something is real or not, to create an artistic affect in regards to an inexplicable (and usually unexplained) event taking place in reality. And while it would be erroneous to refer to Gothics or fairy tales as "the first Fantasies", it would be just as foolish to deny that many of Romanticism's now-famous classics re-established the connection between literature and imagination, and were in part responsible for the current form of Fantasy literature.

Regrettably, there is little in the way of documented non-Western pre-Fantasy literature written or published at this time, save for a few transcribed folk tales in East Asia, and a handful original narratives from India, Japan, China, and parts of the Caribbean. This is no doubt a direct

⁷⁷ Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Polidori's *Vampyre* (1819), Maupassant's *Horla* (1887), and Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Grey* (1890) are but a few among dozens of relevant examples.

⁷⁸ CLUTE, John and John GRANT, "Supernatural Fiction", *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Online Version). HTML : http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=supernatural_fiction (Consulted 2016-09-11)

result of the genocidal political climate outside of Europe at the time, caused by the stranglehold of colonialism and the numerous revolutionary wars that permeated the globe at the time, events which many regions of the globe have yet to wholly recover from. This might very well explain why many of these international texts bafflingly remain untranslated even today. The one exception to this rule would be Russia⁷⁹, from whence came grotesque, experimental works that played vital roles in the development of contemporary science-fiction⁸⁰. But, even then, this means that most recorded (or at the very least, institutionalized) pre-Fantasy literature was overwhelmingly colonial in its ideologies and Caucasian in its authorship. To make matters worse, the majority of international narratives published at the time were travelogues written by explorers or emissaries, which, while non-fictive, tended to frame themselves as awe-inspiring or incredulous, as though the lands they had “discovered” were completely alien, and the non-white ethnicities they met there were a different species. This inspired many racist tropes in the popular imaginary steeped in pseudo-science, such as biological myths surrounding “Negroid” races, and traditions of “white saviour” narratives. These, in turn, played a large role in the fantastic’s tendency to portray non-white, non-Christian males as “other”: if not as inherently monstrous or alien, then at least as exotically abnormal⁸¹.

When one also considers that, during this century, the European slave trade hit its peak *and* begun showing signs of dissolution, with race being viewed as indicator of fundamental biological difference that “proved” white superiority⁸², the optic of the white “racializer” hero in fantastic narratives, who addresses the non-white “racialized” as though it is a different species, or an uncanny creature, using a “racial qualifier”, begins to make more sense⁸³. This also explains why many Fantasy narratives aim to establish a wide, almost irredeemable gap

⁷⁹ Hardly surprising when one considers how Russian literature intertwines so often into European literature canons.

⁸⁰ Namely, Mihailov’s *Beyond History* (1869) and Turgenev’s *Mysterious Tales* (1883).

⁸¹ As seen in H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1884) and Théophile Gautier’s *The Mummy’s Foot* (1840).

⁸² KURTZ, Paul. “Can the Sciences Help Us Make Ethical Judgments?”, *The Skeptical Inquirer Magazine*, September 2004 Issue (Online Version). HTML: <https://web.archive.org/web/20071123123232/http://www.csicop.org/si/2004-09/scientific-ethics.html> (Consulted 2016-09-29)

⁸³ MALDONADO, Marta Maria. “Racial Triangulation of Latino/a Workers by Agricultural Employers”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 6, p.1017-1036. [ONLINE] - HTML: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01419870902802254> (Consulted 2015-11-30)

between the customs, beliefs, needs, cultures and even generalized personalities of different humanoid species, for the sake of ensuring that (white) humanity's sense of rightful superiority is maintained. Furthermore, the obstinate trend in Fantasy to portray female bodies as borderline inhuman others, much in the same way non-white races were "fantasized" in Gothic *fantastique*, makes more sense when considering all this baggage. Simone de Beauvoir explains that this labelling was not exclusive to Fantasy-esque literature, but representative of a greater 19th-century social problem, where all but white men were subjected to nigh-identical modes of segregation or discrimination: "whether it is race, caste, class or sex reduced to an inferior condition, the justification process is the same."⁸⁴ When one looks at stories like Gautier's *Omphale* (1834) or Maupassant's *Mère aux Monstres* (1883), among others, one notices women are made into surreal, occult entities, inspiring dread or wonder similarly to the discovery of lost civilizations in foreign countries, or the appearance of humanoid horrors like vampires or lycanthropes. Even in modern Fantasy, this trend can be seen in depictions of unyielding women being shown as threats, and subservient women as preternaturally seductive or "pure". Meanwhile, non-human races like orcs or dwarves are often generalized as being species of uniformly savage killers or greed-addled xenophobes, respectively, not unlike the stereotypes attributed to certain real-world minorities. All un-white non-males were made "others", in an attempt to awe and inspire gone wrong. This is why Gothic fiction, along with folk-tales, fairy tales, medieval epics and romances go a long way in explaining Fantasy's troubled relationship with racial and sexual discrimination. Since much of early Fantasy derives from these works' mentalities and sensibilities, "wrapped up in then-prominent 19th century ideals of ethnicity and nationalism"⁸⁵, this has led to especially outdated or extremely vitriolic forms of scientific racism discourse enduring within works of literary Fantasy, including recently published titles. Again, the idea of Fantasy as evolving the monomyth of a civilization's collective imaginary, of its shared ideology of racial discrimination communicated through zeitgeist-transmitted popular fiction, hauntingly persists, growing clearer the closer we look.

⁸⁴ DE BEAUVOIR, Simone. *The Second Sex* (ed. Judith Thurman), Toronto, Vintage Books, 2009 (1949) p.32

⁸⁵ ALLEN, M. "Literary Criticism and Fantasy Literature: Is Anyone Taking this Seriously?" *YA Hotline* (Online), No 76, 2006, Dalhousie University School of Information Management. HTML:

<https://ojs.library.dal.ca/YAHS/article/view/420/405> (Consulted 2016-09-07)

The Inauguration of a Legacy

However, in 1858, the world witnessed the publication of the first *true* Fantasy novel as per modern-day definition of the genre. Though very much a product of its time, George MacDonald's *Phantastes* featured a wholly original story set in a completely fabricated world that was not directly inscribed within an existing folklore, history or mythology. Most importantly, the fantastical elements of the text did not act as mere allegories or generators of affect, but as fundamental components of the narrative's structure, where a reader's immersion and suspension of disbelief were mandatory for the entirety of the work, in ways fairy tales and epic poems had never attempted. If Fantasy's medieval ancestors were the genre's most primordial state, and the timeframe between the late 1600's and mid-1800's its first tentative steps forward, then the publication of *Phantastes* was the beginning of the genre's early childhood; an extremely brief but extremely influential moment that helped define its core goals and the forms it would take in its modern-day "adulthood", further cementing its pre-Fantasy, monomythic "hero's journey" motifs, today seen as generic clichés. But while MacDonald's importance as Fantasy literature's "father" should not be overlooked, his essays on the subject of Fantasy were easily his most defining contributions to the genre. Not only were these among the first theoretic writings to ever legitimize escapist fiction as a literary form for adults *and* children alike, they were also the first to define Fantasy as more than senseless imagination for senseless imagination's sake. For MacDonald, Fantasy was the ultimate art form, as it brought the artist closest to God. Fantasy meant not only inventing *everything* from one's own mind, it also meant defining the laws and rules that allowed these inventions to coexist in a coherent, believable way, rather than chaotic, logic-less decorations: "Obeying law, the maker works like his creator; not obeying law, he is such a fool as heaps a pile of stones and calls it a church."⁸⁶

That having been said, two other authors from MacDonald's generation arguably played greater roles in defining the genre's principal tropes during its formative years. The first is

⁸⁶ MACDONALD, George. "The Fantastic Imagination", *A Dish of Orts* (Enlarged Edition, ed. Kent Edenbridge). Online Gutenberg Project Edition: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9393/9393-h/9393-h.htm> (Consulted 2016-09-09)

William Morris, who, with *The Well at World's End* (1896), created the first true fictional Fantasy universe⁸⁷. Unlike the fantasized perspective of reality in Gothics or fairy tales, the distant lands of “lost world” fiction or theosophy, and tangentially real-world-based dream-realms like Wonderland or Oz⁸⁸, Morris’ novel was set in a world completely disconnected from our own, spatially, physically and temporally; a first for the genre that remains a ubiquitous trend even today. The second is Dunsany, author of *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924)⁸⁹, who, thanks to his immense popularity across Europe and North America, made his trademark writing style – a lyrical adjective-and-exposition-heavy prose chock full of visual details – into one of the Fantasy genre’s most common and characteristic features. While this style initially helped distinguish Fantasy from other genres, like horror, it also helped solidify the suspicion that Fantasy was dominated by white voices that referred to “Others” as mystical creatures rather than people; an effect S.T. Joshi equates to literature-enforced “segregation”⁹⁰. On one hand, Dunsany’s style was a crucial influence on some of the genre’s greatest authors, like Tolkien⁹¹; on the other, it snared all Fantasy writing in a persistent stylistic rut from which it has yet to outgrow, slowly but surely funneling modern Fantasy into its future format of uncreative, almost blatantly plagiaristic pastiche, that often lacks unicity or experimentalism in its narrative voice.

⁸⁷ CARTER, Lin. “Magic Casements: An Introduction”, *Kingdoms of Sorcery: An Anthology of Adult Fantasy*, Doubleday, New York, 1976, p.39

⁸⁸ These are the “worlds” of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), fantasies written by Morris’ contemporaries Baum and Carroll. In both, the worlds are unreal, but can be accessed from the real world.

⁸⁹ Including over a dozen other works of Fantasy, such as *Gods of Pegâna*, *A Dreamer's Tales* and *The Book of Wonder*.

⁹⁰ JOSHI, Sunand Tryambak. “Foreword”, *21st Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels since 2000* (ed. Daniel Olson), Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2010, p.xv

⁹¹ NELSON, Dale J. “Possible Echoes of Blackwood and Dunsany in Tolkien’s Fantasy”, *Tolkien Studies* (vol.1), West Virginia University Press, 2004. (Online) HTML: <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/176072> (Consulted 2016-09-16)

Disillusioned Illusions – The Great War and *Weird Tales*

One crucially formative - but typically overlooked - event that took place in the genre's early years, was the reinvention of Western Fantasy following World War I. For one, the tense political state of the world in the War's aftermath limited circulation of foreign literature for some time, with much of Russian, Chinese and Japanese Fantasy going unseen by Europe and North America at the time. More significant, however, was how early Fantasy almost completely "dismissed all forms of 'wish-fulfillment' fantasy as ridiculous and stupid" in response to the events of the War...and yet, this same response simultaneously prompted authors of the genre to make their Fantasies more "escapist" than ever before. The result was that the Fantasy of the era often tackled extremely mature themes such as genocide, rape and trauma, all while striving to be as unrealistic and wondrously imaginative as possible⁹². This set in stone a problematic paradox, one the genre is still defined by, yet struggles to free itself of: its ambivalence towards its ambiguous target audience. On one hand, Fantasy is often seen as a source of childish entertainment, and can be at times. But it just as often contains explicit adult themes and moments of grim introspection. Fantasy almost perpetually straddles a delicate barrier between liberal use of wild, senseless imagination, and a grown-up, fatalistic resignation towards reality, never allowing itself to lean too far to either side, lest the illusion of the tangible world or the phantasmagoria induced by its fantastic elements, fall apart at the seams. Hence, the relationship between the over-the-top imaginary of the child and the starkly glib optic of the jaded adult clash visibly in many pivotal works from this era⁹³, and this tension can still often be found in Fantasy literature today. The war's aftermath could also be responsible for a renewed spirit of intolerance towards the "Other" in Fantasy, as rising political tensions incited explicit "us versus them" mentalities in most of popular culture. This might explain the general trend in

⁹² STABLEFORD, Brian. "Re-enchantment in the Aftermath of War", *Gothic Grotesques: Essays on Fantastic Literature*, Rockville, Borgo Press, 2009, p.110-121

⁹³ For instance, E.R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922) offered one of the earliest examples of "Dark Fantasy", possessing much of the gore, sexism and (probably intentional) racial insensitivity present in many works that would follow in its footsteps, while also being set in a fictional version of Mercury called "Demonland", where warriors and sorcerers wage vicious wars, reminiscent in some ways of Dunsany's more dreamlike approach to Fantasy.

Western Fantasy of the time (and of today), to portray Caucasian heroes facing off against the evils of foreign humans, or of species that are, in some way, inherently malicious.

For example, North American Fantasy was beginning to make a name for itself around WWI, thanks to the incredible success of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*, *Barsoom* and *Pelucidar* series. These novels translated colonialist adventure narratives into Fantasy contexts, leading to extremely racially insensitive, but also extremely influential and well-received works of early Fantasy. These books usually featured white saviour narratives, where a male hero puts an end to a non-Caucasian people's barbarous ways, for the sake of a vague "greater good". This has since become an almost traditional narrative format in Fantasy stories (and beyond) that, due to Burrough's work selling very well and garnering massive readerships, allowed outdated rhetoric of discrimination to persist, and even *spread*, across Western culture. The popularity of these novels helped to ensure that colonial thinking would live on under the guise of the Fantastic imaginary, among readers *and* fellow writers. In fact, Burroughs' treatment of race and forcefully colonial take on the "lost world" subgenre gave rise to problematic trends as seen in Lovecraft, and even as recently as *Indiana Jones* or *Uncharted*, where lost civilizations are practically always associated with a racialized, frightening form of mysticism.⁹⁴ Thus, one could say it is around this time that Fantasy truly began to depict racial difference as inherently villainous, not just as a carelessly misguided shorthand to inspire wonder or a sensation of difference. Race in Fantasy had become a metaphor for the Caucasian perspective of othered demographics, in the same way colour of skin was seen as representative of entire ethnicities' white-imposed characteristics and consequences⁹⁵.

However, the entities that truly cemented our current-day understanding of Fantasy as narratives of epic hero journeys, sword-wielding adventurers and damsels in distress, are the stories that were published in the innumerable pulp Fantasy magazines of the early 1900s. The most important of these being *Weird Tales* and *Unknown Worlds*, which garnered avid readerships throughout Europe and across all of North America, redefining the nature of

⁹⁴ CHIPMAN, Bob. "Relics", *The Big Picture* (Online video essay series), published on *The Escapist* 2012-03-13. HTML: <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/videos/view/the-big-picture/5465-Relics> (Consulted 2016-09-19)

⁹⁵ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., "The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifying: Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning", *The Signifying Monkey*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, p.44-88.

contemporary Fantasy to the point where the magazines were considered “a nexus point in the development of speculative fiction from which emerged the modern genres of fantasy⁹⁶”. Specifically, in *Weird Tales*, many of today’s biggest names in Fantasy literature made their debuts and left their indelible marks on the genre. These include H.P. Lovecraft’s “Cthulhu Mythos”, which practically invented cosmic horror (a fusion sci-fi, horror and Fantasy) altogether and gave birth to one of Fantasy’s earliest and richest auteur mythologies, as well as Robert E. Howard’s *Conan the Cimmerian* series, which almost singlehandedly defined the essence of the “swords-and-sorcery” style of Fantasy, with its action-centric plots and war-torn landscapes. Sadly, both series exemplified some of the worst, most openly racist characteristics in the history of the genre, and as a result of their popularity, their discourses have, with varying degrees of intention, been imitated and preserved by successors. Lovecraft, however, rather than simply being “a product of his time” like Howard, was stunningly xenophobic even by the standards of his era, as attested by his equating of interracial marriage to the “pollution” of the human race that would lead it to extinction in *Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936), or in his supremacist poems, stories and correspondence⁹⁷⁹⁸. His extremist philosophy, present in his person and writing, unfortunately inspired future writers to adopt somewhat similar mindsets, if only by unconscious exposure or misguided tribute. Mercedes Lackey’s novels for instance, despite often featuring strong female leads, non-vitriolic representation of homosexual characters and extremely creative worlds and imagery, are often tactlessly racist in a way that echoes Lovecraft’s ideals of aryan superiority, and the demonization of non-whites⁹⁹.

On a more positive note, the early 20th Century is also the point when most women writers of Fantasy¹⁰⁰ and female Fantasy protagonists¹⁰¹ made their appearances on the literary

⁹⁶ EVERETT, Justin and Jeffrey H. SHANKS. *The Unique Legacy of Unique Tales: The Evolution of Modern Fantasy and Horror*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2015, p.x

⁹⁷ Be it the horrific sonnet “On the Creation of Niggers” (1912) or his letters referring to non-whites as “nebulous adumbrations of the pithecanthropoid and amoebal” (see reference below)

⁹⁸ HOUELLEBECQ, Michel (citing H.P. Lovecraft), *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*. McSweeney’s, London’ 2005 (1991) p. 31

⁹⁹ Be it the species of lizard-people that willfully submit to slavery status due to feeling it is the “natural order of things” in *Valdemar* (1987-2016), the dehumanizing orientalism of non-white cultures in *The Elemental Masters* (1995-current) or the Confederate apologist subtext found in *Dead Reckoning* (2012).

¹⁰⁰ Notable female authors here are C.L. Moore, Hope Mirlees, Thea von Harbou...And Mercedes Lackey herself, later on, funnily enough.

¹⁰¹ These include Red Sonja, Warrior Princess Xena, and the first of her kind, the oft-forgotten Jirel of Joiry.

scene...ironic when one considers the rampant misogyny and uber-macho heroes found in most western Fantasy of the time. Additionally, one of the very first works of explicitly *feminist* Fantasy fiction was written around this time. Charlotte P. Gilman's *Herland Trilogy* (1911-1919) was among the first examples of using the genre's fascination with the imaginary to explore concepts such as socially-imposed gender roles, matriarchal society, and sexuality, proving early on that the modern form of the genre was capable of deconstructing the discriminatory subtexts of early Fantasy and proto-Fantasy, rather than reinforcing them. In short, it is an early, excellent example of how the genre's history of self-tropeing can be used against itself to dismantle and discredit the potentially offensive and racist ideologies it helped enshrine in international zeitgeists in the first place. Not only that, but writings *about* Fantasy were becoming more common as well, creating a (sometimes tense) discourse surrounding the nature of the genre, and verbalizing many of the genre's key features in theoretical contexts. Namely, authors like Dunsany and MacDonald helped clarify and justify conventions pioneered by their own works, thanks to numerous – if at times unconvincing – essays. In many ways, non-fiction texts such as these helped lay the groundwork for our modern-day Fantasies, which are more heavily invested in ideas of upending malignant or outdated social norms, and staying true to these ideals of escapism and unbridled creativity.

The Birth of a Messiah

Nevertheless, the astoundingly vast and varied body of Fantasy literature produced during the beginning of the 20th century cannot even begin to compete with the impact that J.R.R. Tolkien's arrival on the literary scene would have on modern Fantasy literature, to the point where many aforementioned works (and more still) remain relatively unknown today, even among devout readers of the genre. This brief span between *The Hobbit*'s publication in 1937 and the late 60's when Tolkien gained unprecedented international renown, may not have been the genre's most prolific or progressive period, but it was, without a doubt, its most significant. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), unlike almost any works of Fantasy before, received nigh-unanimous popular *and* critical success¹⁰². This had the effect of making Fantasy leave the cult niche it carved for itself in magazines, and enter the popular mainstream as a best-selling fiction genre. This led to the re-printing of famous pulp Fantasy works decades later, and established the genre as a worthy object of cultural and literary study. That said, the latter was mostly due to Tolkien's own essays on the genre, which finally set out a clear – if cautious – distinction between “Fantasy” and “Fantastic” literature.

The Lord of the Rings was not an especially revolutionary departure for Fantasy. Its structure, styles and ideas¹⁰³ were adopted from Dunsany and Morris, and Tolkien borrowed liberally from Germanic folklore, English literature, and swords-and-sorcery stories¹⁰⁴. However, its *scope* was unlike that of a novel, and more akin to an epic¹⁰⁵, the world of Middle-Earth being more developed than almost anything in fiction that had come before. The plot especially was more carefully structured, complex and capably written than almost any other work of Fantasy ever had been, with stories within stories within histories and legends, all intertwining together. In short, it was the birth of modern *epic* Fantasy, which contributed to a second coming of Fantasy literature across the western world. More importantly, perhaps,

¹⁰² This was in part thanks to Tolkien's rather illustrious status as an Oxford scholar, since, let us be blunt, scholarly elitism and status always plays a far too significant when it comes to what works earn the label of “worthy” literature.

¹⁰³ The “universe” of Middle-Earth being a good example here.

¹⁰⁴ Including those of Robert E. Howard, coincidentally.

¹⁰⁵ Arguably an entire mythology, if one considers every text Tolkien wrote set in this world.

Tolkien's work ensured the genre was no longer exclusively associated with children or the childish; *Lord of the Rings* proved Fantasy was an adult genre of literature, capable of eliciting wide-eyed wonder and exploring complicated moral themes all at once. In addition, *Lord of the Rings*' success and renown practically meant all future works of the genre had to follow in its footsteps in order to be acknowledged, and with Tolkien's numerous essays debating the definitions of science-fiction and Fantasy as separate entities¹⁰⁶, the two genres began to take far more divergent paths in their literary aspirations. Science-fiction grew closer to a speculative study of humanity's potential reactions or developments in alternative social contexts or possible futures, rather than simply relating adventures steeped in the purely imaginary, if animated by technological aesthetics. Due to both mutually emphasizing the importance world-building and escapism, both science-fiction and Fantasy can be described as "fundamentally outward-looking genre[s], in direct contrast to literary fiction, which looks inward to explore the human condition¹⁰⁷". But where science-fiction wanted to rattle the status quo, mid-20th-century Fantasy preferred to maintain it. This new optic led to the development of feminist sci-fi and dystopian fiction, each being far more concerned with social issues such as racism, discrimination, capitalism, politics and gender identity than Fantasy of the time was. For its part, the genre's goals mainly continued to be the providing of "escape" from reality, an appreciation of imagination for imagination's sake. "The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity"¹⁰⁸, and these early Fantasy narratives ensured that this ideology would remain enforced as a result of misusing some of Tolkien's most long-lived and defining tropes.

¹⁰⁶ The two were previously considered one and the same during the *Weird Tales* era.

¹⁰⁷ MCKENNA, Juliet. "The Genre Debate: Science Fiction Travels Farther than Literary Fiction", *The Guardian*, Published 2014-04-18 (Online). HTML: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/18/genre-debate-science-fiction-speculative-literary> (Consulted 2016-09-13)

¹⁰⁸ DYER, Richard. "The Matter of Whiteness", *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* (2nd Edition, ed. Paula Rothenberg), London, Worth, 2005, p.11

At the Borders of Middle-Earth

Sadly, the cultural phenomenon that was Tolkien led to many of the scholar's contemporaries to be ignored for decades, or, at the very least, condemned to live in the shadows of "the first true Fantasy", despite achieving considerable critical acclaim, sales and popularity of their own. Of Tolkien's numerous compeers, C.S. Lewis is probably the most well-remembered; *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) easily matched Tolkien in influence, albeit specifically in the field of children's Fantasy literature. Lewis also wrote many essays on the genre, most of which deal with issues of intended Fantasy readerships and the "purpose" of Fantasy, further setting it apart from the fantastic, and legitimizing it as an adult-inclusive genre¹⁰⁹. Contrarily, Mervyn Peake's *Gormhengahast* (1946-1956) and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1938-1941) proposed far different takes on Fantasy than Tolkien, offering epic-scale Gothic Fantasy and historical Fantasy, respectively.

However, though nations like Russia and China wrote large amounts of Fantasy literature before Tolkien's appearance on the scene, the unstable political situations in each country, coupled with trade embargos, policing of literature and wars, led to far fewer authors of the time earning much of a reputation, both at home and abroad...And, as a result, most of these texts went untranslated until the early 2000's and beyond. This penury of non-European voices invited the flourishing of an almost completely Eurocentric interpretation of Fantasy, during perhaps the single most defining moment of the genre's lifetime. *Some* great works of non-western Fantasy *did* emerge, nevertheless, most of them from southern Asia¹¹⁰. However, these works often faced a recurring issue, in that they rarely "let loose" in the way European narratives of the genre did. Rather than wholly embrace the moniker of Fantasy to create entirely fictional worlds, mythologies and histories based on regional folklore, most remained faithful to a fault to the historical mysticism and religious legends of their respective nations, to the point that

¹⁰⁹ LEWIS, C.S. *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (Paperback Edition), Boston, Mariner Books, 2012, 168 p.

¹¹⁰ Kalki Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan* (1951-1954) was a romance-like epic set in a Fantasy version of medieval India, and Xiang Kairan's *Knights-Errant of the Jianghu* (1921-1928), a modern reinterpretation of *wuxia* (martial arts hero Fantasy) that breathed new life into a dying story format. Both works proved popular enough to earn imitators of their own in their respective homelands, not unlike *Lord of the Rings*.

some are difficult to describe as “proper” Fantasies. In these cases, writers’ imaginations or worldbuilding skills were rarely commended; the majority favoured a writer’s ability to bring traditional tales to life instead. Alternatively, some writers simply produced worlds that mirrored those of their English contemporaries to a fault, with very little traces of their own national imaginaries, story structures, or personal voices to be found in the final products¹¹¹. Because of European Fantasy’s monumental success at home and abroad, combined with the lack of genuine (or renowned) Fantasy authors in other parts of the world¹¹², *European Fantasy* became, effectively, globalized. Internationally, the genre’s defining traits were held to be not only a focus on creating imaginary worlds and unrealistic imagery, but also to be stories told from a strictly white perspective, steeped in Eurocentric visions of (imaginary) history and heroism. It is for this reason that, even today, we see a great deal of Fantasy narratives set in medievaesque, pseudo-European worlds originating from regions like East Asia and North Africa.

This is also part of the reason that Fantasy’s relation to racism has remained so complicated. If anything, it became even more complex following the globalization of western Fantasy literature. With *The Lord of the Rings* edified as the genre’s Ur-text on a planetary scale, other authors didn’t only emulate Tolkien’s “formula” of aesthetics, structure and themes; they also assisted in the propagation of some of these work’s more problematic subtexts, such as reinforcing colonial understandings of race through tense interactions between Fantasy species, as well as the novels’ more-or-less subtle ideologies of a “standard” race surrounded “abnormal” ones. Indeed, Tolkien revolutionized the planet’s understanding of Fantasy as a genre, but also transformed the very concept of *race* in Fantasy. The unfathomable popularity of his works made it so that his portrayal of race, racism and racial discrimination, heavily influenced by Tolkien’s own Eurocentrism, helped some forms of old European racism to subtly re-enter social and literary imaginations across the globe, and, to a certain extent, endure. Second, his use of the term “race” as a placeholder term encompassing all sapient species in Middle-Earth resulted in “race”, “ethnicity” and “species” to be blurrily conflated in future works of the genre,

¹¹¹ UPENDRAN, Achala. “Indian Fantasy Writers Are Creating Worlds Beyond the Epics, but Readers Must Know Where to Look”, *Scroll News* (Online), Published 2016-06-25. HTML: <http://scroll.in/article/810251/indian-fantasy-writers-are-creating-worlds-beyond-the-epics-but-readers-must-know-where-to-look> (Consulted 2016-09-27)

¹¹²Let alone any that could compete with *The Lord of the Rings* in terms of sales, readership or impact.

and led to troubling scientific racism discourses to resurface under the guise of Fantasy literature, as discussed prior.

What's more, this misunderstanding of the nature of race has partially bled into popular culture and our modern cultural zeitgeist, reinforcing the ideologies of believers faithful to outdated forms of biological or pseudo-scientific racism, with popular Fantasy literatures acting as catalysts. The main consequence of this confusing phenomenon, is that depictions and descriptions of race in Fantasy became far more explicit. Sometimes, this worked out for the better¹¹³, and sometimes, for the worse¹¹⁴. In a way, Tolkien's *oeuvre-vie* had refreshed the previously established motifs and themes of the Fantasy monomyth in such a way that its legacy would not only *thrive* on discourses of racial discrimination – however subtle or unintentional these might have been in the first place – but that themes of race and race-based discrimination would become as integral to the genre's DNA as fire-breathing dragons or “hero's journey” narrative arcs.

¹¹³ Later authors would use popularized interpretations of the term “race” to approach themes of racism and racial discrimination in their works more organically, by critiquing the Fantasy genre itself, as well as its legacy of discrimination from the inside-out, without resorting to essayistic statements.

¹¹⁴ Some authors would intentionally use the term “race” to portray non-white ethnicities as equally uncanny or inhuman when compared to the other humanoids in their fictions.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ignored

Still, despite what either side of the debate might argue, it would be wrong to describe *LotR* and other Middle-Earth stories as uncompromisingly racist. Rather, Tolkien's work entertains a complicated, fluctuating relationship with racial representation, and had a considerable impact on the way we interpret Fantasy-centric racism today. Reading the author's correspondence, one realizes Tolkien was rather progressive for his time, and was even conscious of issues of racial representation issues in his work *and* in reality. While *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* contains proof the author intended dark-skinned orcs to resemble "mongoloid" corruptions of elves, greedy and boisterous dwarves to be stand-ins for Jews, and lineages of great kings to be products of sanctified eugenics¹¹⁵, judging by the tone of the letters, these elements seem to be, more likely than not, attempts at inclusive, positive diversity gone horribly wrong. Tolkien's notes suggest the author meant to refer to as many real-world societies, ethnic groups and minorities as possible, densifying Middle-Earth's history in a way that felt believable, and made the Fantasy relevant to real-world issues. Unfortunately, the narration surrounding these stand-in groups is often closer to deterministic racism than one of compassionate multiculturalism, likely due to the fact that many were based on offensive race archetypes¹¹⁶. This dichotomy between good intentions and poor execution is made all the more visible when one remarks that both *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* contain explicitly anti-racist themes, with great emphasis put on the peaceful fellowship between the free races of Middle-Earth, steeped in mutual respect despite different beliefs and legacies of discrimination towards one another. In the end, such is the only path the heroes have, in order to claim victory in the war against an encroaching evil. This in no way excuses the *actual* racism present in these stories, nor does it obviate that Tolkien's "claims of universalism are, in themselves, rooted in particularistic representations of civilization, its conventions and historical roots, as well as

¹¹⁵ TOLKIEN, J.R.R., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (ed. Humphrey Carpenter), Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1981, 480 p.

¹¹⁶ CHISM, Christine. "Racism, Charge of", *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (ed. Michael D.C. Drout), New York, Routledge, p.557

cultural practices¹¹⁷”. However, it neither alters the fact that Tolkien’s work contains themes of fellowship and racial tolerance that seek to abolish established colonial narratives pertaining to racialized bodies.

For instance, Frodo’s status as the hero destined to bear the burden of the ring – a weight no one else can withstand – is made all the more impressive by his status as a hobbit, so often considered frail, incapable and cowardly by “tall” races. Meanwhile, interracial friendships such as the one between the dwarf Gimli and the elf Legolas, national alliances between grudge-bearing nations like Gondor and Rohan, multiple character perspectives, and the humanization of Sauron’s servants¹¹⁸, are frequent in the later tomes. This suggests Tolkien was, to a certain extent, aware of the unintentional racism in his work, and attempted to retroactively *fix* the issue as his writing progressed, with themes of diversity, tolerance, and renunciation of bigoted ideologies becoming more central to the plot as the trilogy neared its end¹¹⁹. Thus, to hold Tolkien fully accountable for the presence of racism in the Fantasy literature of today would be an overstatement, as he is among the first white male authors to attempt to quell this millennia-old tradition of hate, however bumbling his approach. Difficult as it may be to admit, the brunt of the blame for Fantasy’s ongoing propagation of racism does not belong to Tolkien. It belongs to us, the writers and readers of Fantasy. *We* are the ones who failed to recognize the repetition of racially charged discourse in the genre, or, at the very least, failed to do anything meaningful to stop it sooner.

Still, let us not overlook the fact that, in these same years, some Fantasy finally began to prove that it could directly address themes of social justice in brand new ways, by using the very same genre-exclusive traits that established Fantasy’s racism problem in the first place. For example, Ursula K. LeGuin’s *Earthsea* (1964-2001) is another masterpiece of Fantasy that appeared in this era, but like others, was mostly overlooked until the end of the 20th century. When one realizes this is not only one of the first works of epic Fantasy by a woman writer, but

¹¹⁷ CHEN, Tina Mai. “Introduction: Thinking Through Embeddedness: Globalization, Culture, and the Popular”. *Cultural Critique*, Issue 58, 2004. p.10

¹¹⁸ These include Easterlings, Haradrim, Southron and Orcs alike.

¹¹⁹ REARICK, Anderson. “Why is the Only Good Orc a Dead Orc? The Dark Face of Racism Examined in Tolkien’s World”, *Modern Science Fiction Studies*, Vol.50, No.4, Winter 2004, pp.861-874 [ONLINE] HTML: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/177550> (Consulted 2016-11-25)

also one of the first works of western Fantasy where a deconstruction of race and racism is crucial to the story and world¹²⁰, this is something of a tragedy. Likewise, Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1963) was among the first modern Fantasies to explicitly deal with themes of gender and patriarchal oppression and one of the earliest examples of "Science Fantasy"¹²¹. Borges' *Fictions* (1944) and *The Aleph* (1949), meanwhile, were among the only non-European Fantasies of the time to earn international recognition¹²². But, apart a few outliers such as these, Fantasy generally remained conservative-minded. Although, one can find an exception to the rule in superhero stories, a burgeoning Fantasy subgenre which made its home in comic books. While frequently considered juvenile, if not insipid, many early superhero icons put forth explicit messages of anti-discrimination, in no small part thanks to the fact that many early comic writers were Jewish-Americans fighting against the era's widespread Klan and Nazi ideologies. Superman once took down the KKK in absolute rejection of the cult's white supremacism in 1947¹²³; Wonder Woman's character was intended as an embodiment of a modern feminist ideal that could fix longstanding damage caused by patriarchal eurocentrism¹²⁴; Captain America's resembles the Aryan ideal (blond-haired, blue-eyed Caucasian male) despite embodying explicit anti-Nazi values and promoting acceptance of all cultures and races, in blatant, dismissive satire of these ideals¹²⁵; and this is to name but a few. As a result, early superhero comics are among the original examples of Fantasy used as a vehicle to intentionally *oppose* othering, rather than to unintentionally promote it by means of mindlessly rewriting prior racially-charged narratives.

¹²⁰ LEGUIN, Ursula K. "A Whitewashed Earthsea", *Slate*, 2004 (Online). HTML: http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2004/12/a_whitewashed_earthsea.html (Consulted 2016-03-20)

¹²¹ A subgenre that uses a sci-fi aesthetic, but remains rooted in the fantastical. The most well-known example of the genre today is probably the *Star Wars* film trilogies, despite their regular mislabeling as straight science-fiction.

¹²² Still, their more essayistic tone has leads them to be called "experimental" narratives more often than Fantasy.

¹²³ BOWERS, Richard. *Superman versus the Ku Klux Klan: The True Story of How the Iconic Superhero Battled the Men of Hate*, Washington D.C., National Geographic Society, 2012, 160 p.

¹²⁴ CHIPMAN, Bob. "All the World is Waiting", *The Big Picture*, published on *The Escapist*, 2011-01-11. HTML: <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/videos/view/the-big-picture/2628-All-The-World-Is-Waiting> (Consulted 2016-5-5)

¹²⁵ MCWILLIAMS, Ora C. "Not just Another Racist Honkey", *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays* (ed. Robert G. Weiner), Jefferson, McFarland Books, 2009, p.66-78

A Humiliating Lineage

Despite being one of the genre's most creatively prolific periods, the literary Fantasy landscape between the 1970s and the mid-90's, was also its most problematic, for two reasons in particular. First, with the progressive erosion of pulp magazines and the unparalleled success of *Lord of the Rings* worldwide, Fantasy went from a niche genre to a commodified cultural phenomenon, as publishers searched ambitiously for the next hit that would take Tolkien's place. But, ironically (or, more likely, foolishly), publishers also aggressively refused to take any risks with texts too dissimilar to the Oxford linguist's magnum opus. Fantasy's success at the time – its survival, really – depended on “consistency and predictability¹²⁶”, rather than its power to inspire wonder; a paradoxical definition that nearly brought about the genre's death knell. The result of this pressure to “be like Tolkien” was a deluge of extremely popular works of Fantasy that were, for the most part, of mediocre quality and lacking in creativity. A general trend that resulted in a troubled period for the literary genre, better equated to a prolonged awkward puberty than a “dark age” of Fantasy. In many ways, this was when Fantasy (somewhat rightfully) earned its reputation as a derivative genre that did nothing but copy Tolkien, as a result of the sheer *amount* of derivative Fantasy being published at the time. This has resulted in the well-known, and often apt label of the Tolkienesque “standard Fantasy setting”, which both readers and non-readers of Fantasy tend to falsely associate as synonymous with the very concept of “Fantasy” as a genre¹²⁷, practically becoming a new monomyth in and of itself.

Consequently, this is also when Fantasy novels gained the reputation of “never ending¹²⁸”. With ten-book-long series becoming standard practice, the genre tended to be more concerned with marketing itself *en masse* than telling a good story; a narrative's scope being

¹²⁶ ATTEBERY, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992, p.2

¹²⁷ This typically includes the standard fare of elves, dwarves, dragons and wizards in a pseudo-medieval universe where broadly defined forces of good face off against similarly-defined forces of evil.

¹²⁸ HARTMANN, Christina. “Why do some People Hate Fantasy?”, *The Huffington Post* (Online), Published 2012-08-14. HTML: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/quora/why-do-some-people-hate-fantasy/entry.html> (Consulted 2016-09-09)

more prized than its quality¹²⁹. Worse still, since a majority of these works plagiarized structures, settings, even entire *plots* from Tolkien, many failed to offer original themes or explore newfound narrative potentials for the genre. Most writers simply regurgitated the well-worn ideas of established sagas, until, over the course of many books and many years, they became established clichés. In some regards, this was a return to a “pre-Fantasy” era, where popular works acted as sources of inspiration to be broadly rewritten or reinterpreted, in the same way as folklore and myths once were. And yet, these novels’ popularity ensured that they too would become “influential” in the eyes of fellow and future writers, extending Fantasy’s awkward puberty of familiarity over novelty even further. If remaining close to *Lord of the Rings*’ style, themes, and mythology need not in and of itself be problematic, the *ways* authors reworked them were. To borrow Gates’ words again, Fantasy novels of the time were almost always plays *of* Tolkien’s traditions, not plays *on* them¹³⁰. The difference being that, rather than using Middle-Earth’s tales or lore as a springboard to offer introspective studies of Fantasy, take bold steps into unexplored literary territories, or propose narrative deconstructions of themes found in Tolkien’s works, most authors instead chose¹³¹ to build on Tolkien’s existing ideas without challenging or upending them in any major fashion...save, of course, for those who used the opportunity to proclaim white superiority, rather than race-transcending fellowship. This is one of the core reasons why Fantasy’s potential was so severely squandered in the late 20th century, and why critics tend to refer almost exclusively to texts from these decades when deploring the genre’s history of racism.

Gates also states that “when one writer repeats another’s structure by one of several means, including a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent content¹³²”, the latter can undo tropes the former established, and yield a parodic pastiche that permits the dissolution of prior labels and the establishment of new ones. In this context, Gates refers to how black American writers

¹²⁹ Eddings’ five-book Belgariad (1984-87) Jordan’s fifteen-book Wheel of Time (1990-2013) and Brook’s twenty-two-books-and-counting Shannara (1977-soon, thankfully) are among the best examples of these worst offenders.

¹³⁰ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., *Figures in Black*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p.249

¹³¹ Or, perhaps just as likely, were pressured by their editors.

¹³² *Idem*, p.242

appropriated the formats used by their racist compeers, to propose affirmations of, rather than undermining, black voices and identities. Looking at Fantasy, however, it is easy to see that the result was the polar opposite. Works of the time – primarily those of Tolkien imitators – often missed the point of Fantasy altogether, and led the genre toward practically becoming a cyclical caricature of itself. Rather than propose large-scale reimaginings of the world, or of what the real world could be like if viewed through a lens of wild imagination, these oftentimes unambitious, hurriedly-written texts failed to produce actual Fantasy, instead yielding recursive, self-troping stories that exaggerated clichés found in the plot structures, themes and ideas that defined the genre. Rather than challenging established definitions of racism and race relations through the optic of Fantasy, as did LeGuin and Tolkien, this generation created recurring racist stereotypes that only apply to Fantasy world contexts¹³³. Often trivialized as non-issues, these Fantasy-exclusive racial archetypes rarely get the attention they deserve, leading us to overlook their role as signifiers and proponents of Fantasy’s perpetuation of problematic racial representation. This becomes only more infuriating when one realizes the genre has always had the tools necessary to reconfigure the imagining of race, but that authors frequently missed the opportunity to do so, even among those armed with the best of intentions.

Truly devastating however, was how these imitators elaborated on Dunsany and Tolkien’s already long-winded prose, giving birth to the colloquially-known “exposition dump”: a cliché of Fantasy that is both ammo for critics dismissing the genre as derivative or subliterate, and an overlooked promulgator of the genre’s sometimes racist subtexts. Portnow claims exposition is perhaps the biggest obstacle to writing and reading Fantasy, due to “the massive amount of world information that needs to be conveyed” in narrative, calling it both “the groundwork we require to understand the space we’re playing in” and a limitation of the genre that acts as “price of entry to participate in the narrative”, even though it “doesn’t actually drive the tale being told.”¹³⁴ The result? This era’s Fantasy often *tells* readers about the world,

¹³³ To name but the most well-known of these, the cliché of the elf and dwarf that hate one another, but eventually become friends. Coined by Tolkien as a symbol of fellowship, it has since been overused to the point of becoming a problematic stereotype, its format strongly mirroring real-world stereotyping narratives, such as the dismissal of existing tensions between Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

¹³⁴ PORTNOW, James, et al. “More than Exposition: Building Worlds Without Info Dumps”, *Extra Credits*, 14 March 2014. (Online Video Essay).HTML:

dictating the righteousness or wrongness of cultures or races in surprisingly propaganda-like terms, essentially making the racism present in their narratives appear justified, if not unquestionably logical. Here, we have what is possibly the single most devastating example imaginable of why it is important to *show*, not *tell* in writing. This was further aggravated by the propensity of this era's authors to, as Le Guin puts it, translate real-world politics into Fantasy, which, "instead of imitating the perceived complexity and confusion of existence, tries to hint at an order and clarity underlining existence¹³⁵". This resulted in authors reinforcing the racist statements made in their stories – whether they were based on real-world racist understandings or culturally-transmitted narratives – in ways that made them appear as inarguable truths, on par with stating the colour or breed of a fantastic beast. The problem was only further worsened by the genre's widespread habit of using a popularized, mostly homogenous version of Olde-English. This widespread writing habit yielded a situation where nearly the entire corpus of Fantasy nigh-relentlessly droned an almost uniform racist rhetoric into readers' heads. Due to language and style alone, individual works by different authors often reiterated the same points, shared the same Eurocentric ideologies, and agreed on "universal" definitions of good and evil...all despite these stories being almost completely unrelated. In some ways, this was the progression of the previously mentioned racism-centric Fantasy monomyth, one far more dangerous than the one that had come before. It would be quite some time before these trends would dissipate from popular Fantasy, yielding space to a greater range of voices, and diverse interpretations of right and wrong.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEERJ1a2rsU&list=PLB9B0CA00461BB187&index=129> (Consulted 2015-12-01)

¹³⁵ LEGUIN, Ursula K. "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie", *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* (ed. David Sandner), Gainesville, Greenwood Press, 2004, p.148

***Weird Tales'* Racist Comeback, and its Misogynistic Followers**

Concurrently to these new writers, publishers reprinted collected editions of pulp-era works as novels and anthologies, leading to a resurgence in readership for the likes of Howard and Lovecraft, a timely preservation which had the catastrophic side-effect of giving these works' xenophobic, misogynistic subtexts a second wind. These authors' outdated, damaging racist and sexist depictions were then readapted by modern fans and imitators, who were either blissfully unaware of the discriminatory discourses that thrived in these stories, or similarly used Fantasy settings as pretenses to express racial supremacy ideologies, defending their bigotry with "it's all make-believe" and "that's just how *that* imaginary world works" arguments. These include Terry Goodkind's *The Sword of Truth* (1994-2013)¹³⁶ and Piers Anthony's children's Fantasy *The Magic of Xanth* (1977-current)¹³⁷¹³⁸¹³⁹, but John Norman's science-Fantasy series *Gor* (1966-1988, second ongoing series beginning in 2001) is by far the most unpardonable of these in regards its overt racism and misogyny. At one time popular enough to earn *two* feature-length film adaptations, the novels feature Neo-Nazi rhetoric of racial superiority that aligns – practically word-for-word in certain passages – with Hitler's theories on the topic found in *Mein Kampf*¹⁴⁰. Meanwhile, non-white¹⁴¹ cultures are described as irredeemably monstrous in ways nearly identical to descriptions of the insectoid monsters that stalk the world of *Gor*. Furthermore, all female "characters" are, without exception, initially portrayed as rebellious

¹³⁶ The author often uses his protagonist's status of Chosen One as a pretense to forward a determinist moral ideology that excuses heroes' acts of KKK-esque racial discrimination, sexual violence against women, and wholesale slaughter of coloured foreigners (some of which are referred to as "Mud-People) as divinely-appointed righteousness.

¹³⁷ In this case, the author often refers to non-white, *humanoid* non-humans as "ongoing dehumanization[s] of Man [reference below]", and portrays female beings of all species as vapid "creatures" existing solely to serve or please their males. Hyperbolizing these problematic representations even further, the Anthony's writing exhibits "a lingering predilection for underage girls [...] that comes skin-crawlingly close to glorifying" pedophilia [reference below].

¹³⁸ ANTHONY, Piers. *Castle Roogna* (Book 3 of *Xanth*), New York, Del Rey Books, 1987, p.224

¹³⁹ HELLER, Jason. "Revisiting the sad, misogynistic fantasy of *Xanth*", *The A.V. Club* (Online), published 2013-10-18. HTML:<http://www.avclub.com/article/revisiting-the-sad-misogynistic-fantasy-of-xanth-104382> (Consulted 2016-09-23)

¹⁴⁰ [Author Unknown], *Gorean Nazism*. (Online), 2002. HTML: <http://gornz.tripod.com/> (Consulted 2016-09-24)

¹⁴¹ Or "non-civilized", as the term is used interchangeably by Norman.

misandrists, who are tortured, raped and humiliated by men, until they either die or become euphorically grateful for being shown their “rightful” place. This philosophy has inspired its own BDSM subculture, and likely, alongside *Story of O* (1954), helped popularize non-consensuality in erotica fiction, such as in *Fifty Shades of Grey*¹⁴². In fact, Norman’s treatment of women appears almost identical to “the old American South attitude toward black people¹⁴³”, proving that De Beauvoir’s remark, on how discriminatory treatments of female and ethnic minority groups are borderline identical, still holds water in Fantasies. So, while the preservation of classic authors like Lovecraft and Howard encouraged authors to explore Fantasies less aligned with Tolkien’s inventions, and was indispensable for cultural posterity – these reprints even helped shed light on influential Fantasy authors that would have been otherwise lost¹⁴⁴ – their “resurrection” coincided with the genre’s single most troubled and self-harming period. Wrong as it might be to deem this moment in Fantasy’s history as wholly toxic, it cannot be denied this set the genre back for decades.

¹⁴² More relevant to Fantasy, Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005-2008) famously romanticized abusive relationships.

¹⁴³ [Anonymous]. “The Worst Fantasy Books Ever: *Gor* (John Norman)”, *Best Fantasy Books* (Online Publication), Last Edited 2015. HTML: <http://bestfantasybooks.com/worst-fantasy-books.html> (Consulted 2015-06-01)

¹⁴⁴ Fritz Leiber’s stories of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser helped kicked off Dark Fantasy’s emphasis on psychology, C.A. Smith’s mythologies rekindled interest in cosmic, complex and atypical Fantasy worlds, and Seabury Quinn’s *Jules de Grandin* tales set the standards for Fantasy set in the real world, as seen in *Harry Potter*, *The Dresden Files*, and more.

Roll a d20 to Proceed: Critical Failure

The second culprit behind Fantasy’s “awkward puberty” is, ironically, one of the main reasons for its ubiquity within mainstream culture: the development of Interactive Fiction and role-playing games, alternative literatures that share close ties with the genre¹⁴⁵. The relationship between the Fantasy and interactive mediums was perhaps facilitated by its inherently game-like nature. Both reading and writing Fantasy are intellectually dynamic processes, involving prolonged stints of sustained “imagining”. Authors and readers *must* participate in an actively evolving creative process to form coherent fictional worlds, by experimenting with premade rules that force them to interpret unrealistic or imaginary scenarios according to predetermined, self-imposed limitations. This makes Fantasy a natural fit for RPGs and IF, interactive experiences which encourage more active implication from “readers” than traditional literatures, and demand spectators to actively contribute to the storytelling process. While some of these interactive Fantasy oeuvres were popular, even experimental in their approach to discussing themes of race and racial representation at times¹⁴⁶, the most influential among them is, indisputably, Gygax’s *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). *D&D* combined tabletop gaming and collaborative storytelling by offering players sets of predefined assets, settings, characters and lore inspired by popular Fantasy classics¹⁴⁷ to toy with, encouraging them to create their own adventures and tales as though using building blocks¹⁴⁸. On one hand, this greatly bolstered the amount of Fantasy literature written at the time, since the game helped many writers clear the initial creative hurdle of elaborating a complex Fantasy universe from scratch. On the other, it caused writers to publish novelized transcripts of *D&D* campaigns in lieu of original content, and to employ generic, shared fantasy universes that, once again, placed greater importance on the *quantity* of stories than on literary quality. The result was a different kind of, but just as

¹⁴⁵ These, alongside drawn Fantasy art, helped bring the genre to the mediums of cinema and video games as well.

¹⁴⁶ Whether for good or ill, works like *ZORK* (1977-1982), the *Choose your own Adventure* novels (1979-1998), and the *Ultima* (1981-2013) series attempted to address race differently than their predecessors, however clumsily or briefly.

¹⁴⁷ Tolkien especially, but also Howard and Lovecraft, to list only the more famous sources.

¹⁴⁸ WITWER, Michael. *Empire of Imagination*, Sydney, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, 320 p.

inherently problematic, avalanche of subpar, heavily commercialized Fantasy novels, with multi-author series like *Forgotten Realms* (1987-onwards) and *Dragonlance* (1984-2011) swamping the market...which even further shifting Fantasy's priorities away from creativity, and towards familiar reiteration.

As a result, the mold of the “generic” Fantasy setting congealed further, and ingrained itself into the popular culture as the one we are familiar with today. This is why it would be inaccurate and short-sighted to call most “standard” Fantasy works *Tolkienesque*, as most of these stories are actually *Dungeons & Dragons*-esque. The game's “story resources” are themselves a mish-mash of various ideas and assets “stolen” from across the span of all Fantasy literature, then converted into the narrative equivalent of pabulum through successive derivations by writers. This is also part of the reason why Fantasy was, and still is, held in such contempt by most institutions and academics. With the entire genre coming to be associated with a board game, many scholars and critics too easily dismissed the totality of Fantasy literature¹⁴⁹ as inherently juvenile and incapable of being considered “high literature”. Moreover, widespread rumors claimed that playing *D&D* caused psychological damage in teenagers and young adults, while the popular “Dark Dungeons” *Chick Tract* suggested the game promoted Satanism. Even more wearisome, the group B.A.D.D. (Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons) believed the game encouraged illicit behaviour in its players, and campaigned to have it banned from circulation, in tandem with most associated works of Fantasy¹⁵⁰. With all these controversies surrounding *D&D*, it is no wonder the Fantasy genre, so closely associated to Gygax's magnum opus, earned such a stain on its reputation in mainstream and academic circles.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Save for the thousands of institutionalized classics that inspired its modern incarnations, *for some reason*.

¹⁵⁰ STACKPOLE, Matthew A. *Game Hysteria and the Truth*, 1989 (Online Archive version posted to “The Escapist”). HTML: <http://www.theescapist.com/archive-gamehysteria.htm#fantasy> (Consulted 2016-09-24)

¹⁵¹ The *D&D* novels' approach differed from the shared universes seen in its contemporaries, DC and Marvel comics, which encouraged writers to set established characters in new stories, permanently expanding their mythos'.

Revolution in Elfland

That said, the second half of the 20th century did give birth to a few legitimate masterpieces, scattered as they were among the typical sea of dreck. In fact, this era marked the point in time when Fantasy started to overtly address themes of race, racism, and discrimination on a regular basis. Many works of Fantasy written in these decades openly criticized and deconstructed themes of race and supremacist thinking through narrative, rather than just parroting prior authors' interpretations of race mindlessly. Namely, Charles R. Saunders and Samuel R. Delany were among the first and best-known black authors of Anglophone epic Fantasy. Saunder's *Imaro* (1981-1985) offered a swords-and-sorcery story featuring a black hero in a non-exploitative tribal Africa-inspired Fantasy world, whilst Delany's *Return to Nevèrÿon* (1979-1987) is closer to a brick-by-brick deconstruction of swords-and-sorcery from a more multi-ethnic angle. By "repeating and reversing simultaneously"¹⁵² the ways in which racist designations and social contexts are formed in Fantasy narratives, these authors empowered minorities previously oppressed by Fantasy, by rethinking the purpose served by the generic tropes that were normally used to amplify racist discourses, such as highly expositional dialogue¹⁵³. This is why Djèli Clark believes "speculative fiction has also been a refuge for black writers seeking to deal with incidents of racial terror in their midst – a means to confront the traumatic by interpreting it through the fantastic"¹⁵⁴. As a result of such works, the genre slowly began to become less of an enforcer of old-world racism, and more of an intuitive critic of present-day racism, that operated by refashioning the popular imagination's concepts of race and the fantastic alike. The consequence of such revolutionary visions was a progressive move away from the genre's obsessive whiteness, but also a move towards a new type Fantasy, one that more actively dismantled the status quo through its unbelievable features

¹⁵² GATES, Henry Louis Jr., *Figures in Black*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p.236

¹⁵³ PENNINGTON, Latonya. "Repainting my Imagination with Black Fantasy Authors", *Black Girl Nerds* (Online Publication), published 2014-10-23. HTML: <http://blackgirlnerds.com/repainting-imagination-black-fantasy-authors/> (Consulted 2016-09-09)

¹⁵⁴ DJÈLI CLARK, Phenderson. "Early Black Writers, Speculative Fiction and Confronting Racial Terror", *The Musings of a Disgruntled Haradrim*, Posted 23-07-2015 [ONLINE] HTML: <https://pdjeliclarck.wordpress.com/2015/06/23/early-black-writers-speculative-fiction-and-confronting-racial-terror/> (Consulted 2017-01-20)

and components, encouraging more experimental, personal takes on worldbuilding and storytelling than those found in unaspiring pastiches.

Similarly to Delany and Saunders, Salvatore's *Dark Elf Trilogy* (1990-1991) was a critical study of race discrimination and race identities in Fantasy. By using *D&D* lore against itself, the author demonstrating how familiar or overused tropes in Fantasy could communicate racism if handled poorly, all while addressing the racism inherent to *D&D*'s foundational universe. The trilogy also served as a prequel to the author's earlier *Forgotten Realms* novels, adding an extra layer of depth to prior stories featuring the dark elf Drizzt. Gardner's *Grendel* (1971) likewise retold *Beowulf* from Grendel's perspective, humanizing the otherwise inhuman beast, and highlighting the nationalistic, discriminatory side of the English classic many readers overlook¹⁵⁵. Sapkowski's *The Witcher* (1992-2013), meanwhile, presented a Fantasy world inspired by eastern-European folklore that aggressively dismantled Tolkien's whimsical take on race, to present a vicious, prejudiced world rife with longstanding traditions of discrimination. Based on a natural progression of Middle-Earth's racially charged politics, its reimagining and expanding of Fantasy race stereotypes was ground-breaking for its time. Meanwhile, Goldman's *Princess Bride* (1973) and Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* (1983) had comparable goals, with a focus on gender instead of race¹⁵⁶. Jan Morris' *Last Letters from Hav* (1985) was perhaps even more noteworthy, being an experimental combination of lost world science Fantasy with elements of biography, travel literature, and philosophy. The book reads unlike anything in Fantasy, describing the invasion of a fictional nation by a faction that would, in another book, be the white male heroes of the tale, but are here depicted as invaders, as seen from the perspective of the country's natives, transformed into racialized "others"¹⁵⁷. Cook's *Black Company* (1984-2000) and King's *Dark Tower* (1984-2012), for their part, offered some of the gloomiest, goriest, and realistic interpretations of Fantasy ever seen, using the genre's tropes to tackle troubling

¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Victor LaValle's very recently released *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) retells Lovecraft's infamous *The Horror at Red Hook* story from the perspective of a black man who is more or less "spectating" the events of the story, fusing cosmic horror and fear of racial persecution into a single entity.

¹⁵⁶ The two novels proposed a revisit of older modes and stories of Fantasy from female characters' perspectives, and encouraged tentatively feminist analyses of Fantasy's problematic depictions of women through their narratives.

¹⁵⁷ Moreover, it is one of the first Fantasy novels by a transgender author, and one of the first Fantasies nominated for a non-genre-exclusive literary prize (the Man Booker), making it a significant, oft-forgotten, accomplishment.

topics in ways post-WWI Fantasy deliberately shied away from. Finally, Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* (1984-86) is perhaps the closest the genre has come to finding a successor to Tolkien. Kay did more than just bootleg Middle-Earth: he yielded a multicultural, almost cosmopolitan Fantasy universe inspired from world mythologies and folklores. The trilogy both re-emphasized Tolkien's themes of acceptance and fellowship, while deliberately addressing potentially harmful instances of racism and discrimination that less talented purloiners thoughtlessly included or maliciously reiterated¹⁵⁸, not unlike the approach of fellow Jewish writers in comics years earlier.

Authors outside North America and Europe also became more widely known, with Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988) and Dyachenko's *Gate-Keeper* (1994) offering new forms of Fantasy that fit the molds of European classics, but weren't as steeped in colonial Eurocentrism. Western-style Fantasies from Japan also became internationally successful, and some oeuvres¹⁵⁹ established themselves as touchstones that provided new takes on conventional faux-Medieval settings, by exploring themes of racism, sexual violence and religion that Western counterparts tended to gloss over. This is also in part why Japanese occupies such a large niche in today's mainstream, and still touches on themes such as racism in its Fantasy¹⁶⁰. The importance of these non-white, non-Western voices entering international readers' conceptions of Fantasy cannot be overstated, as they played key roles in Fantasy's abolition of Eurocentric whiteness as the "default" state in Fantasy. These changes prompted further works in the genre to examine racial identity as more than just a label, all while taking a step back from the "non-whites-as-others" narratives that plagued prior tales. Similarly, Fantasy movies became more popular and feasible to produce thanks to the refinement of special effects and animation. This moved filmic Fantasy away from B-movie realms and into mainstream cinema territory, prompting

¹⁵⁸ ANDERS, Charlie-Jane. "Guy Gavriel Kay Shares his Secrets for Turning Real-Life History into Fantasy", *io9* (Online Publication), Published 2016-04-28. HTML: <http://io9.gizmodo.com/guy-gavriel-kay-shares-his-secrets-for-turning-real-lif-1773635178> (Consulted 2016-09-09)

¹⁵⁹ Some notable titles include Kaoru Kurimoto's *Guin Saga* (1979-no sign of stopping yet), Ryo Mizuno's *Record of Lodoss War* (1988-1993), and Kentaro Miura's *Berserk* (1989-present).

¹⁶⁰ That said, due to the complex situation regarding ethnic discrimination in Japan (worthy of a thesis of its own, if not several), works of Japanese Fantasy fiction often alternate between avant-garde progressiveness and decades-old racist discourse, making it difficult to refer to the entire corpus of Japanese-made Fantasy as a whole in this regard.

Hollywood studios to stumble upon (and exploit) a new goldmine that has yet to truly run dry¹⁶¹. In turn, early Fantasy video games¹⁶² did very much the same: interactive properties allowed these art forms to deal early on with themes of racism, religious faith and gender identity in nuanced ways, thanks to narrative structures that prose and cinema could not - and still cannot - imitate¹⁶³. Later on, the influence of Fantasy games led to a wave of unconventionally-structured stories in popular literature, greatly inspired by the themes and forms of these digital tales.

¹⁶¹ Films like *Flash Gordon* (1980), *Nausicaä* (1984) and *Highlander* (1986), for instance helped expand Fantasy's popularity further, all while inspiring new, non-Tolkien or *D&D*-esque plot archetypes that would later be reinterpreted in literary forms, further helping Fantasy move away from its middle-ages obsession.

¹⁶² Notable examples include *Ultima* (1981), *Final Fantasy* (1987), and *Warcraft* (1994).

¹⁶³ COOK, Myles Russell. "Watching *Warcraft: The Beginning* is a lesson in real-world Racism", *The Conversation* (Online), Published 2016-07-13. HTML: <http://theconversation.com/watching-warcraft-the-beginning-is-a-lesson-in-real-world-racism-61573> (Page consulted 2016-09-03)

A Brief Note on Theorizers of the Inexistent

Essays, journals and theories about Fantasy also evolved considerably during these decades, with fewer texts attempting to define *what* the genre was, *who* it was for, or what its *point* was. Rather, texts were more dedicated to explaining what made Fantasy unique, what it could accomplish that other genres could not, what it could tell us about society, and, perhaps most of all, why Fantasy, and its heritage, *matters*. More importantly, these authors also played a big part in *reorienting* Fantasy down the proper path, suggesting that Fantasy's problems with racial representation – and its lack of acceptance in academic circles – were not tied to the genre itself, but to many authors' poor exploitations of the genre's intrinsic powers to reimagine, or, totally escape, reality's binds. This, in turn, would have led to its popularization of international, cross-racial “whiteness”, as well as the creation and widespread internalization of discriminatory Fantasy tropes. Seeking to legitimize Fantasy literature studies in academia and beyond, prolific essayists like Lin Carter, Lyon Sprague de Camp, Michael Moorcock, Damon Knight, S.T. Joshi, John Grant and John Clute deal with wildly different subsets of the genre, but all of their writings analyze the genre's legacy, criticize many of its modern masterpieces, and ponder the causes behind its difficult reputation among elites...all while acknowledging the past and present shortcomings of the genre¹⁶⁴. Whilst often unnoticed, or even held in contempt by writers and scholars alike, their contributions have led to generalized recognition and acknowledgement of Fantasy's many, many multifaceted issues with race, misogyny and problematic writing habits. Their work, in many ways, helped to reorient the genre towards more experimental, creativity-driven pastures, and prompted more in-depth studies of what was once seen as nothing more than a childish genre.

Much like Tolkien and Lewis, many other fiction authors also wrote theoretically on Fantasy¹⁶⁵, with Saunders and Delany specifically unpacking Fantasy's racism problem at length. Among others, they proposed hypotheses on how forms of racism found only in Fantasy

¹⁶⁴ And, sadly, if more rarely, criticizing its present-day foibles.

¹⁶⁵ The aforementioned Lin Carter, Michael Moorcock, Damon Knight, and Lyon Sprague de Camp, also fit this bill.

narratives (hatred towards orcs for instance) were at times adopted by real-world Fantasy fiction fandoms, and directed at those they perceived as “intruders” or “corruptors”. Most of the time, this meant non-white, non-male, or non-straight writers and fans of Fantasy. Delany likewise helped move Fantasy¹⁶⁶ away from the “race-blind” utopias many authors wrote of, which he viewed as ignoring deeper debates surrounding race and sexuality. He instead suggested that the genre ought to more closely examine experiences *unique* to people of colour, as these portrayals “become lenses through which to examine all possible avenues for future racial identification.¹⁶⁷” Similarly, much like in *Neveryön*, Delany attempted to unpack the lingering effects that colonialism had on the white Fantasy imaginary. Thus, the author of *Dhalgren* not only proposed studies of themes such as gender and race in Fantasy, but also helped well-meaning (if unaware) authors rework their processes for designing Fantasy worlds, in order to avoid the mistakes of their predecessors. Finally, much like his fiction, Delany’s essays helped pinpoint how races, genders and sexualities that do not fit heteronormative definitions are demonized in Fantasy¹⁶⁸, all while offering new methods for representing issues of race and gender in genre-specific ways that are empowering or thoughtful, rather than dehumanizing.

¹⁶⁶ Not to mention science-fiction.

¹⁶⁷ SANCHEZ-TAYLOR, Joy Ann. *Science Fiction/Fantasy and the Representation of Ethnic of Ethnic Futurity*. Dissertation, University of Florida, 2014, p.2 [ONLINE] HTML: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6498&context=etd> (Page consulted 2017-01-20)

¹⁶⁸ GILMAN, Sander R. “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature”, *‘Race’, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.248

The Dream Lives On

Finally, there is the Fantasy of today, beginning in the mid-nineties, in tandem with the fall of science-fiction. In the swiftly-evolving technological landscape of the 21st-century, scientific discoveries often outpace and surpass science-fiction's ability to speculate about possible futures or alternative societies, causing the genre to lose a great deal of popularity, and, debatably, relevance. As a result of these changes, the two once-conflated genres of Sci-Fi and Fantasy have begun to mesh into a single entity once more in recent years. This time, however, the fusion is more strongly animated by Fantasy's desire to create imaginative landscapes founded in authorial imagination and large-scale worldbuilding, and far less by Sci-Fi's penchant for pseudo-scientific hypotheses. Even so, the latter contributes its more humanitarian and socially-conscious perspectives on the nature of imaginary worlds, and the ethical reinventions humanity must undergo in these unrealistic environments¹⁶⁹. This has led to the popularity of traditional high Fantasy to progressively wane, and to science-Fantasy narratives and aesthetics to become more beloved and more prevalent across almost all mediums. The massive success of *Star Wars*, for instance, confirms science-fiction to be a pivotal influence when it comes to the development of more unfamiliar and expansive Fantasies.¹⁷⁰

With popular culture becoming more globalized and mediatized, the medieval custom of readapting or rewriting famous myths or folk tales has also translated over to modern Fantasy, if under a new guise. Whether the product of capitalism cohabiting with art, or borne from a genuine desire to modernize potentially outdated stories for new audiences, movie, video game

¹⁶⁹ MCCALMONT, Jonathan. "Cowardice, Laziness and Irony : How Science-Fiction Lost the Future", *Ruthless Culture* (Online Essay Collection), Published 2012-10-03. HTML: <https://ruthlessculture.com/2012/10/03/cowardice-laziness-and-irony-how-science-fiction-lost-the-future/> (Page consulted 2016-10-01)

¹⁷⁰ Examples in modern literature include the following. Vaughan and Staples' *Saga* (2012-ongoing) fuses space opera, high Fantasy and war narrative to yield a story about immigration politics, sexuality and the influence of racial heritage on storytelling thanks to a diverse cast of characters; Mark Lawrence's *Prince of Thorns* (2011-2013) sets a high Fantasy epic in a post-apocalyptic world, to provide insightful observations on trauma, sovereignty, international politics, and genre conventions, shown from the perspective of a damaged antihero; Peter Newman's *The Vagrant* (2015) presents a post-apocalyptic future of a Fantasy world, brought to life through minimalist, lyrical writing, displaying imagery and concision rarely seen in most works of Fantasy.

and graphic novel adaptations of existing Fantasies have become common occurrences¹⁷¹. The perfect example of this trend is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which essentially created modern-day reinterpretations of cult superheroes as media mythological figures, leading the multi-billion project to spawn countless imitators and earn the admiration of audiences across the globe. This was further aided by comics' return to ideals of inclusion and progressiveness, the 2010's marking the inclusion of more non-white, transgender and LGBT characters in superhero Fantasies than ever before. This return to roots has also been interpreted as a way for Marvel to create a new, more diverse "lineage" of characters to be adapted in future media properties, more suited to current globalized markets¹⁷². Either way, because of this unprecedented popularity, Fantasy has begun to address social justice themes in ways more relevant to modernity, tailored to accommodate a greater diversity of viewpoints and beliefs than was the case in the past. By touching on issues like immigration, racism, global warming or feminism, modern works of Fantasy ensure that the genre continues to exist at the center of the world's cultural zeitgeist, rather than at its fringe. For this reason, and in distinction to the overly familiar elves-and-dwarves Fantasies of the past that did little more than mirror¹⁷³ status quos of white "superiority" and xenophobic labellings of foreign cultures, the genre can now be seen as returning to its earlier escapist sensibilities, all while addressing relevant social issues in fantastical guises with renewed resolve.

¹⁷¹ The *Lord of the Rings* films, the *Witcher* video games, and the *Wheel of Time* comic books, to name a few.

¹⁷²CHIPMAN, Bob. "The REAL Marvel Agenda", In *Bob We Trust* (Online Video Essay Series). Published 2017-01-23 [ONLINE] HTML: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmXA08jzUfc> (Page consulted 2017-01-30)

¹⁷³ And, sometimes, openly support.

A Second Coming of New Voices

Thus, not only is this the end of Fantasy's "awkward puberty" it period, the present can rightfully be considered a new Golden Age for Fantasy, being both a return to the genre's roots and a deliberate attempt to correct the errors of its elders: not by means of rhetoric, but through the medium of Fantasy fiction itself. We could also view the current period as a renaissance judging by the *amount* and *quality* of the Fantasy being produced, as well as the *diversity* of the Fantasy at hand. And, it is this same diversity, in regards to subject matter, author origins, and even the styles of Fantasy narratives, that has led to the existence of the far more inclusive, accepting, and social-justice defending Fantasy of today. Ellis explains this is because Fantasy can lead to a greater understanding of the newly globalized state of the modern world, describing the act of redefining the global as an act of cooperative dialogue between multiple non-segregated societies and cultures:

"Power of knowing and understanding the past and current milieu comes from the realization that history is not a monolithic structure, but a rhizomic network of resistances and power effects that culminate in a shared, organic history that points the way to future cooperation through mutual understanding.¹⁷⁴"

In short, by moving away from the imposed Eurocentric worldview of Tolkien and his imitators, and towards a kaleidoscopic tapestry of increasingly personal interpretations of Fantasy and social justice, the genre is able to address sociopolitical themes with depth and panache, rather than simply translate authors' perspectives on topics as though they are unquestionable experts of race, gender or politics.

Plus, with an abundance of *translated* non-Western Fantasy¹⁷⁵ available to readers the world over, the genre has progressively abandoned pseudo-Medieval-European worlds as the

¹⁷⁴ ELLIS, Jason W., "Engineering a Cosmopolitan Future: Race, Nation, and World of Warcraft", *The Postnational Fantasy*(ed. Masood Ashraf Raja, Jason W. Ellis and Swaralipi Nandi). Jefferson, McFarland Books, 2011. p.162.

¹⁷⁵ And translated Western Fantasy as well, of course.

standard Fantasy setting *par excellence*, resulting in more drastic reimaginings of foreign or national folklores, the likes of which have not been witnessed for centuries¹⁷⁶. Not only that, but alongside new generations of Fantasists came the greater presence of queer, non-white, non-cis-male Anglophone Fantasy authors, who brought much-needed wrinkles of depth and inclusivity to Fantasy art, literature, games and films, all while reigniting the genre's penchant for creative expression in all aspects of writing, narrative design and worldbuilding, even further straying from earlier Fantasy's habits of "plagiarism"¹⁷⁷. This mirrors Gates' definitions of "Signifyin(g)", in the sense that many of these works could not exist without the genre's prior history of racism; their deconstructive approaches to Fantasy racism and racial representation are powerful *because* they exist in intertextual relation to problematic predecessors, not *despite* them¹⁷⁸. Through this method, modern Fantasy is essentially able to *un-trope* the potentially offensive baggage it has bared for centuries, as well as *re-trope* itself in such a way that it could potentially instill a whole new generic tradition for itself, possibly even a whole new monomythic format. This way, later Fantasies would more easily reiterate on present-day inspirations, and continuously uproot, dismantle, and examine the nature of racism in fantastic *and* real-world contexts. After all, if Tolkien's lineage "poisoned" the popular zeitgeist with outdated racism, who is to say a new lineage of Fantasy could not accomplish the opposite, and rid popular imaginations of lingering, problematic representations or understandings of race?

¹⁷⁶ For instance, Ar Gen's *I Shall Seal the Heavens* (2000-2015) fused western Fantasy's magic systems and epic formats with a Chinese folk-fantasy setting, yielding one of the first ahistorical *wuxias*, whilst Daniel Heath Justice's *Way of Thorn and Thunder* (2011) crafted a world based on Native American myths to produce a narrative that rejects aboriginal oppression, cultural appropriation, and colonialism.

¹⁷⁷ British-Malaysian Zen Cho's *Sorcerer to the Crown* (2015), Jamaican-Canadian Nalo Hopkinson's *Salt Roads* (2003), black woman writer N.K. Jemisin's *Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (2010), transgender author Poppy Z. Brite's *The Crow* (1998), Egyptian-American Saladin Ahmed's *Throne of the Crescent Moon* (2012), to name a few on a lengthening list.

¹⁷⁸ GATES, Henry Louis Jr., *Figures in Black*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p.49.

Boy Wizards, and the Benefits Thereof

Contrary to most expectations, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) is easily the single most revolutionary work of Fantasy in recent history, and in some ways, has proven to be even *more* redefining and zeitgeist-permeating than Tolkien's works. For starters, the record-breaking bestseller helped the genre to free itself from its insecure obsessions with "maturity" – a need first triggered by *Lord of the Rings*' surprise success among adult readerships. This unparalleled success among children and teens¹⁷⁹ triggered the ongoing boom of Young Adult Fantasy, which, in imitation of Rowling, typically aims to make complex concepts, social themes and political issues more accessible to juvenile audiences¹⁸⁰. Because of this, *Harry Potter* marked a return to more whimsical settings over gritty, grim ones, the genre moving away from disillusionment with reality in order to become more of a gateway towards other possibilities of what the world could be, if observed through wild imaginative eyes¹⁸¹. Then, there was Rowling's step away from increasingly unattainable ideals of complexity and depth for Fantasy universes, and her refocus on the idea of revealing the smaller-scale Fantasy, secretly hidden within reality. This helped shift many Fantasies' priorities away from their worlds' *scope*, and reoriented the towards the affect and wonder their worlds could inspire in readers. This similarly led to a resurgence of fantastic and supernatural literature, and to the flourishing of urban Fantasy; a subgenre that regularly deals with themes of discrimination and the creation of community in multi-racial, cosmopolitan environments, whose narratives value diversity, acceptance, and limitless imagination in ways that prior fantasists and Fantasies never did¹⁸².

Urban Fantasy has since grown increasingly popular in recent years, thanks to what Mestiri calls "familiarizing" Fantasy. Urban Fantasy "simulates reality without being faithful to

¹⁷⁹ Coupled to the fact that readers effectively "grew up" alongside series protagonists as they read each new volume upon release.

¹⁸⁰ REAGAN, Maggie. "Writing Fantasy in a Post-*Harry Potter* World: Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On*", *The Booklist Reader* (Online), Published 2015-11-07. HTML: <http://www.booklistreader.com/2015/11/17/young-adult-literature/writing-fantasy-in-a-post-harry-potter-world-rainbow-rowells-carry-on/> (Page consulted 2016-09-21)

¹⁸¹ TEITELBAUM, Stanley H., *Illusion and Disillusionment*, Guilford, Jason Aronson Publisher, 2007, 344 p.

¹⁸² Notable titles include Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake* (1993-2016), Terry Pratchett's *Sam Vines* (1989-2013), and Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* (2001-2012), among others.

the latter's dictates¹⁸³”, making it accessible to new readers, relevant to current discussions of social justice, and organic in its inclusions or deconstructions of institutionalized discrimination. This is because, “as societies become more complex and in certain respects more frustrating, the mesmeric appeal of a simplistic [racializing] ideology¹⁸⁴” remains high...but Urban Fantasy counters this pressure to oversimplify in two ways. First, it places Fantasy racism on the same stage as real-world racism, explicitly comparing one to the other through narrative; this complexifies the debate about race relations, tropes and labels, without making them so dense as to become inaccessible. Second, it inserts these “parallel” situations into contexts that mirror the real world's, so that readers recognize existing signs and traits of institutional racism, rather than needing to relearn wholly new “codes” of racial signifiers. Contrary to Fantasy that attempts to reinvent the social schemas in which racisms are borne, urban Fantasy encourages readers to consider how existing schemas would cope with the introduction of *fictional* racial identities, before demanding them to consider what this means in regards to *real* minorities and ethnic groups, inside and outside the realm of Fantasy.

Third¹⁸⁵, is Rowling's influence on the *form* of Fantasy narratives, which loosened the increasingly bland and repetitive, monomythic storytelling structure the genre had grown accustomed to employing. Following the success of *Harry Potter*, the genre steadily abandoned overused “faux-epic” styles popularized by Tolkien, and adopted structures more akin to that of a Bildungsroman. These offered sweeping tales of protagonists' personal growth and individual, intimate discoveries of the world, rather than theological, authoritarian explications of unreal elements found in fictional universes, as was often the case in Fantasy from the prior generation¹⁸⁶. This fundamental alteration has proven crucial to Fantasy's current transition to forward-thinking and social justice-oriented goals. Slaughter states that “Human rights and the Bildungsroman are mutually enabling fictions: each projects an image of the human personality

¹⁸³ MESTIRI, Asma. *Sign, Meaning and Violence in Laura K. Hamilton's Novels*, Thesis, UdeM, 2014, p. 89

¹⁸⁴ LACAPRA, Dominick. “Introduction”, *The Bounds of Race, Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (ed. Dominick Lacapra), Cornell University Press, New York, 1991, p.1

¹⁸⁵ And, perhaps, most meaningfully.

¹⁸⁶ KHERBERT, Damian. “The Cultural Impact of Harry Potter (Revised)”, *Datacult*, Published 2014-11-03. HTML: <http://www.ericrettberg.com/datacultj1/longer-essays/the-cultural-impact-of-harry-potter/> (Consulted 2016-09-30)

that ratifies the other's vision of the ideal relations between individual and society"¹⁸⁷; meaning, that by presenting a Fantasy universe from the viewpoint of characters who, like readers, discover how the world works for themselves, authors are better able to nuance representations of racism within it, without necessarily implying these descriptions to be irrefutable "scientific" truths. This, allied with the more youth-oriented direction of these Fantasies, encouraged a genre that engaged in overt racial profiling and stereotyping, to instead value diversity and difference in all aspects of humanity, to upend harmful stereotypes imposed by prior Fantasy works, and to create non-exploitative, racially diverse societies in their fictional universes¹⁸⁸.

Coincidentally, many works of non-Fantasy fiction have since crafted narratives centered around Fantasy literature *readers*, depicting the influence the genre can have in these peoples' lives, and examining how it can influence their perceptions of race. The best example here is Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007). In this book, the titular protagonist, upon rereading Tolkien as an adult, finds himself alienated by the novels he once loved as a child, which describe black bodies in the same way as his hostile New Jersey surroundings view and treat him: as monstrous, repulsive, subhuman. But the discovery also teaches Oscar to make peace with his self-loathing and come to terms with the racial identity, the cultural heritage, and the dissatisfying body image he was attempting to reject throughout his childhood. As the novel nears its end, it is implied that the protagonist has been inspired to transform the Fantasy that *he* hoped to write so as to better reflect *his* experiences, not those of a few treasured authors. Thus, though the novel tackles familiar subject matter, demonstrating the impact Eurocentric, racist Fantasy can have on non-white readers, and demonstrating how Fantasy racism can echo real-world discrimination, it is among the first to do so purely through *narrative*. The mere fact a work such as this *exists* is of phenomenal importance, not only in regards to the dynamics between racial representation and Fantasy, but also in having minority writers give personal accounts of this rapport between Fantasy readership and race as opposed to the mostly detached, theoretic breakdowns of mainly white essayistic voices.

¹⁸⁷ SLAUGHTER, Joseph R., "Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The Bildungsroman and International Human Rights Law", *PMLA*, Volume 121, Number 5, October 2006, p.1407

¹⁸⁸ Works like *Percy Jackson* (2005-2009), *Circle of Magic* (1997-99) and *Leviathan* (2009-2011) fall into this category.

Reclaiming the Past

Yet, as if openly contradicting Rowling's influence on the genre, some of the best Fantasies ever written¹⁸⁹, while very recent, are rather "conventional" homages to the swords-and-sorceries and *D&D-esques* of old, that simultaneously dismantle the established traditions of these inspirations. For instance George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-T.B.A.) brought a Dark Fantasy aesthetic to a High Fantasy epic, yielding a grim narrative based on history and realistic portrayals of war and politics. The series both thoroughly de-romanticizes the dark ages that so many fantasists ignorantly glorify, and offers uncompromising, critical close-ups of the racism, sexism and slaughter that permeated those centuries, both from the perspectives of those that experience and inflict it firsthand¹⁹⁰. The series also offers clever insights on how real-world sexist and racist violence is idolized in Fantasy, demonstrating how the genre is capable of analyzing, representing, and deconstructing these bigotries. Meanwhile, Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind* (2007) combines elements of biography and ballad to yield a Fantasy epic reminiscent of old sagas, as opposed to the wordy, clumsy prose of modern blockbusters, doubling as a complex, detailed character piece. Likewise, Stan Nicholl's *Orcs* (1999-2004) weaves a fairly predictable Tolkienesque tale of "free races" fighting the goblinoid forces of a Dark Lord...but, in this case, the story is told from the perspective of the discriminated Orcs, as seen in *Lord of the Rings*. The novel portrays their crass, temperamental ways as humane, informed by a unique culture and history, in contrast to the white races' borderline robotic, psychopathic disposition towards annihilating coloured "enemies". This list of titles could go on *much* longer, as most modern authors who prefer Fantasy's traditional forms typically challenge the genre's conventions purposefully, to tell new stories, promote new values better suited to the modern world's needs, and reinvigorate the genre.

¹⁸⁹ Debatable, of course.

¹⁹⁰ Though one could argue that the series has been more than questionable in its portrayal of sexual violence and its treatment of foreign cultures, in most cases, this is more often a result of the now-infamous TV adaptation's divisive changes to the source material, and much less a result of overt misogyny or xenophobia in Martin's original work. Still, this is once case where further research, if not further theses, could be dedicated to unravelling the topic.

Predictably, however, problematic racial representations in Fantasy have not been (nor will likely ever be) completely eliminated. Despite changes in trends and tropes over the years, the generic traditions established by modern Fantasy's precursors have persisted in such a way that, rather than just repeat the outdated racism of older Fantasy narratives, some present-day works actually *update* these discriminatory subtexts, depicting current modes of racism or xenophobia in imagination-laden robes.¹⁹¹ While this can sometimes lead to interesting perspectives on globalized conceptualisations of racism (especially in regards to immigration), or allow us to consider sociopolitical race dilemmas from new angles, this also means authors and readers run the risk of re-establishing some of the genre's most damaging tropes; tropes that we've only barely begun to subvert. As a result, I must reiterate: Fantasy in and of itself is *not* responsible for its problematic racial representations. *We* are. Therefore, to ensure that the genre remains a powerful, relevant, and inspiring subset of world literature, it is our unanimous responsibility to prevent Fantasy from ever losing track of its purpose again. The genre must *become* and *remain* a tool to reimagine the real world from all angles. It must lead us to re-examine societies and cultures in relation to new ethics, all while remaining a source of escapism that *anyone* can enjoy, not just for the amusement of a white, male chosen few.

¹⁹¹ For instance, British author Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* (2006-2008) depicts a war between a divided nation, that, at times explicitly references the American Civil War. The GURKISH people of the south are all (without exception) dark-skinned religious fanatics with pseudo-Arabian names that create cannibalistic revenants, bent on the dominion of the world and the enslavement or annihilation of the white peoples to the north: unsurprisingly, protagonists' home. The parallel to modern-day islamophobia is explicit, as are references to real-world narratives of racially-motivated wars, showing that the genre's relationship to race is ever-changing, but not always in the right direction.

Explaining the “Chapters of the Pale”

The creative portion of this thesis aims to prove that oft-maligned Fantasy tropes can be reconfigured in order to address racial representation with dignity and respect, in ways that conventional literature cannot. That said, my goal is also to produce a work of professionally publishable quality that corresponds to previously established definitions of Fantasy: a complex worldbuilding narrative focused primarily on escapism. The work is set on an unnamed continent, in the years following a war that has damaged relations between four Tribes. The Ithians of the East, an Empire of silver-skinned, tentacled amphibianoids bent on territorial, political and industrial expansion; the Granvull of the West, large carnivores resembling fusions of lions and reptiles, their culture steeped in patriarchal warrior values; the Yuvei of the South, genderless, bipedal plant-like insects, once-wielders of Magic and lovers of art; and the Kalleed of the North, white-haired, gray-skinned, long-tailed beings known for their resilience and sense of family honor. As a result of the war, the world is infected by a phenomenon known as “The Pale” – a sheet of opaque white energy that blots out sun and sky. The Pale has not only devoured the Magic of the world, but rains fire upon the continent and renders the air toxic, forcing all Tribes to reside in the Ithian-run Imperial Capital.

The creative portion is comprised of four nonchronological chapters that detail smaller-scale events from the perspectives of various Tribe members, coping with the war’s aftermath and the impact it has had on their perception as racialized bodies, in this new, globalized, racializing world. This structure allows for the elaboration of a more complex fictional world, as well as an examination of multiple individual viewpoints on race. This way, I can depict and deconstruct various experiences of racism and racial identity organically, without tactlessly appropriating the position of an existing minority group. What’s more, chapters are stylistically different, each echoing a particular era of Fantasy literature’s themes, styles, and aesthetics. Much as the genre’s defining features shifted over time, here too, stories change shapes as they address new racial representation problematics. Similarly, the multiple species will allow for a more diverse representation of race and racial issues, and will allow the creative portion to touch upon themes such as sex and gender, in relation to race.

Likewise, in a bid to avoid the typical pitfalls of racial representation in Fantasy, I designed the Ithians, Granvull, Yuvei and Kalleed so no Tribe would be seen as the allegorical equivalent of an actual ethnic group. Rather, they act as broad representations of institutionally racist discourses and racializing mechanisms, found in both Fantasy and reality, that each story aims to upend in some way. Specifically, I tried to mirror Saunders and Delany's approaches to discussing race in Fantasy, by means of making the racism that exists in their narratives exclusive to these fictional worlds. These authors do not "merely 'flip' the somatic markers of their protagonists" so that the dynamics of racism are reversed, "but rather create worlds in which the racial logics that structure so many Fantasy worlds do not exist."¹⁹² My goal is to replicate this process, so that no Tribe might be interpreted as an offensive reference to a pre-existing stereotype. Nor do I try to impose real-world modes of racism onto these Fantasy species. Instead, I meant to depict a version of institutional racism exclusive to *Ithians*, and set up diverse forms of racializing discourse that could be addressed or deconstructed at greater lengths in different chapters. This naturally results in a greater diversity of characters' self-perceptions as racialized bodies, as they are both forced to define themselves in relation to other races, but also as individuals that might be perceived as racial entities amongst their own kind. Finally, I tried to ensure that the "racial signifiers" used by the Empire remain based on differences defined according to the tribes' relations to their *own* bodies, and not human bodies, in order to further emphasize the way racial signifiers can be arbitrarily, or even artificially, defined. In doing so, I also hope to discredit lingering theories of scientific racism from a new angle. By creating a context where multiple sapient, non-human species coexist, I wanted to depict institutionalized racism as arbitrary "laws" imposed by those coded "normal", and prove that "race-as-biology" or "race-as-species" arguments *cannot* be evoked when denying ethical treatment of different cultures or "races", in fiction or in reality, so as to turn the arguments of racialism against themselves.

The first Chapter follows an Ithian war veteran, Lady Cioh, confronted by the consequences of her actions as a soldier and writer. Her story acts as an "introduction" to later chapters, establishing the baselines of the Fantasy universe, hinting at its history and the nature of the racism within. It is also divided into two parts: one transcribes Cioh's influential

¹⁹² YOUNG, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, Routledge, New York, 2015, p.47

propaganda written prior to the war, the other focuses on Cioh's present, and her guilt upon witnessing the discrimination she helped propagate. In this sense, the story is inspired by my experience as a Fantasy aficionado, looking back at works I once loved that contain racist subtexts I was unaware of at the time, and that I unintentionally included in my writing. Stylistically, the Chapter recalls the Fantasy written between the publication of *Phantastes* and the heydays of *Weird Tales*. The "history" segment emulates a bombastic, fascist version of Dunsany's writing, while the "present" half offers a more disillusioned view of the world, closer to what was found in pulp magazines, veering into existential horror comparable to Lovecraft. Cioh herself is at a particular juncture, being a pureblood Ithian, but described in the same dehumanizing terms as the other Tribes. This reflects both her alienation from her own kind, and her distance from the goals of the Ithian Empire. Likewise, the expositional worldbuilding offered by the "history" portion will be contradicted and questioned by Cioh (as well as in later chapters), encouraging readers to look below the surface, and make sense of the racial issues plaguing the world from an interpretative viewpoint.

The second chapter follows a female Granvull warrior, Stroltzkin. During the Ithian-Granvull War, she rescues Veo Ru, a Yuvei refugee, and the two grow closer, learning of one another's aspirations, shared distaste of the war, and progressively cast away the blind racial hatred it has encouraged. Due to Stroltzkin being harshly discriminated against for being a woman that wants to adopt a "male-only" social role, she is made into a racial body among her kind, much in the same way as the albino Veo Ru, echoing the conflation of gender and race in Fantasy¹⁹³. The story willfully opens with an exaggerated battle scene, only to shift focus to themes of peaceful reconciliation, in direct criticism of older Fantasy's absolutist good-versus-evil mentalities and romanticizing of war. The text also emulates Tolkien-era Fantasy by paying homage to the author's themes and writing while willfully contrasting his conservative leanings and at-times problematic depictions of race with the more progressive values of lesser-known contemporaries. In a way, this is a reflection of the story itself, depicting two outcasts embroiled in an event of global proportions, who discover keys to mutual respect and self-acceptance on their own terms. The chapter also refers to the "Book of Lost Heroes", a bible-like text that

¹⁹³ HASLAM, Jason. *Gender, Race, and American Science-Fiction: Reflections of Fantastic Identities*, Routledge, New York, 2015, 248 p.

Stroltzkin begins to interpret differently as she gains perspective, not unlike how Tolkienesque Fantasy has been reimagined for the better in modern Fantasy.

The third chapter focuses on a Kalleed Shipyard worker, Elrec, recounting the death of his father Vellenge, detailing how they chose different paths that ultimately led to their falling out. The contrast in perspectives between the two is meant to illustrate how people labelled “the same race” perceive their situations as “Others” or racial identities differently, nuancing the race-related themes of this fictional world rather than simplifying them, reflecting the move away from black-or-white, good-or-evil of more recent Fantasies. The story is also told in stylized, *film noir*-like first-person narration, an atypical Fantasy form meant to echo the arrival of revolutionary black voices like Saunders and Delany onto the whitewashed Fantasy literature scene of the 1980’s, while also demonstrating the range the genre can have. This narrative focus is also meant to show one man’s *personal* experience with post-Pale racism, rather than a story that portrays the issue globally or attempts to *explain* it, mirroring how Fantasy’s growing maturity in the late 1900’s allowed it to address social issues more carefully or pointedly, rather than solely focusing on large-scale epics. Similarly, the story is grittier, more violent, and more realistic than other chapters, with a more disillusioned outlook on issues that riddle this world. My goal is to translate the tone, themes and subject matter seen in slave narratives or proletarian fiction, much like how other works of the late 80’s emulated forms like war fiction¹⁹⁴, in such a way that the fantastical does not interfere with discussions of racial representation and identity, but rather reframes them.

The final chapter is told from the perspective of Sol Raya, a half-Yuvei, half-Ithian Magician, in an era where Magic is slowly returning to the land, and the magically gifted are persecuted by the Empire in holocaustic fashion. The narrative depicts Sol Raya’s evolving perception of the world and its racism, from childhood to death, in Bildungsroman form; comparable to coming-of-age story tales found in many post-Rowling Fantasies. Similarly, the chapter recalls Y.A. fiction in writing *and* plot. This means Sol Raya’s tale offers more clear-cut exposition and straightforward language with fewer ambiguous allegories, and features much more explicit examinations of racial representation, putting it at the forefront of the story.

¹⁹⁴ As seen in Glenn Cook’s *Black Company* books.

Likewise, the focus on the new racially-charged climate aimed at Magicians has the dual role of simplifying the complex networks of racial representation earlier stories dealt with, while simultaneously adding another layer of depth to the Empire's process of institutionalizing racism, and characters processing their own individual racial identities. Sol Raya himself is a peculiar case, both privileged citizen of the Empire and powerful Magician, making his depicted experiences as both member and outcast of Ithian society more complex, and justifying his at-times difficult rapport with the Empire's politics of legalized discrimination. Similarly, just like how authors such as Rothfuss or Cho reworked traditional Fantasy tropes to explore new storytelling avenues and address more contemporarily relevant social issues, the fourth chapter directly references the current sociopolitical climate surrounding race in North America, primarily Black Lives Matter movements and the resurgence of white supremacy. Once again, the imaginary elements of the narrative are not meant to demean, but to magnify themes of race, allowing them to be deconstructed and criticized in ways that are only be attainable as a result of Fantasy's defining tropes and features.

CREATIVE PORTION

CHAPTERS OF THE PALE

First Chapter:

INHERITANCE

Every day the same sky, for years upon years, Cioh sighed.

Beyond the rattling confines of the carriage, the noontide sky was a uniform shade of bright white, lined with uneven fissures of black, like cracks in an eggshell. No clouds, no sun, no wind nor rain. Just endlessly white light, looming low. A barrier between heaven and earth, eyeless, yet forever watching. Light, sky, continent: all of them now belonged to the Pale.

The Pale. The miasma that ended the war, changed the world, poisoned the earth. The sorcery that engulfed the planet in noxious flames, scorched the earth bare, turned the air toxic, and transformed all life into diseased abominations riddled with crystal growths. Now, only the Imperial Capital remained safe from the Pale's grasp, shielded by the great spell-barrier walls.

The last remnants of the world would forever witness the Pale lurking above, blotting out the sun and moon in a sea of burning pallor. Every day the same sky, for years upon years.

Damned Pale is the only thing that never seems to grow old these days, Lady Cioh mused, fingertips clenching the cushions of her seat tightly, the edge of her amputated leg faintly numb as the drummer-boy cadence of Hoof-Wolves' gallops made the landau lurch and creak.

Despite the Empire's self-aggrandizing claims of its fair City's absolute impeccability, the uneven, half-shattered paving stones of the Imperial Capital's winding roadways made for a bumpy ride past age-worn shopfronts. Every pothole sent throbbing shivers of phantom pain up the former soldier's prosthetic leg and rattling down her weary body's arthritic bones. Her long-delayed return to the Ithian Royal Academy had, thus far reminded her of the deployment caravans they rode to the frontlines of the Granvull War. As her beast-pulled landau tore through the streets, portly chauffeur swearing at a limping Kalleed pedestrian who'd barely jumped out of the way, the aging Ithian felt as though she was witnessing a slow slideshow of the Empire's legacy - her legacy - through cracked glass.

Malnourished, spindly Granvull beggars pleaded wealthy-looking Ithians for coins with shaking, malformed hands. Their once-shimmering manes had faded, and their armored scales were flaking away from many a hungry winter spent roaming the gutters for crumbs...Not to mention the decades spent eating a meatless diet of rubbery protein feed.

Sick Kalleed children entranced by the window display of a sweets shop, their emaciated russet-skinned mothers pulling them away from the stores and the eyes of the disapproving bakers. They held balding tails between their legs as they rushed back to their Ithian employer, who hollered to keep laying paving stones if they hoped to get paid.

Halberd-wielding Imperial Soldiers held pleading Yuvei buskers at spearpoint, wringing the gangly-limbed insectoids' pistils. The reasons for their arrest was unclear, but Cioh was convinced they were to be condemned to the dungeons without trial, as they must have been accused of participating in illegal Magic-related practices that hadn't taken place since the Pale.

Beautiful, wide-hipped and chrome-skinned Ithian noblewomen wandered the streets in opulent garbs, giggling and chattering the day away as though they did not notice the sufferings at every street corner. Giddily, they entered stonewall taverns, inns and banks with bold-lettered signs proudly advertising themselves as Ithian-only establishments. Cioh recognized the disclaimers at window bottoms warning any immigrant Tribes of the legal – and sometimes illegal – repercussions of disobeying an Imperial law. She'd made the mistake of offering an old Kalleed woman tea at a pub, once. It had been the very first time since the War's end that she'd seen someone die.

The carriage lurched, and the former soldier's eyes flickered upwards.

The Pale stood watch over the fascinating mess beneath it, immobile and eternal in its cruel grandeur. Cioh could not bring herself to look at it. The Pale hurt to look at, as though it knew what she did, knew how she hurt. She wanted to yell that *they* made her do it, that all she wanted to do was make amends, that she had not wished this when she signed up for the army. But it was far, far too late for that now. Now, there were too many people in too small and too dirty a city, with nowhere else to go except the flesh-melting wastelands just beyond city walls too tall to climb. "The flowerless fields, where the desperate die alone", the famous poem went.

Alone, except for the Pale, that is. That all-seeing, all-consuming Pale.

When they'd first told Cioh her career on the battlefield would change the world, this...*debauchery*, was not what she'd had in mind. It was hard to tell if there'd been any change at all, really, beyond the colour of the sky, and the starving immigrants hunted down for being hungry. It was easy to be called a hero for killing them, back when she knew nothing. Now that she knew more than she wanted, the dead faces of strangers would not let her sleep at night.

This wasn't your fault, she hummed to her mind. *You didn't know. You didn't want this.*

She was not sure that she could still believe herself. *They'd* done too much to her.

The driver rapped his knuckles against the carriage roof, warning that they would be arriving soon.

Cioh sighed. She was not looking forward to this day. She would have rather never gone back there. She did not want to see *him*, and she did not want to lie again. To the students, or to anyone else. But homelessness in the Capital was terrifying to consider, reminders were everywhere, and coin was hard enough to come by as it was. Moral integrity was a powerful force, Cioh learned, but not powerful enough to buy food or shelter.

Begrudgingly, the Ithian observed herself in the carriage's mirror one last time. Fist-sized black eyes sat still, sunk deep into sockets, lightless and tired. Sleepless dark circles were dug beneath like wartime trenches. The surface of her silver face was less reflective than in the past, even with so much polishing makeup applied. The two large tentacles on the back of her skull were wrapped together in a long, twisting braid, pulled to the front of her chest. Her slender figure was hidden in a loose, long-sleeved red dress, that hid the wizened dullness of her aging flesh and unalluring thinness...and yet, one could still make out the sharp contours of her collarbones, and the awkward bulk of her prosthetic leg, even through layers of crimson velvet.

She looked sick, and had been ever since war's end. She looked old, and was older than most Ithians got the opportunity to be since the Pale. She looked like she'd seen more than most ever would, and had seen more than most ever should. She didn't look the way an Ithian ought, and she rarely felt like one anymore. But she looked the part of the proud soldier as well, properly compensated for her years of service, if a bit worse for wear. She looked the part of an honor student of generations past, returning to make a triumphant, didactic speech on Ithian patriotism and military interventions. People would believe her when she'd lie about feeling fulfilled by a life as a soldier. People would believe her when she said the Empire had done nothing but good, that non-Ithians had done nothing but steal, betray and lie. It would do.

Not like they'd believe me if I told them it was the Empire's fault anyway, she grunted.

As the landau came to a steady halt, Cioh wrenched her tightened fist open to reach for her cane and adjust the folds of her garb. With some luck, maybe she could find some way of concealing the contour of her artificial appendage when she stood.

But, as she leaned forward, it happened again.

Heat surged through her veins, starting from the tips of her limbs and moving towards the middle of her chest. Her breath went short as the burning feeling swelled, intensifying with every explosive heartbeat, and soon turned to a blaze of agony. Cioh felt her eyes water and her fingers dig into her chest as though trying to rip the pain out. Her mouth opened wide. No sound followed. There were only the fear-thoughts, the ones that came every time the pain struck.

Her first was always half-contemplative, half-mourning: *This is how those Kalleed in the Shipyards would die, isn't it? How they still die. How they still let them die.*

The second was always half-panicked, half-hopeful: *Is this one going to be it?*

The carriage door swung open, almost tearing off its hinges. The portly Ithian chauffeur clambered into the vehicle, one hand holding a handkerchief to Cioh's mouth, the other pulling Cioh's away from her flesh. He was strong, but shaking.

Cioh felt herself begin to cough up blood. The fire in her intestines faded as she hacked a scorching mouthful into the cloth, lips scalding from the fluid's touch. The driver flinched when he felt the heat coming off the liquid, but held the kerchief steady - either out of dedication, or out of fear of making a mess of the chariot. Every time Cioh spat blood, she felt herself go weaker, colder, as if submerged in ice water, despite air slowly returning to her lungs. The attack barely lasted a few seconds this time. And yet Cioh suddenly felt as though she'd had not slept for days, again.

"Thank you," she wheezed, teeth numb, tongue drenched in a spicy, spoiled food taste.

Blight this damned day, she added for herself.

The man simply nodded without looking, eyes transfixed by the substance in his palms.

Cioh's blood was pure white, peerless, and thicker than paint: the same white as the Pale. The blood bubbled wildly in the handkerchief, writhing as though alive. Alive, and in horrible, horrible pain. Thick plumes of steam rose from its surface as the boiling settled with a creaking hiss, leaving a smell of burnt chemicals. Soon, the blood began to congeal quickly, hardening into a small, flat, white crystal inside the scrap of cloth, all in a matter of moments.

"White above," the man cursed under his breath, giant black eyes growing even bigger than typical for Ithians. The knife-sized gemstone in his hand transfixed him was fascinated disgust, awed horror. It must have been his first time seeing the Milkbleed in person.

Cioh groaned as though the thought of the name sickened her more than the disease itself. She recognized the uncomfortable fear in the man's eyes, but wished she hadn't. It was

as if he'd been looking at something disturbingly unnatural. Like a Yuvei with all its mandibles. Or a Kalleed that had not shaved its head. As the former soldier contemplated just how furious the thought made her, she noticed the man open and close his lips, incapable of speaking.

"No disrespect, dear Lady Cioh," he asked, after much hesitation, trying not to look at the still-warm crystal in his palms. "but...it's not one of those...contagious ones...is it?" The man spoke slow, stuttering, as though his question ought not be asked, even though its answer desperately wanted to be heard.

Of course, this question comes first, Cioh snarled, grabbing her cane and preparing to exit the landau without answering. And yet you wonder why they ask in the first place - if I were to lie and tell him "yes", what good would it do for him to know, besides knowing? Scared fools, the lot of them. Only care when it's about themselves, not those at their city doors still screaming to come inside. Damn Empire does its job so well, it has too many fools to run the city right.

Before she could make it through the door, however, something opened it from the outside, and then came an unpleasantly syrupy voice the former soldier was all too familiar with.

"You'll *have* to excuse me for being so brash, Lady Cioh," Director Luid said, something in his tone suggesting he was, somehow, eerily pleased to witness by the woman's suffering. "I was wondering what would prompt your gentleman here to *need* to rush to your rescue, and simply *had* to know if everything was alright...Everything *is* alright, isn't it?"

The stagecoach was simply big. Luid was magnificently obese. Wide as he was tall, the man was well-fed and well-rested to the point of appearing immortal, silver skin twinkling in the Palelight like that of a man twenty years younger. There was androgynous beauty to his pear-shaped face that made one suspect he could have worked as a model, had he not accepted the lucrative post of Academy Dean. His thin-lipped smile appeared riveted in place, and the tight fabric of his collants highlighted the shapeliness of fat, healthy legs that many students had no doubt fantasized about. Even Cioh, despite her hatred, could not help find Luid gorgeous.

Everything about him felt like a provocation. A taunt made flesh by the power of the Pale. Not envy, but sheer outrage towards the unshakeable feeling that she was being mocked by his gaze. Cioh wondered if she could have remained just as beautiful as he had, were it not for the Milkbleed, for the burning air of the Pale she'd inhaled like white fire, that day.

Because of *him*. Because of *them*. Because of all the lies both had made her believe.

“Everything’s fine, Director,” she replied, voice trembling more than she’d meant. “Had a bit of an episode is all. Bit of rest and I’ll be fine. Though I’d have an easier time making it through the door if you weren’t standing so squarely in the middle of it.”

Luid’s smile widened, but something about the grin made the chauffeur flinch, in the same way as when he’d seen Cioh’s ashen blood. She had never cared for Luid’s prinked manners, which he seemed to wear like a mask of flensed skin over his true face. Luid stepped out of the way, holding the door ajar for his guest of honor, offering a slight bow of condolence. The gesture was theatrical enough to seem sarcastic, but not to the point of appearing intentionally spiteful. The man clearly remained a sly performer, if not a genuine one.

As the driver helped Lady Cioh down, she felt her knees buckle under her own weight. The Milkbleed stroke had obviously taken more out of her than she’d anticipated. Age was becoming as great a handicap as the illness itself, let alone the missing limb. Still, when Luid offered her an arm as support, she walked past him, groggy in her movements, iron leg stomping and black ivory cane clacking against the paving stones out of sync. She’d rather risk a fall than that man’s pity, now that she’d already fallen so far. The Academy’s Dean chuckled.

“You’ll at least *have* to allow me to lead you in the correct direction then. Right this way.” Luid’s grin thinned and stretched as he moved past her, his snide pride like a beacon.

From behind, she overheard the chauffeur nervously mumble – something about wishing her luck at the conference and that he’d be back to retrieve her by dinnertime – before snapping his beasts’ reins and leading the caravan back towards the Capital’s main streets.

Part of Cioh prayed her life wouldn’t last that long.

“As you *must* plainly see,” Luid slurred, his tone matching the dramatic sweep of his arms, “the Academy *has* remained one of the Imperial Capital’s most gorgeous vistas, despite the influence of the Pale. In fact, I’d argue the white above *has* only made our campus stand out as a pinnacle of Ithian civilization even more. You simply *have* to agree, don’t you, my Lady?”

Cioh refused to give Luid the answer he craved, but could not deny the truth in his words either. The Royal Ithian Academy was glorious, even more so than in the past.

Whilst most of the Capital seemed overpopulated, awash in dust and shades of slop, the Academy was bursting with colour, and felt like an isolated sanctuary. Massive classroom buildings were shaped like oversized cathedrals, carved from white marble and detailed with rows of skull-sized pearls. Clean, pink-and-grey bricks drew coiling networks of smooth, curving paths through emerald grasses and flowerbeds. Groups of plump Ithians in sky blue uniforms ate sitting on the lawns, faces sparkling with light and laughter. Even in the distance, the great black Barrier Wall of the Imperial Capital seemed like a beautiful shield meant to keep safe this haven.

If it weren't for steel panels reading NON-ITHIAN TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT and cohorts of Imperial Crossbowmen, she might have felt proud to witness such lavishness in the War's wake. But by the time she remembered the Pale was still there, glaring down from up above, stalking her every move with a venomous smile, the Academy's beauty made her nauseous. As she noticed gray-skinned Kalleed in groundskeeper uniforms shaking from exhaustion, the place suddenly felt like an epitaph to her failures, a tribute to what the Empire had made her do.

No wonder *he* felt at home here.

Cioh noticed Luid's smirk slacken at the corners. The Dean seemed to have noticed the woman's eyes, or perhaps, was upset by his employees disheveled looks. It was hard to tell, as his disdain of Cioh and his disdain of Kalleed were practically identical. Luid whipped around again, tails of his coat spinning with him, and pointed to a church lined with Imperial flags.

"That happens to be the auditorium where you *will* be delivering the seminar you *have* prepared for our bright young minds today. I'm sure you *must* already know the place well, considering the standing ovation you received upon presenting us your sermon those years ago. Such raucous glee there was! On that note, I myself *must* admit that I am curious to hear what you will *have* to say on the benefits of military enrollment! I may *have* been an army man myself, but I can't possibly imagine I'd be able to present a speech as patriotic, instructive and moving as yours *will* be today. Especially on the subject of international policies! It will be fascinating to hear how your mastery of the field has expanded since the redaction of your proposals for Tribal labour equality, controversial as they were. Might you be planning to discuss the Emperor's recent proposal of strengthening the registration process for non-Ithian immigration, or...?"

Cioh struck her cane against the road, cracking a flimsy paving stone down the middle. In the distance, pair of students lewdly wrapping their tentacles together under an oak tree ceased their display of affection, startled. Cioh's anger shivered with sick, upon recalling her and Luid used to do the same when they studied here. How was it she had ever loved such a man?

"Director," she said, hoarse-voiced, "I'd prefer if you spared me the florid euphemisms. I'm here to do a charlatan's job, and I'd rather not be given false praise for false efforts."

Cioh's words were so unexpected, the man's feet and smile froze instantly. Luid's expression remained unchanged as he faced his fellow veteran once more, but something beneath his polite facade had changed, and drastically so. Perhaps it was the way the muscles of his thighs seemed to clench together beneath his taut pantaloons, as though readying a kick.

"You'll *have* to pardon me," the man asked, a jagged edge suddenly visible beneath the honeyed lull of his speech, "but what exactly do you mean to imply your purpose is?"

"Same as your scholars' and the same as the Empire's, Director," she replied plainly. Luid's eyes twitched, but he kept quiet, pretending to be amused. Cioh went on. "Sophistries and propaganda. Pure and simple. I know what I'm here for, and what you want me here for. I'd even be willing to believe some of your students know, if they happen to be as brilliant as you claim them to be. Just be informed I'm neither stupid nor insensitive enough to remain ignorant. I know full well why I'm being paid so much for so little. I've attended enough 'mandatory conscription conferences' in my younger years to know exactly what you need of me today."

She sighed before resuming, the deep breath reminding her that there were limits to what she could say to an Ithian in Luid's position without facing consequences. She needed this money. She needed it, her honor be blighted. Dignity alone would not keep a roof over her head long, much less the kind of dignity the Empire would not buy.

"Please. Give me time to recover, and a sizeable portion of your young minds here will enlist as soldiers by day's end. Believe me when I say your school will receive the continued financial support from the military it needs. A small percentage of graduates is all it takes, and a little showmanship from a war hero will earn it. So please, cease this pretence of ignorance. I find it offensive and indecorous to witness a former subordinate acting so falsely coy."

Luid went stiff as she spoke, different hues of black hate dancing in his eyes. The mention of the past, of his status once being beneath hers, revealed old angers, honed by decades of envy and insecurity. It was the only part of the man that looked its age. For a moment, Cioh

wondered if the Dean would finally snap, lunge at her and give the woman an excuse to break his teeth. But by the end, the Director was beaming, guffawing as he resumed his leisurely walk.

“If, you do so insist, Lady Cioh, I’ll gladly *have* to. To oblige. To oblige you.”

Cioh noted the fingers on Luid’s old sword hand had begun to jitter like insect legs, and even the man’s voice had begun to nervously jerk in places it did not previously. There was a moment of silence as calm took it’s time returning to the Dean’s face, before Luid spoke again.

“But, on that note, I *must* apologize for not recommending that you rest before you *have* to attend the evening’s main event. To be sure that you do not flounder. Or faint from the effort. I realize you *must* be quite drained after *having* such an unexpected struggle. Milkbleed not an easy ailment to live with, let alone to *have* it at such an...advanced...age. So please, you *have* to let me offer you comfort, somewhere you can let strength renew your limbs, at the very least. I insist. For the sake of my school, and for the sake of the Ithian Army.”

Sharp tongue, but a sharp tongue that speaks the truth, she resentfully conceded, struggling more than ever to keep up with the Director’s great strides.

Luid took a sudden right, moving towards a stocky mausoleum-esque edifice. Cioh could feel a difference in the brick path leading up to the colourless place, an unintentional unevenness of the surfaces beneath her metal foot, betraying feelings of disregard for the place.

“I’ll *have* someone prepare you a private seat in the Library. Quietest place on the grounds, of course. And cozy, if I do say so myself. The books will be a nice distraction as well, I’m sure. Seeing so much knowledge in one place always kindles my heart, personally. Oh, I *must* apologize! I keep forgetting you *had* been a student here as well. How time runs. Maybe you’ll recall some of your days as a scholar, surrounded by such knowledge, once again!”

And then, Cioh heard Luid whisper something that was not intended for her ears.

“Maybe you’ll remember why you ought to repeat what you’ve been told, crippled slag.”

The Library was nothing like Cioh remembered, yet far too familiar as well.

She’d expected a peaceful, private, modest room; the kind she had spent hours penning her graduation sermon in, back when she attended. She just needed a comfortable chair that would allow her to lie back, to let bones decompress between muscles. Just enough room to remove her prosthetic and let the zigzag scars on her severed thigh breathe, without garnering

unwanted stares. Just enough silence to drift to sleep for a few minutes, without overhearing a clatter that would send her back to the frontlines for a few, fearsome seconds.

What Cioh got was a dim, cramped corner in a rigid steel seat of concerning fragility. The chair seemed to have gotten stuck between the heaving mass of the desk and a nearby pillar, holding Cioh's stomach so close to the table's edge, she felt suffocated. Even by struggling with all her might, till the white heat of her blood climbed up her throat and into her brow, she could barely move, let alone undo the bolts and clasps that tied the now-agonizing weight of her prosthetic to the stump of her limb. If anything, the damned leg felt as though it was welded to the wall, more immovable and alien to her body than ever. She had been seated behind rows of leather-bound history works that loomed over her like the dead ghosts of her butchered past. The titles etched in gold along their spines coldly smiled at her, in a towering wall of inanimate grins. The smiles seemed to claw at her insides in the same way as Luid's, as the Pale's.

Worst of all, however, was how the Library looked, smelled and sounded like a catacomb. Humid darkness flooded the place, shadows so thick the air felt as dense as water. Somehow, the Library was claustrophobically small and nightmarishly enormous all at once. Shelves and desks were crammed so close there was barely room to move between them, whilst the ceiling reached so high Cioh couldn't tell if there even *was* one, draped as it was in inky shade. The blue candles on every table and the fading azure-flamed lamps lining the walls did little to stifle the gloom. Their eerie glow basked the building's confines in an otherworldly shimmer, light that rippled across cast-iron bookshelves like Palelight atop water. Worst still, was the whispers and footsteps of students conducting last-minute research, their voices a choking, soft, ghastly music. At times, Cioh could make out a few breathless words, as though the Library itself was mocking her:

...hate them...She did...why...almost done, almost done...why did...they left...find it...

Were they speaking to her? Were they talking to themselves? Was there any difference?

Maybe you'll remember why you ought to repeat what you've been told.

Luid's words clung to Cioh's insides like Milkbleed pains.

The veteran clutched at her heart. Her fingertips reddened from heat as they touched her skin, hinting the inevitability of a nearby stroke.

The damned trenches on trebuchet days were more comforting than this, she brooded. Even her thoughts felt slow and fiery in her mind now. Lady Cioh's pulse throbbed quickly,

painfully. She could perceive the shape of her veins as whitened blood pumped through them, swelling and shrinking, brightening and darkening. The Milkbleed burnt, but her fear of being back in this place, back in the place where it all began, was smouldering.

There was no way this crypt of ink and paper would let her rest, and there was a good chance Luid had been counting on it. Whether the goal was to insult or to re-educate, Cioh was unsure, but she had no doubts that the Director intended to wear her down...and, sadly, the man's scheme was working.

Had she been able to squirm free, Cioh would have left the Academy immediately, without warning or ceremony, and cancelled her "conference" altogether. Blight the personal expense, blight the Empire's compensation; she'd sleep better knowing she'd refuse to stoke the Ithians' hatreds further, for once in her life. And yet, part of her knew this was exactly what Luid wanted. To see her crumble, to prove that weakness and hatred of the Empire's ways were simply one and the same. Even now, she couldn't help but picture *his* inanimate smirk in her mind, an expression the myriad books before her seemed all too eager to replicate.

In frustration, or perhaps anguish, the former soldier lashed at the tomes with her cane. Several tumbled over, hitting the ground with cracking *snaps* of leather covers against tile, the whiplash noise startling faraway whispers into stunned silence. Even the voice of the books felt haunting, like the sound of footsteps in the trenches, of her hazmat-helmet shattering, of her thighbone cracking under a Granvull's axe, of Luid running, while everyone stayed to fight...

Choke on the white above forever, Luid! You craven deserter! she screamed at her mind.

Cioh reached for a black-coated book that had fallen next to her. She would throw it across the hall, the way Luid had thrown his sword behind as the Granvull tore through the barricades, into Ithian bones. The way she'd thrown her protective helmet off to beat her crippler to death with it, before inhaling a breath of Pale that set fire to her guts. The way she'd thrown the doctor against the ground when he told her they'd already removed her leg upon awakening, the white blaze in her belly still painfully hot. The way she'd thrown her cane at the officer who branded her unfit for duty due to her Pale-poisoning devolving into advanced onset Milkbleed, telling her how it would eat at her splendid rolls of fat, and kill her, slowly. The way she'd thrown herself at that smirking Luid, upon hearing he'd been promoted to Academy Dean as recompense for his service, on the day the war ended, the day she'd received her hulking scrap

iron prosthetic, the day she'd been knighted "Lady". The way she'd thrown the first Milkbleed crystal she'd heaved at the sky, at the Pale, that smile that mocked her everywhere she went.

She would have, that is, if she hadn't recognized a name stitched upon the cover.

A Brief Chronicle of the Granvull War - preceded by the Sermon of Apprentice Cioh.

Her graduation sermon was in here. Her life's work she had submitted to the Ithian Army, the pages the Empire now imposed in all schools as the basis of all history, all knowing, was in here. All the years of effort, sleepless nights and emptied inkwells that had culminated in her enlistment, with honors, was in here. The pages that cut off her leg, racked her with illness, condemned her to misery, were in here. Her hatred and shame, lost pride and lost hope, made material within the Spirograph hieroglyphs of the Ithian tongue.

This was it. This was what had made her believe the lies. Made her become what she now regretted. It was all this...*thing's*...fault. All of it.

Maybe you'll remember why you ought to repeat what you've been told.

No. Luid was wrong. She needed to remember why she should not. Cioh opened the book, heat in her fingertips rising as she began to read her own words. She was unprepared for the magnitude of the tragedy she was about to inflict upon herself.

A GENEALOGY OF ITHIAN GLORY

A Sermon by Apprentice Cioh of the Royal Ithian Academy

Before time became moving, our world lay infested by formless evil, an apocalyptic being that fed on hope, branded with the black name of the Blight. The Blight was a shade that enveloped all creation in a malicious fog, that devoured all that was good in the world, birthing fiends that gouged scars into the souls and bodies of the just. As the forces that animated the world were leached away by the Blight's hunger, it was clear that a dusk, darker than black, was setting upon the world's beaming dawn. However, it was in this moment, in this, the bleakest instant of existence, that providence incarnate engendered the Champions that could repel the blight; saviors of the light, defenders of all things noble, heroes destined to repel the dark.

In the western lands of yore lay the source of all knowledge - a brilliant sea of hallowed Platinum that alit earth. This final twinkle in the twilight was consecrated by the breath of

destiny, and we, the almighty Ithian Tribe, were born from it, and the light of fortune's virtues were permanently emblazoned upon our radiant flesh. Blessed by fate and guided in our missives by truth, our shining realm, our Ithian Empire, was formed. With it, we laid waste to the vile beasts born from Blight, and purged the black that polluted the continent, with industry, bravery, and blades of justice, leaving only the luminous sheen of Ithian glory in its wake...

As with all things, tragically, the war's end came at a price. Our maternal sea of hallowed Platinum succumbed to drought, having exhausted its purity to create our culture of progress and peace. Thus, we left our benevolent womb lands behind, and departed in pilgrimage to the eastern realms. Here, we forged our Imperial Capital, a radiant mass of silver wrought from remnants of our holy blades, a sanctuary to shield the weary and the worthy. Under the guidance of our first Grand Emperor Haol, our shining conurbation became a lighthouse that led the world to peace and prosperity! But, just as stars blaze brightest in blackness, our luminary bastion attracted tendrils of evil, and remnants of Blight gathered round our homes like disease.

Cioh's lips, hands, veins, clenched, her mind screaming at itself not to turn the pages any more. She knew what awaited her, and did not want to be reminded of what she'd done to them. Not like this. She remembered far too well what she'd written here. Or perhaps, the rest of the world had not allowed her to forget. Neither had allowed either the option of seeing the truth.

Maybe, you'll even remember why you ought to repeat what you've been told.

Luid's words were cold against her soul, but she could not allow herself to ignore them. There was something here. Something she had failed to recall, failed to grasp the scope of. The Ithian woman inhaled and held the breath, as she felt herself sink back into her past.

From the western world, far beyond the edges of our hallowed sea, came the barbarous Granvull, who settled upon the remains of the wastelands of our womb lands. These gargantuan carnivores worshipped physical power, prowess and pride, as would any unknowing cur. Their towering bulks were lined with sharp fangs, sharp claws, and crowns of fur round their bulging throats, swelled with the stench of beast-sweat and death-flesh. Thankfully, our Grand Emperor Haol condemned the savages to live their disgusting lives far beyond the fair walls of our holy domain, so that no Ithian might be exposed, in mind or in person, to their meat-eating ways...

From the southern world, fleeing the accursed forests from which the Blight was created, came the heathenish Yuvei. Like blasphemy against the gorgeous shimmer and plumpness of our Ithian forms, the Yuvei's abominable and anorexic, sexless and scentless, semi-vegetable and semi-insect bodies were covered in dull green shells lined with devil-horn barbs and maggot-writhing pistils. Worst still, the nomads were wielders of Magic, the lifeblood of the Blight! Their disheveled dances and endlessly wriggling mandibles could sing black musics that would turn reality against itself, and call upon the power of the blight! Thankfully, the sexless roaches were foolish, and strayed far from our land, knowing full well they would not be welcomed here.

From the northern world, came the greedy Kalleed, fleeing the skin-shearing blizzards of their glacial mountains. The most cowardly and filthy among the non-Ithians, their supple gray membranes were as corruptions of our sanctified appearances, their heads of white hair as hoods that hid their true faces, their long tails and pointed ears as the bodies of trickster devils. Their mischievous spirits must have led them to believe this insulting disguise would be enough to earn our pity, so that they may infiltrate our walls, steal our riches, lay waste to our culture, and suckle at the teat of our wealth like ticks! Thus, even though they came in feverish, haggard scores to our gates, our Grand Emperor repelled their devious ploys, until they abandoned their irrational plots to deprive our City of its finest riches. They receded into the mountains where they belonged, sentenced to die at the world's own hand.

Despite the Blight's futile post-mortem attempts to ruin our Imperial way of life, and soil the legacy of the Platinum's children, we Ithians stood triumphant on all fronts, once again. But it was here, at the absolute apex of our magnanimous reign, that the most egregious offense was committed upon the immaculate legacy of our people!

The feral Granvull desecrated our womb lands, disemboweling the revered ground to filch its contents! Horror of horrors, the brutes tunneled so deep, they discovered a second sea of Platinum, far beneath the surface, and began to smelt our primordial ambrosia into testaments of their barbarism! Outraged by the Granvull's destroying what belonged to us by birthright, our Grand Emperor Haol, animated by sacred wrath and righteous indignation, declared war on these bastard children of the Blight. Thus began the virtuous Imperial Army's campaign against the barbarians of the west, the holy clash known today as the Granvull War.

Cioh's hands shook, ears thumped, tentacles knotted. Disease and hate made her dizzy as she remembered these were *her* words. This *was* her, or at least, a her who once was. A her she hated more than Luid, than the Pale. The voice of the one who committed *those* atrocities, silently and proudly. Those horrible, horrible memories, that woke her sweating and shaking, often as the burning blood in her lungs.

There was no such blighted lake of "hallowed" Platinum. Nor did the other Tribes immigrate to the continent seeking salvation. For all she knew, the Blight itself was a fabrication as blighted as its namesake. *They* had been the invaders. *They* had pillaged the motherland of the Granvull, to feed their greed and their industry with genocide. *They* had incited a hundred-year war, not in the name of justice, but in the name of despoiling the Granvull of what was rightfully theirs, without compensation. *They* had ruined *everything*. Ruined everything so completely that lies and truth meshed together so perfectly, it had become impossible to tell one apart from the other. Cioh's mind flooded with conflicting thoughts and ideas, and hate made that flood boil.

At the time, she unconditionally worshipped Imperial decrees as absolute, regurgitating their words blindly, like Milkblood crystals. But now, she'd lived the thankless pain of war for herself. She'd witnessed the humanity of alleged savages firsthand. She'd seen the stains of Ithian avarice the Empire kept hidden in plain sight. She'd suffered same as those that roamed the Capital, knew the despair of their powerlessness. This was not the justice she'd venerated.

And yet, there had to be something else. Something she had forgotten. Answers to questions she could not remember. With a shaking hand, Cioh turned the page and kept reading, every spirograph line of the Ithian script like whiplash against her brain.

Despite the guidance of Grand Emperor Haol, our brave Imperial Army met with a crushing defeat at the claws, teeth and traitorous ways of the Granvull. The boggling reach of our terrible trebuchets, the booming blasts of our firebombs, and the dizzying heights of our powerful palisades proved devastating, but insufficient to claim victory. The Granvull were as innumerable as they were unrelenting. The monsters stormed our defenses like ravenous vermin, each beast a battle-hardened flesh-eater that welcomed demise like the lustful embrace of a lover. What's more, the behemoths had forged blistering blades from our lakebed of hallowed

Platinum, using the unborn souls of Ithians to rend the flesh of their living kin! In the end, even our compassionate and courageous Grand Emperor, fell to the Granvull.

Following this terrible tragedy, the Granvull came to us with a proposition of amity, to staunch the chasm of chaos and hate between our peoples. The barbarians demanded to remain in the homes they'd erected upon our womb lands, no doubt so that they remain free to dilapidate what few riches it still housed. In exchange, they offered to sell us the Platinum they mined from the earth! Not only did they take what was ours by inheritance, but they demanded compensation for their pillaging of our home, their defilement of our unborn! Our newly appointed Grand Empress Miar, in fierce retaliation, ordered, a rain of firebombs to carpet the western coast of the world. And as the land bathed in Magic flame, their fires stoked our people's wills to triumph over the wickedness of the Blight, the sins of the Granvull!

In the Battle of Saah, we -

Cioh skipped ahead, hoping to spare herself the retelling of wars. The zigzag wounds of her leg smouldered as though their original pain had not yet faded. Stories such as these had driven her to join the army in the first place, to become a hero found in song that would last till the end of Ithian history. Looking at them now, she felt a new sickness roil in her guts.

No matter the gilding, death and misery was all that War had ever been. It had never been the stories Ithians wrote, that *she* wrote. It had been endless nights in the cold mud of trenches, tortured moans echoing in the horizon, only ceasing when the thunder of firebombs and the shrieking of raiders tore through darkness. It had been seeing friends, family, lovers, all die, silent. No grand speeches or displays of honor, only shrieking and splattered blood that lingered on her skin like invisible tattoos. It had been insomnia, hands shaking, stomach roiling, feeling the spasms of a slaughtered "enemy" linger in the muscles of her arm, no matter how much she clawed. It had been too many things too many people did not know the meaning of.

The earthquake was over, but Cioh could still feel every aftershock. War would forever wake her, screaming and weeping at night. Its stains would always be everywhere, poison everything. So long as the Pale stayed where it was, she would never be able to run from it.

A hundred pages later, she continued, body deadened from the heat growin inside her. She could already taste Milkbleed in the back of her throat. Cioh felt herself stop reading, and

yet still, the swirling runes of the Ithian script leapt up at her, engraving themselves into her mind against her will, demanding that she forget the truths that had brought her to suffering.

As the battles went on, with no end in sight, neither side relented, nor showed signs of desperation. The womb lands grew stained in Granvull blood, seared by Ithian weaponry, and scarred by countless blades...But soon, destiny proved itself to be an ally of good, as it had been in the past, and brought us victory from the most unexpected of places!

The Yuvei came clawing at our gates, begging tearfully for refuge. The invertebrates had learned of the Granvull's true nature, and were prepared to change their own foul ways if it meant they would not be hunted down and slaughtered next. Captivated by the silver aura of our Imperial Capital, they entertained delusions that their kind could learn to equal the splendor of Ithian culture, and that we could learn from them! Ridiculous as the proposition was, our Grand Emperess, in her boundless generosity, offered the insects safe haven from the war. The Yuvei were kept inside our towers, where no harm would come to them, and their bodies would not offend the senses of our brightest, bravest and youngest. In heartfelt gratitude for our services, the roaches finally accepted to share the secrets of Magic with outsiders, so that we might make of it a weapon, that could turn the war's tide in the favour of the righteous.

The Yuvei began to conjure an entity more powerful than even the Blight, that would exist only to purge the world of the Blight itself. This force rose to the sky and watched over the land like a second sun, white as our sinless spirits, and came to be known as the Pale. This mighty Magic, inspired by the purity of the Ithians, was a force of nature that one would wield as a sword, a weapon that could rend the very continent into pieces! The Pale rained destructive radiance upon the Granvull, alighting the night with luminance and the mad beasts' screams, leaving only in its wake, the truth: that the Ithians would once more, reign supreme!

Reduced to a Tribe of pathetic cowards, the Granvull surrendered, and swore fealty to the Ithian Empire! They begged, kneeling and pleading like the dogs that they were, begged that our nation help cure their kind of the sicknesses the Pale had inflicted upon them! Our Grand Emperess, in a gesture of kind benevolence, accepted the submitted Granvull among our ranks, and effortlessly convinced them to abandon their sickening customs and savagery.

Thus, the demons embraced our vegetarianism, our philosophies, our culture of goodness. No longer would they wage war or combat, for honor or sport, under penalty of death.

Now, they would grow thin and languid, weak and docile! Only few misguided beasts remained, hidden in the depths of the west's Platinum mines, refusing to abandon their "homeland" and "history" to "invaders". Today, their idiotic tenacity is all that stands between us and the origin of our world...For before the Pale could end the war in a single blast of brilliance, the greatest tragedy of our time took place, a catastrophe that, to this day, haunts all that exists!

The Yuvei had proven too slothful and immoral to wield a power such as the Pale, a power too pure to be wielded by any other than a valourous Ithian! Thus, the almighty Pale's bonds slipped from their careless grasps, and the orb of pallid power wreaked havoc upon those it was meant to protect! As the Pale writhed and swelled, raining white fire upon the entire continent, the sky and sun became blotted out by invincible pallor, swallowing the world in the unbreakable prison that stands before us now! The Pale, once the living symbol of Ithian justice, became an accursed light that bellowed disease upon its very makers, and our silver radiance was stained with the whitened blood of Magic, of the Blight in Pale clothing!

For the longest time, Cioh had blamed Magic for everything. Magic had given her, and millions more, Milkbleed, or worse. Magic had turned the world into valleys of ash and gemstone, irradiated lands from which there was no escape. Magic had forced the Tribes to cohabitate, to subject themselves to endless hatred of one another, hatred where the Ithians, once more, ruled. Magic *was* the Pale itself, a monochrome, smirking demon that drew joy from all the pain it had rained upon the world for generations. But, time had taught Cioh that she could no more blame Magic for its malice than she could daylight or rain.

The Ithians were the ones at fault. They'd ignored the Yuvei's warnings. They'd turned the world's lifeblood against itself. They'd been the ones so obsessed with slaughter, they dared to kill the planet for the sake of prosperity. The Pale sky was their sky, a testament of their cruelty, of the madness that animated the murderers that called themselves saviours, the masters that claimed they only wanted to "save" those they made slaves.

The Yuvei had suffered for their obedience; their mandibles were clipped so that they could not sing spells, and their shells were carved into gendered shapes against their wills. The Granvull had suffered for their honor; they grew emaciated and sickly from the absence of meat, and lived as half-mongrels in the eyes of those that had offered them penitence. The Kalleed had suffered for simply being alive; their furs clipped, their homes taken, their existences

reduced to that of machines that bled and died. And meanwhile, here the Ithians were, blaming their self-inflicted misery on those they had taken everything from.

Cioh's head throbbed with the senselessness of it all, guts bubbling with moist flame. The sermon's pages grew heavy. She began to understand what Luid wanted her to remember.

Our dwindling population and dire lack of resources prevented us from leaving the city to gather foods, luxuries or knowledge. Brave, superior Ithian citizens were too few and precious in number; they could not be sent off to die like plucked weeds beneath the Pale's flame. Yet, we could not trust the Granvull, now weak and feeble creatures, to slay their own. And we could not trust the Yuvei, sly liars who failed us so unfathomably, to do our bidding.

Thus, we were forced to depend on those of the northern world; the Kalleed, who crawled to our city doors once more, desperately seeking shelter from the Pale...But the concrete-fleshed beings, hardened by enduring years of tumultuous cold, were able to thrive amidst its miasma, immune to the effects of the air that devoured the flesh of the other Tribes!

Grand Empress Miar, offered these unclean gray ones solace in our walls, so that the dirty sub-Ithians might redeem themselves to us. Overnight, the Kalleed become willing servants that ensured the survival of our pure Imperial Capital. They mined our Platinum, built our facilities, and searched for food at the cost of their very lives...but their lives did not matter, and they did not care for death, for they were consenting martyrs, fighting at long last for the sake of good, for the sake of Ithians. In fact, the Kalleed proved so numerous that many could not live within our fair city. Our Grand Empress, in the spirit of generosity and fairness, would allow only the truly dedicated, the truly honest, the truly repentant gray ones to be given access to our Imperial Capital. After years of service to the Empire, they would be given the honor of directly serving the Ithians they had risked their lives for, and find even greater fulfillment.

Cioh barely stopped herself from swearing out loud.

The Kalleed could *not* thrive in the Pale. They could endure it well, but they were by no means unaffected. A few weeks, or even days, and their insides would be wracked with malformations or crystallized tumors. Even cases of Kalleed Milkbleed weren't unheard of.

No. The Kalleed were simply so numerous, and so desperate to enter the Capital, that the Empire turned them into machinery faster than they had slaves. Most of the gray-skins would

never even *see* the Imperial Capital's interior: laws prevented workers that had been exposed to Pale radiation for too long from entry, under fear of contamination. Kalleed would work themselves dead trying to buy their freedom, only to learn it was never theirs to buy in the first place. The few who *did* earn passage to the Capital there found no solace, only further servitude, dusting the boots of those that ground their heels upon Kalleed lives so casually.

The more Cioh read, the more she saw where she'd once seen only so little, hidden between the cracks of her own falsifications. Her brain throbbed as she kept noticing slander masquerading as fact in her writing, and she began to question where the lies ended and where the truth began. Had there been a battle at Saah? Were Granvull actually able to live without meat healthily? Maybe Kalleed really *were* vicious thieves the first time they came to their walls? Was the Pale the Yuvei's fault? Had the Empire been telling a truth no one but Ithians were willing to see, or spinning lies so bombastic only the blindest Ithians could see them?

Cioh's blood grew so feverish, she could feel it bubble in her throat, the spiral patterns of Ithian writing blurring, as the vertigo, anger and nausea of betrayal engulfed her thoughts.

Turning to the final page of her sermon, Cioh braced as though about to lose another leg.

Thus, we stand today, at the cusp of a new era, our faraway homeland nearly reclaimed, the corrupt Blightborn Tribes at the service of our righteous glory. With the hundred-year Granvull War nearing its inevitable end, I, as a proud student of this, our most brilliant Royal Ithian Academy, wish to fulfill my duty to the Empire as one who belongs to the superior Tribe.

I, heartfelt and humble Apprentice Cioh, through the following proclamation of my willful and honorable deference to the decrees of Grand Empress Miar, present my candidature as Imperial infantrywoman, destined to laud the magnificence of my people through my service as a soldier. May my sincerest of words only shine further radiance upon the unquestionable glory of our Ithian empire, and may my silver flesh, born of the primordial Platinum, mightily smite and punish all the fiendish parasites who oppose destiny's indisputable edicts!

As Cioh let fall the pride of her past onto the desk, her chest was like a furnace. She could not breathe, but she refused to believe it had anything to do with her sickness.

∩∩

Maybe, you'll even remember why you ought to repeat what you've been told.

She could no longer deny the truth she'd been trying to deny to herself for decades now. Her entire life had been a lie. All of it. Lies, within lies, within blighted, bloated lies. And the Empire - and Luid - were preaching those lies as righteous truth to everyone, just like she had.

Because of *them*, the world was nothing more than too many people in too small and too dirty a city, with *nowhere* to go. Because of *them*, there was nothing left but Kalleed slaves, Granvull beggars, and Yuvei criminals who had done *nothing* wrong, crawling at the feet of a few Ithian pigs too blind to see themselves as anything else but *gods*. Because of *them*, the world would see the same sky, *every day, for years upon years*.

Cioh saw her signature on the sermon's cover. The letters grinned with Pale-like hatred as they looked up at her, as though thanking her for everything she'd done.

...It wasn't just them.

Maybe, you'll even remember why you ought to repeat what you've been told.

The realization had hit her. Cioh vomited a mouthful of steaming white blood, tears streaming down her cheeks as the liquid muffled a shriek. The fire hurt, but it was nothing compared to the memories. The smoke of her hardening blood was opium, the insides of her skull was melting, and her body was no longer hers.

It had not just been *them*. It had been *her*.

She had been blind. *She* had been a pawn, a player in this massive game she'd helped design. *She* had made the lie the standard upon which truth was judged. *She* had made the lie so perfect, so beautiful in its deception, that the lie had become the new reality. And now, *she* was the one about to help thousands more believe in the lie, and made the lie into something more powerful than the Pale, something generations upon generations of fools would worship.

She had made the world what it was. The blighted lie was *hers*. The Pale's smile was *hers*. The scenes of pain, the scar-mouthed Yuvei, the beaten Kalleed, the decaying Granvull, all of them, *hers*. And she'd been the hypocrite, unable to accept the burden of what she'd done.

Lady Cioh screamed.

Startled curses resonated throughout the Library as the woman seized the now-hardened crystal of blood like a dagger, plunging it into her sermon. Over and over again she pierced the book, vision gone white from hate, paper, Milkbleed, self-loathing. Never when at war had she ever wanted to kill so badly. Never when at "peace" had she wanted to kill herself so urgently.

Never in her life had she wanted to kill what she'd done so very, very desperately. When her hand finally gave, the crystal shiv fell, and she screamed again, louder, at the books around her.

She knew now. Each one was filled with the same slander, spewed from a different maw. Was there *any* truth left in this place? Was any of this, or anything else she'd ever believed in, for that matter, real? Had she, and her *entire Tribe*, been enveloped in such a web of intertwining fictions made facts, for so many years, that the truth had simply ceased to exist? Did anyone even care, even notice, even *want* to care about how wrong the world had become? *What*, in the name of the white above, had been the blighting point of *anything*?!

From the floor of the Library, the Milkbleed knife glared at Cioh with an inanimate smile of blood-glisten light. A smile just like Luid's. The soldier knew. No matter where she hid, the Pale would follow. Like a mirror of her failure, its blank, fractured visage would look down upon her, and never stop showing her the reality only she could see.

The Pale would always look down, and laugh without a voice at their powerlessness.
At *her* powerlessness.

Second Chapter

CONFESSION

Grant comfort to those who fear death. Fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. Honor those that bless you with trust. The true heroes lost are those strong enough to show compassion before despair, that place the virtues of saviors before the needs of slayers.

The familiar words from the Book of Lost Heroes reverberated in Stroltzkin's mind, the chill of sharp Platinum cold and heavy in the Granvull's palms. It was easy to forget its teachings in times such as these, when invaders stood their gates, and a single defeat more could mean the extinction of her Tribe. But the Soldier would not waver in her dedication. Not now.

There was more than lives at stake today, though the Ithians would never see it, and the males would not realize to what extent. But these thoughts did not matter now. War was all that would matter, soon. There would be death, and much of it. There would be tragedies, the likes of which wordless songs are made of. But there would be glory, also. And, perhaps, victory. All Stroltzkin could do now was fight, and remain true to the teachings of the Book. She breathed deep as surrounding Granvull clenched weapons, prepared to die.

Stroltzkin would not allow herself to.

I will change our ways, she swore, and braced herself for attack, as their High Warlord pointed the tip of his halberd towards the silver-skinned horizon.

“For our Hearth Lands! Pave the road to our liberation with Ithian gravestones!”

The booming war cry of High Warlord Drovenktz Ardveltz echoed through his ventilation mask, resonating across the field of battle. The frontlines of the Granvull forces responded with a united roar, and the gathering of twelve thousand warriors charged forth in a cloud of dust and a tremolo of clawed paws, their Platinum spears and battleaxes alit in the flames of Ithian firebombs' white-hot Magic power. Ithian commandants Ser Reiv and Ser Daen gave terrified orders to hold the line and continue firing trebuchets so that “the blighted blood-drunk hell pigs stay far away”, but the Granvull were already upon them. Even their Yuvei-built

weaponry lacked the power to contain the wrath of these battle-worshippers, raging beneath the brewing storm of the pure white Pale.

There was an explosion of howling voices and shattering metal as the first wave of maned warriors crashed into silver-skinned assailants, led by tall-hammered Warlord Zolschracht. Ithian soldiers stood valiant, even when outnumbered by such mighty enemies, but their efforts were in vain; glimmering Platinum lances pierced towering shields, splintering steel like rotwood, impaling pallid bodies upon Granvull polearms like bloodied idols. With the frontlines annihilated, the axemen, led by Champion Orndstrall Erstwryrh, vaulted off spearmen's broad backs, diving into Ithian backlines with reckless abandon. The Imperials advanced and riposted, lunging with shortswords, thrusting into their foes' immense bodies and goring them...But, with the lives of their families and homelands on at stake, nothing could stop the Granvull infantry from raining death upon the Ithian forces in a maelstrom of spraying blood, splintered bone, hewn armor and war-drunk screams. Even with blades jutting from their hides and scales, the warriors kept screaming, kept swinging.

Having forced their way to the center of the enemy ranks, the Granvull attacked from within, while the remainder of their forces continued their charge, pushing back enemy ranks and dispersing the chain of command. Vaulting over allied spearmen with a powerful jump, Champion Stroltzkin Vriddinik brought down twin hatchets upon the heads of her enemies, cleaving their helmets, skulls and chests in two. Surrounded by all sides, the great warrior advanced, swinging wildly, Platinum weapons casting a whirlwind of gore and sparks at the heart of the battlefield. Surrounding allies doubled their efforts and battered at the last lines of enemy defenses, some dying standing at they swung down two-handed weapons. Ithians and Yuvei had always vilely referred to the Granvull race as "beasts", as mad demons, but no devils were capable of savagery such as this.

At last, after a downpour of death, the prairie soaked dark with the guts of Ithian and Granvull alike, Stroltzkin stood before the leader of their enemy, the silver General Yoel. The man cowered in fear behind the hammers of Ser Reiv and Ser Daen, who swung their almighty bludgeons down at the great warrior. But Champion Vridinnik lashed faster, and shattered their

hazmat helmets, leaving their Pale-choked carcasses behind as she charged forth to end this battle, once and for all.

His two last protectors fallen, General Yoel began to sound retreat, but the order came far too late, and Stroltzkin was already upon him. The Champion drove both hatchets into the Ithian General's chest, and Yoel's last breath came as a wailing squeal for mercy; mercy he had refused to grant the Granvull when he chose to follow the Emperor's orders; orders to plunder their Platinum and burn their children. As the General's dying shriek echoed across the battlefield, Champion Orndstrall led one final charge against fleeing Ithians, who ran for their lives, for their great city, where they would hide, along with the sexless roaches that built their damned weapons.

Have I done it? Stroltzkin gasped, rush of bloodlust and battle still steaming in her.

"My kinsmen!" came the voice of High Warlord Drovenktz. Stroltzkin's head, and the heads of thousands more, looked his way. The hulking-bodied warrior stood atop a mound of bodies that towered over their heads, a pillar of Ithian and Granvull death that rose like a bloodstained lighthouse, towards the fissures of black that lined the Pale above. The Granvull ceased their rampaging and faced their leader, gazing at what the High Warlord held aloft. In Ardveltz's left hand was his great axe, and in his right, the severed head of Yoel, like a great sphere of Granvull Platinum in his fist.

"My kinsmen," he roared again, "Today, your manes were buffeted! Scales chipped! Hides bruised! Furs singed! Bones snapped! Lives of brothers, lost! But today, on this day, where death looked down at us, we have claimed our freedom from those who would take it from us!" Roars of victory echoed across the battlefield, as Granvull raised fists to the sky and tearfully embraced. The war was far from over. But tonight, they would feast with their families, and see the sun rise tomorrow, as free men, unchained by the Empire, as the last true Granvull. They were all heroes.

"To the heroism of your Champions!" hollered Drovenktz again, sweeping his weapon across the battlefield, Gredrungdt and Orndstall raising their own in response.

“To the might of your Warlords!” he bellowed with a fist to his chest. Every hot-blooded warrior beat their own in a rising war drum rhythm, feet stamping earth like mourning bells.

“To the fall of the Ithian-Yuvei alliance! To the victory of all Granvull! To the freedom of those taken! *To us!*” he shouted, both hands skywards, and his people shouted back with ecstatic cries and deep-throated, joyous roars.

The victory had been glorious and hard-won, but it was the first victory they had known in years, ever since the Pale first swallowed the sky. It would not last, and would perhaps even be their final moment of glory before their utter annihilation at the hands of the Ithians’ new Yuvei allies and Kalleed. The Granvull stood alone, but their legacy would endure. *Stroltzkin’s* legacy would endure.

In the center of the blood-drenched battlefield, the Champion collapsed, looking up at the bolts of white the Pale was preparing to rain down, both sky and woman shedding tears. As her adrenaline faded, leaving behind a core of disgust and trauma, Stroltzkin realized she had just lived out a tale from the Book of Lost Heroes. *She* had been the shining hero, that pushed back the darkness, forever. *She* had earned the esteem of her comrades, her family, her people.

She had succeeded.

Finally, she thought. Finally, she would be remembered by her kin as she truly was, as the first of many great Granvull axemaids. Finally, the world would change.

Grant comfort to those who fear death. Fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. Honor those that bless you with trust. The true heroes lost are those strong enough to show compassion before despair, that place the virtues of saviors before the needs of slayers.

The familiar words of the Book of Lost heroes rang out again in Champion Stroltzkin’s mind...but now, they sounded dull and hollow, like the words of falsifiers and betrayers.

Vridinnik's entire career had been dictated by teachings in the Book of Lost Heroes. She swore she would not just be a good soldier, but an exemplary one. A guardian to her people, not just a killer of enemies. Through her kindness, strength and determination, she would change the ways of her Tribe, be remembered as the one that liberated Granvull from their Ithian oppressors, and all Granvull women from the bonds of their males. She *would* change the world. But when Droventktz himself ordered her to work weapon reclamation duty following the battle, any hopes the Champion had of earning the honours of peers faded, and Vridinnik's dedication to her principles fissured once again.

"This is unbearably humiliating", Stroltzkin snarled to herself through the fabric of her ventilation mask. A mortar of Pale-born energy blasted the earth nearby, punctuating her anger.

Far off in the distance, between the echoes of the burning storm and her own sickly coughs, she could hear the sounds of comrades celebrating the victory, from the safety of the Western Hearth Gorge Mines. Starved and battered warriors feasting on jerkied meats of all kinds as though it were the greatest meal they'd ever known. Drunks merrily dancing to sweeping poems and moving songs, some of which they wrote themselves. Soldiers building monuments to honor the fallen from polished Platinum and animal bone. Womenfolk lighting lanterns and chanting slow hymns to mourn the souls of lovers lost. They said that with the Pale's birth, Magic had died. And yet here it was, still lingering among the living, as songs of tragedy, and as armaments of misery. Magic had not died, it seemed, simply changed, as it prepared its slow, but certain return to life, in this pain-whitened world.

As Stroltzkin trudged through the dead battlefield's mire, sweat matted her long, orange mane to her skin, Pale-dust and cold winds sticking to her scales and furs. The warrior wanted nothing more than to rest her weary bones, and read from the Book of Lost Heroes, so as not to forget the reasons why she fought in the first place. The rush of berserk madness she had been consumed by earlier had all but faded, and she was becoming dizzy with fatigue. The stench of Granvull running blood and bodily fluids was too thick to be blotted out by her crude ventilation mask, and steam came off her kinsmen's stiffening remains, like the smoke left in the wake of the Yuvei's forsaken spells.

The Book of Lost Heroes had prepared Stroltzkin for many battles, and had taught her many virtues, but it had never accommodated her to the shadows that haunted battlegrounds, abandoned by all, except the Pale. All around were shimmering bodies of the white-armoured Ithians, and proud hides of Granvull once lined in bright furs, polished scales and varnished bones; both had been swallowed by mud, blood and the first hints of decay, turning the landscape into a mosaic shade of disease gray, alit by the white above. Dead hands still held onto deadly weapons, driven into slack-jawed, scarlet-eyed bodies. The ground had gone soft from blood and heavy footfalls, as though it were about to devour the fallen. Every struggling, squelching step Stroltzkin took reminded her that next time, she could be the one eaten by the earth. Next time, she could be the one there, lying in the dirt, forgotten by all. She would be remembered only as a woman that forgot her place in the world, a world unchanged and unmoved by her sacrifice, the Pale the only witness to her departed dream.

Prying a blood-drenched spear from the rigor-mortised claws of a Granvull corpse, the Champion barely held back accursed shouts and tears of frustration as the man's bones snapped. The spear she was meant to reclaim for the blacksmiths, so that they re-smelt the Platinum into a new blade, fell into the mud, the ore's gleaming light consumed by the murk.

The woman felt heat climb up her chest and into her throat, neither anger nor bile, but something just as burning. As important a job it may have been, weapon reclamation was expected of Scouts that never did any fighting, not Champions on the verge of Warlordhood.

The face of the dead Granvull seemed to smile at her mockingly, as though knowing her fight was a lost one, that her people's ways would remain set in stone, that her dreams would perish like the rest of them. Vridinnik kicked the corpse's jaw clean off with a moist crack, the woman's self-loathing almost overpowering her loathing of Ithian greed and the Yuvei conspiring momentarily.

Does it even matter that I try anymore? she pondered. Is there any point to my struggling, only for this to happen every time? Soldiers are insulted by a woman's presence. Women back home see me as an outcast creature no more deserving of respect than the roaches. Even mother and father wish me to die, so that Vridinnik Ancestors are not offended by my grievous affront. My battle is as hopeless as a child that wants to see the sun shine through the Pale's shell again.

Stroltzkin hadn't even earned credit for slaying the Ithian General that was rightfully hers. Gredrungt had claimed it, along with any other honors that could have legitimized her right – or that of any other woman – to participate in the war. All she had been given was another reminder that the Granvull did not accept her...And as she was now, formed by slaughter and honed with duty, giving up her pursuit would not end her abuse at the hands of her comrades, or of fellow kinswomen.

No longer able to distinguish where her tears began and her sweat ended, the Champion looked down at a cloudy puddle of half-dry gore, and saw her reflection.

Time and war had changed her beyond recognition. Standing nearly eight feet tall, with shoulders the size of her head, Stroltzkin would have seemed more masculine than most Warlords, were it not for her breasts, obvious despite her rippling musculature. Her long red mane and hair, her sleek beige scales, the duvet fur around her forearms, all used to earn the eager praises of potential mates. Now, they seemed alien next to the length of her claws, the width of her fangs, the vividness of scars traced across her flesh like jagged memories. Her silhouette put even the great pugilists of Granvull sculptures and paintings to shame, but once, it had been the body of a beautiful lady, destined to be firstwife of a Warlord. Even without her ventilation mask, Stroltzkin could not see in herself the girl she had once been, let alone the faces of lost heroes she venerated. She did not look like a soldier, nor like a woman. She did not look Ithian, Yuvei, or Kalleed, and yet, she looked like no Granvull she had ever seen before, and likely ever would.

What am I? her mind bellowed. *And what am I even trying to do anymore?*

Stroltzkin stomped an Ithian's discarded hazmat helmet as though it were Droventzk's sneering face. Again and again she struck the lump of metal, until it was mashed flat into a shapeless, unidentifiable mass. Kicking it away, she swore a wordless curse at the roiling Pale.

It was then that Stroltzkin heard someone gasp.

Turning to face a mound of Granvull corpses, Stroltzkin saw a tall, lean figure crouching behind the bodies, disturbingly thin body wrapped in a tattered hood, barely noticeable amidst the fog and sludge. The stranger flinched as it understood it'd been caught, but dared not run

away. Instead, the intruder chose slither back to its hiding place to cower, hoping it might be ignored by the raging warrior. There was a hollow clatter of bones and decorative Platinum as the stranger dropped items pillaged from combatants, spoils meant to be pawned for food and crowns to Kalleed vagrants.

Stroltzkin frowned. She drew one of her hatchets, slowly marching towards the pillager, chiding herself for not ignoring the trespasser and saving herself the trouble of ending yet another life today. The adrenaline of combat and the pride of fighting for a cause had long-since faded inside of her, as was her desire to exercise such justice upon the needing. Killing those bent on taking her people's land was one thing. Killing those that were desperate for food, coin or shelter, was another.

"Show yourself. Immediately," she called out, voice cracking unintentionally, fists tightening. The stranger responded by slinking out, raised hands over their head in a show of submission, drenched robes clinging to their pale, shivering body. Surprised by the stranger's lack of armor, Stroltzkin noted the man was nearly as tall as her, but looked as though they weighed a fifth what she did. She'd never seen an Ithian so thin or tall in her life. She motioned towards the hood with her hatchet, and the pillager responded promptly, drawing back their robe with long, bony fingers.

Stroltzkin's jaw dropped, as she witnessed a Yuvei the likes of which she had never seen before, reveal itself. The sexless insect's cloak had concealed its eggshell-white carapace, made brilliant by the Pale's light, and a pair of bulbous, scarlet eyes. *An albino*, she realized.

Looking closer, she saw disfiguring wounds stretched across its cheeks, where the creature's mandibles once were – the wriggling appendages the insects used to speak chattering tongues and cast eerie Magics had been torn off. The scars were barely covered by the remains of a Granvull ventilation mask, still stained with its first owner's blood. The genderless insect shook as though it had been breathing unfiltered Palewind for weeks. Otherwise, it looked like the rest of its Tribe: tall, thin-limbed, exoskeleton lined with barbs, petals and pistils sprouting from its skull and shoulders...

And yet, to see the face of those that were supposed to be her enemies, so consumed by fear, so engulfed in sadness, rattled every conviction Stroltzkin had ever held towards the

roaches. What troubled her was not the Yuvei's unusual appearance, but the presence of the lone Yuvei itself. Ever since the Southwoods were burnt down and their caravans destroyed during the War, Yuvei either left the continent, or became servants to the Empire's cause. To see one in the Western Hearth Lands, without the collective consciousness of a hive mind to guide its actions, was completely unheard of.

Stroitzkin took a step closer, and the Yuvei fell over backwards, scrambling away, hands still above its head, begging and panting through its mask. A quaver of disgust and unease swelled in her as she watched the insect's blistered, gangly body contort and clamber in such a flexile way, but she felt none of the cautious aggression she usually experienced when facing an armed Ithian, the thought of the insects' toxic Magics, or even the presence of the men of her Tribe. The Yuvei's eyes spoke many horrors, but even more than that, it spoke something louder.

It...does not hate me. Vridinnik realized, watching the Yuvei's three-fingered hands motion softly, up and down, palms presented. The movement was desperate, she knew, but, somehow, it also felt kind. Not a soldier's begging or a rich man's pleading, but an honest soul's reassuring promise that they did not wish to hurt anyone. *I think it might actually trust me.*

Words from the Book of Lost Heroes resonated in the Champion's shaken mind again.

Grant comfort to those who fear death. Fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. Honor those that bless you with trust. The true heroes lost are those strong enough to show compassion before despair, that place the virtues of saviors before the needs of slayers.

Stroitzkin took a deep breath that burned her throat with Palewind, and stepped forward as bolts of light bombarded edges of the battlefield. She would not let her resolve crack. If the Granvull would not let her fight in battle, she would fight for something else.

"Calm," she murmured, showing the Yuvei her palms. She placed her hatchet on the ground, approaching slowly, softly. The insect whimpered as she drew close, but did not flinch.

"Calm," she whispered, soft, soothing, kneeling before it. The Yuvei's breathing accelerated, but it lowered its hands, at last. Stroitzkin reached forward, and when the pillager showed no sign of protest, she gently touched its shoulder, petals soft and slick beneath her weapon-callused fingers.

“Calm,” she mouthed without a sound, looking into the white Yuvei’s brilliant red eyes. For a moment, they stared at one another without speaking, without breathing, watching their reflections move on the surface of one another’s eyes and skins. For a moment, Stroltzkin felt as though she saw herself as the insect saw her, and she felt warmth rather than wrath.

What am I? It was the same question she’d asked herself before, but now, the answer she was looking in the Yuvei’s ruby gaze for was no longer the same.

“Veo Ru.”

The white Yuvei’s words broke her trance, and she blinked, reality returning to her sight with a discharge of noise and colourless light. *Was I under a spell?* She wondered, squinting.

“Veo Ru. Help. Need.” The Yuvei repeated itself in a shaking, wheezing singsong voice. Stroltzkin noticed it had placed a hand to its breast as it pronounced the oddly-inflected words.

“Your name?” she asked. The Yuvei nodded, and placed a second hand on its chest.

“Help need,” the bug repeated in broken Westword. Stroltzkin felt her heart beat faster.

“Where did you come from, the Ithian Captital?” Another nod.

“Kin. Great white city. Build weapon for Ithian war. Not want weapon. Not want war. Veho Ru end want. Kin help want. Want save” The Yuvei pressed its hands against itself harder. “I...mistake. Hurt kin. Hurt Veho Ru. Veho Ru alone. Look for...*not* war. No more. No war.”

Ancestors be woken! Stroltzkin reeled as the realization struck her. *This one’s a refugee.*

Stroltzkin immediately considered bringing it to the Mines as an expatriate, but the thought faded before it could so much as flicker to life. Granvull would not tolerate the presence of Ithian allies, not after the bulging silver-skins broke their peace treaty and burned their homes. Her people were not monsters, but they were not forgiving of the roaches that built weapons for those who took so many of their kinsmen’s lives. By offering the Yuvei sanctuary, she would be condemning it to certain death, even more than starvation and slaughter at the hands of the Great Ithian War.

I need to tell it there’s nothing I can do.

The Champion looked away from the Yuvei, unable to admit her powerlessness. Veo Ru brought its hands toward her and gently grasped the Champion's scarred-and-scaled face, so that she would have no choice but to look into its eyes. The Yuvei's thin fingers were ice-glazed to the touch.

"Help. I beg," it whispered, tears running down gaunt, carapaced cheeks. Its breathless singsong voice sounded more off-key than it did before. "Not death. Help need. Please. I beg."

Stroltzkin gently pulled the Yuvei's hands from her, unsure if the shaking of her head was voluntary. The insect's limbs felt frail bird bones despite their rugged shells. As she looked into red eyes filling with tears, bolts of Pale still exploding around them, Stroltzkin realized she could not bring herself to say no. No Granvull had ever given her such trust. No Ithian had begged her in such a way. Never had she witnessed such honesty, only seen in the Book of Lost Heroes, for herself.

She could not abandon the first person to ever look at her with such eyes to such a fate.

Grant comfort to those who fear death. Fight for those who cannot fight for themselves Honor those that bless you with trust. The words of the Book of Lost Heroes shuddered in her once more, louder than ever, and suddenly, she saw herself in the reflection of the Yuvei's eyes once again. This time, she knew what she had seen, and knew what she had to do.

"Listen to me," she said, rising to her feet, drawing a broken chain from the pack she carried, filled with Platinum blades. "If I take you back with me, and ask them to keep you safe, they will kill you. There's nothing I will be able to do to stop that. But if I take you as my prisoner, you will be captive. You will be made to work for us, you will be treated poorly, you may even be beaten or tortured by my fellow warriors, for vengeance or for secrets. But you will be fed, you will be far from battle, and you live. And I promise I will watch over you, no matter what happens."

Stroltzkin clenched the chain tightly, and looked directly into the Yuvei's eyes, the way she would look up at the Pale's cracked surface before a battle. She would not show the one that had given her respect, given her pride, any weakness that would betray their gift.

"Do you still want to follow me?"

Veo Ru did not move for many seconds, simply looking at the chain in Stroltzkin's hands, sobs subsiding. The insect inhaled deeply. Closed their eyes. Held their wrists together, and placed them on Stroltzkin's lap, where the Platinum chain lay.

"Will believe," they spoke. "Kind...kindness. Appreciate. Forget never."

Stroltzkin smiled sadly as she helped the Yuvei to its feet, and led her convict towards the Mines, where the two of them would likely spend what was left of their lives. The rumbling above subsided as the Pale's storm faded far off into the distance.

From the depths of the Hearth Gorge Mines, Stroltzkin heard faraway screams of Drovenktz's battalion assaulting the Ithian army. She could hear the valorous savagery of Granvull, the creaking of Yuvei siege weapons, the din Platinum tearing apart Ithian flesh. The battle would be outstandingly lethal, she knew, the Empire's victory potentially signifying the final nail in the War's coffin...Tragically, chances were few the battle would be won by Granvull. Drovencktz had always been an exceptional warrior, but a mediocre leader, whilst the Ithian forces were led by Knight Luid and Knight Cioh; two of the Capital's youngest and most brilliant Academy Soldiers. Where Granvull would have won by sheer grit, Cioh and Luid would conquer by numbers, experience, and superior weaponry. Vridinnik muttered an old curse-oath beneath her breath, hoping that the silver woman and her obese subordinate would suffer vile fates that were becoming of their vile souls.

In the constrained, dim-lit stone walls of the underground dungeon where Veo Ru was imprisoned, pacing about their cell, Stroltzkin felt as though the one thing she'd fought for all these years was dying alongside her people. For decades, she had fought for the right to take up arms alongside the males, to prove herself, and the women she cared for, as worthy of titles and honors reserved for men of her Tribe. Her actions and integrity would have determined the future, the outcome of the war. Her trophy would have been freedom and respect. She would have been remembered not as a delusional female that could not obey, but as a *true* warrior that

fought to end war rather than revel in it, a warrior the likes of which only the Book of Lost Heroes sung of. Now, it seemed as though she had more chances of seeing the Pale die, than to see her dream made reality.

When she'd returned to the Mines with Veo Ru last month, the High Warlord interpreted her actions as oaths of faithlessness, triggered by her weak female mind snapping under the pressures of the battlefield. As reprimand for her decision to bring a *bug* into their borders – and to prevent her “woman’s judgment” from wreaking havoc – she'd been assigned to prison duties, to fully appreciate the foolishness of her decision, where the Pale would do no further damage to her ailing sanity.

Thankfully, this meant Stroltzkin could step away from the Pale, and breathe air that did not taste of burnt smoke. She could also ensure that Veo Ru would be treated honourably – she tried her best to allow the Yuvei some dignity, to bring them good food, give them clean quarters, spare them beatings, and offer opportunities to bathe. After much pleading, Veo Ru was even given a cell large enough to accommodate a real bed, a bed Stroltzkin herself found beautifully soft. Nevertheless, the former Champion had to restrain herself from assaulting her High Warlord, and using his beloved Heartreaver to live up to its name, when he'd referred to the white Yuvei as “an Ithian tapeworm”.

“The true heroes lost are those strong enough to show compassion before despair, that place the virtues of saviors before the needs of slayers...’ If only that were still true.”

Stroltzkin read aloud from the Book of Lost Heroes on her lap, wildly swinging torch flames making it hard to make out the runes on the page. She had meant to hum the familiar words to herself as a sort of soothing prayer, but they had come out in a drawn out, baleful snarl, which echoed through the dungeon’s tunnels like a curse upon her bloodline. As if to mock her, the mine’s walls rattled again, almost seeming to close in around her, with the sound of faraway doom she had no part in.

Veo Ru shook as they heard the Granvull turn feral with frustration. They attempted to drink from their stale-water jug, but faraway sound of his Tribe’s conflagrating spell-weapons made the liquid hard to swallow. Longingly, they grabbed at one of the iron-wrought bars of their minuscule cell, and looked towards their kind, if troubled captor.

“Such beautiful words that some of yours seems to speak. It is, though, shame, that so many of Granvull seem misunderstand them so...severely.”

Stroltzkin turned to face the faint glow of Veo Ru’s deep red eyes. Looking back at the night they’d first met, the former Champion could not help but be overwhelmed by how quickly the Yuvei had picked up on the subtleties of the Westword tongue, how much healthier their voice sounded now that they were kept away from the Pale, how comfortable they seemed in her presence...and how large the scars on their cheeks really were, now that they had no need to wear ventilation masks.

“Indeed,” Stroltzkin complied, a sour grin wrapped around her fangs, her angry eyes softening almost imperceptibly under the light of the albino’s. “If more Granvull were willing to see that the Book of Lost Heroes speaks of accepting strength in all its forms, not casting away weakness where there is none, this Ancestor-forsaken war would be over by now.”

Veo Ru paused, the wounds where their mandibles used to be pulsating slightly, a remnant of a pensive tic. Stroltzkin had read Veo Ru the Book of Lost Heroes, and the Yuvei had visibly been inspired by the words of its pages. But more so than knowledge, the Book brought confusion, and they could not understand that the Granvull they’d been told of – the weapon-wielding beasts of the West – would have such rich culture, noble thinkers, or stunning honor. How did such moral warriors, such poets and craftsmen, such wise souls and brave hearts, bear such malice towards pure-hearted and committed Stroltzkin, who had done nothing but good, and been met with naught but disgust?

The white Yuvei’s hands clenched tighter around the bars of their cell as they saw the Granvull woman’s scales flicker in the wind of her own dark thoughts, one hand clenching her beloved Book, the other gripping a rusting spear. They inhaled a deep breath, and stood upright, looking directly at the former Champion, jolted by her friend’s atypical display of assertiveness.

“You care truly about...able to fight for your people?” Veo Ru asked, voice sterner than Stroltzkin had ever heard it before. She nodded, unsure of what her new friend was trying to say, almost dreading the answer they were hoping for.

“Then...why? Why risk your life for them?” the Yuvei added, pistils suddenly rigid. There was a pause as a proud cry from beyond the mines and dungeons swept through, and the former Champion could not help but smile with relief.

“Because,” she answered, voice low, head held high, “I want to change the world. If I can just do one thing that will leave my mark and change my Tribe’s ways for the better, then none of it will have been in vain. And if I can change our culture so that women can fight at the frontlines alongside their men, unafraid to embody their Granvull virtues to their fullest, then I truly believe my freedom will have been passed along to generations to follow, and made our home a more welcoming place. That is a cause I believe is worth dying for. The happiness of my people, the progress of our ways.”

“But then, why – ”

There was a gentle echo of Yuvei firebombs exploding, and Veo Ru sat down quickly, the glow of their eyes seeming to dim. Stroltzkin noticed they were gripping their knees tight, not with fear, but with self-loathing; a self-loathing she herself was all too familiar with. There was another muted blast, and pebbles rolled about the floor as Veo Ru held themselves tighter.

Veo Ru flinched as they felt Stroltzkin’s scaled hand wrap around theirs, the woman’s soft smile reassuring despite rows of fangs. The white Yuvei’s eyes struggled to meet the Granvull’s reptilian gaze, and their lips knotted shut...but the warrior would not let the refugee succumb to hesitation.

“Please, Veo Ru.” Stroltzkin’s claws softly parted her friend’s fingers apart, and slid between them. “Words that warrant honest concern are words that warrant honest speaking.”

Veo Ru’s grasped her fist almost violently, and the former Champion realized that the Yuvei did not hold their tongue out of fear, but out of fury.

“Then why do Granvull-people despise so deeply your actions?!” They shouted, songlike voice suddenly coarse and whiplike, petals and pistils coiled like snakes preparing to lash out, their whiteness suddenly Pale-like. “You sacrifice so much for what you believe in – for *their* sake – and yet you are here, in bottom of rankest pit with rankest prisoner, while they fight

another battle you have right to win with them! Why bother give your life for those?! For...*blood-drunk hell pigs!*?"

Stroltzkin's eyes went wide with breathless shock, cold hurt, as though Veo Ru's words had shivved her gullet. Realizing the what they'd just said, the verbal bile that even the bleakest Ithian supremacist would shudder at the sound of, the Yuvei's hate immediately dissipated. Their head was held low in deep shame, deeper even than the Western Hearth Gorge's deepest mineshaft. Their hand released hers, and they brought it to their brow, pistils and petals quivering as though sobbing.

"No words I know apologize for words such those. But know I regret speaking them, least of all to you. Truly. Truly" The faint apology was spoken in a cracking singsong tone.

Stroltzkin lay silent, but her mind was screaming too loud to hear what the screams said. For someone she cared about so deeply to speak words that violated her entire people's dignity – *her* dignity – so viciously, was shocking in ways the battlefield never had been. And yet, had things been different, she had very nearly spoken words just as vile, the day they'd first met. "Insect." "Bug." "Sexless roach." "*It.*" Hate ran thick between their tribes, thicker than it ever had. Vridinnik could not bring herself to excuse the Yuvei's words, but she was familiar with the reason they were uttered.

Seconds of silence passed between them, where even the war above seemed to go quiet. Then, after many deep breaths, Stroltzkin's honest words came.

"It's because I don't feel as though I am one of them. And I believe they feel the same way towards me as well." She had barely even breathed the words through her lips, but Veo Ru raised their head as though it were as loud as a cave-in. The warrior put down her spear, eyes fixated on a chip in its point.

"I've always believed in my people's ways. Our virtues of strength, courage, valor and will. The way of the warrior, the honor that comes with it, and the wielding of power as a means of protection. Our ways are old, and strong and righteous, and I do not mean to break them. I just want them to change. I want them to welcome more of us. All my life I wanted to embody the values of my kin, to fight for them, to live in respect of the principles they defend.

“But,” she added, her voice suddenly whistling through her fangs, rather than booming through her throat, “I was told I could not. It was said we women could not possibly know the weight of defending our homes, of believing in our ways, as seeing battle as anything more than a scrap of culture. Yet, here I sit, these feelings in my heart, burning so fiercely that I would break the tenets of our Tribe so that they may be known to all, my angers and my loves. However, it seems my will to break those imprisoning tenets has inspired those I would fight for to despise my very soul.”

Finally, Stroltzkin looked up at Veo Ru, and they saw her, for the first time, cry proudly.

“I cannot be alone with this feeling among my kin. I refuse to believe I am the only one. I’ve bared this pain secret long enough to know that men and women far stronger than I have perished bearing this very same pain within them. I fight for them as much as myself, as well as those who would see my vision defiled and broken. Because all of them are worth fighting for. Understand I do not hate my people, Veo Ru, nor even the traditions they would fight and die for. I hate that they will not let me fight and die for the same things they would. So, I will gladly die, if it means I can change this.

“I want my people to remember who I was, not what I was. I want to prove I was right to want the freedom to choose my fate, to want my wishes acknowledged and respected. I want my death to mean something, for the life that preceded it to endure forever. If a few forgotten heroes can inspire me to do such great things, what could a true hero, who truly existed and whose courage will be remembered for generations, inspire in her people? This is what I fight for, what I will keep fighting for, no matter the hatred they bestow upon my name and scales.”

Only then did Stroltzkin allow herself to wipe away the twin lines of tears that ran down her cheeks. Veo Ru lay there stunned for a moment, gazing at this Granvull who spoke such pride in the meaning of her sacrifice, and felt a warm light pour out from her, light that reminded them of Paleless skies. The Yuvei reached out through the rows of cell bars that separated them, and placed their hand on Stroltzkin’s arm. They could feel muscle beneath her skin, knotted and coarse like gnarled oak, the pulsing of a strength that could break stone, bend metal, end lives. But the hand she placed over theirs in kind was somehow more gentle than morning dew, warm,

yet coolly soothing. Veo Ru shuddered as they realized they yearned to be closer, unsure of what the yearning meant.

“Then,” the albino whispered, eyes averting from hers for reasons they could not admit, “can you tell me? About them. Kindred, culture, ones you can die for like this?”

Stroltzkin smiled, and then, she told Veo Ru everything.

She told of their long history of great adventurers, noble warriors, wise shamans, and revered loremasters. She told of their epic songs, heartfelt stories, and tremendous poems that chanted triumph, tragedy, terror and fantasy. She told of their brilliant jewellers, honest blacksmiths, dedicated miners and persistent hunters, sworn to preserve harmony between art, industry, and land. She told of children who wrestled as they learned about trees and earth, women who were kind and fierce caretakers of homes and families, men who did not hesitate to fight for these same women and children. She hungrily told about foods they could not eat now that the Pale hung above them, honey-soaked roasts of fat-marbled meats and savory stews cooked in intoxicatingly rich spices. Veo Ru explained they did not mind, since Yuvei could not tolerate meat, and they laughed together, perhaps the first true laugh either had shared in ages.

She told, and told, and told, until there was nothing left to tell. By the end, their backs were laying against one another’s despite the prison’s bars, the distant battle atop them somehow forgotten. The wall of hate that divided their Tribes, which, just a moment ago, had seemed terrifyingly imposing, now appeared thinner and more transparent than it ever had since the Great War’s dawn.

“Thank you, Stroltzkin,” the Yuvei said, turnin her way. “When I met you first, on that...death-dark day, I lose faith in...everything. Truthfully. My people, purpose...existence. I grateful you could remind why I did what I have did, back then in the Great White City.”

The Granvull tilted her head, staggered by what she’d just heard. Veo Ru always turned silent when the subject of their past was mentioned, as though it were a noose tightening around their neck. As she saw them now, face draped in a veil of melancholy remembrance framed by a sad, scarred smile, Vridinnik had to wonder if she had not loosened that noose, somehow.

“I was trapped in the Great White City along my kin, serving Ithians, building their weapons, firebombs...*Pale*. Our life was unbearable. Yuvei are nomads, worshippers of creation, nature, commerce. Yuvei are prosperity, knowledge, progress. Yuvei are spell-poets, wielded Magic, the benevolent guardian force. Then, the voracious Ithian crusades. Then, locked in their lightless towers forever. Then, forced to betray principles we dear hold...Many kindred could not withstand pain this like. Take their own lives. Some kindred...relished opportunity to vengeance Granvull that chased us from our native Southwoods. That glee did not last in the face of misery. For those who held fast, Ithians treated us as slaves, beating, starving or torturing if we not do use our powers as demanded they be used. The Hive Mind that links Yuvei ensured suffering of one was agony of all.

“I swore I would not stand this injustice, promised kindred I would fight for them. But was no hero to my Tribe, nor a leader, nor even loved because...well, you see. I was sick anomaly, an outcast. Their words, actions, even the hive mind reminded me at all times I was different. A white blister on a magnificent emerald. A vengeance-starved idealist among resigned servants that craved liberation, a reminder they gave birth to the Pale under the dominion of fat silver demons. Like you, I was willing to anything do for Tribe, for giving them a better tomorrow.

“It took me blood. It took me sweat. It took me pain physical and mental I had never known, but in fifteen years’ I gathered followers to cause, allies who loathed me, but shared my will to preserve ways, save kindred. Then one night, we attack as one. Wielded Magic Ithians had corrupted, the power that firstborn Io Lux once used to meld the fruit of Tree of Origin into Yuvei saplings. Wielded Magic to kill and burn the Ithians, to tell the Yuvei would tolerate no longer their malice. We created a message from fear-chaos, wrote in white fire on the walls of the Great White City...

“We were...outnumbered...in matter of few hours. This gathering of braves was shattered in seconds. Dozens of kindred slaughtered, all in the name of a burnt tower and demolished ammunition. Those that did not die, included myself, made public examples. We had sent Ithians the message we do fight for freedom. They reply they do not tolerate our freedom, and mandibles were torn from our jaws and burned in firebombs, our Magic gone

forever. Ithians exiled me. And my dissenters from the Great White City. Leave us to die under the burning gaze of the Pale...Pale we wrought.

“This when I truly lost hope, I believe. I felt voices of few close friends’ spirits pain-moan. For days and days and days, before going silent in the Hive Mind, either from disease or hunger. Their last thoughts cursed Ithians they were powerless to stop, and cursed my Pale self, who did not give salvation they did seek. From within the city, my remaining kindred’s minds were ablaze. They made us heroes, and did follow in our path, sacrificing themselves so that Ithians did suffer for taking us from them, spitting on their traditions, and condemning them to this life of collective solitude.

“I was intoxicated by the Pale’s breath, dizzy with starvation. Voices of my kin yelled at me from all directions of the mind, directions of the wind, directions of the time. Some called me hero and threw blazing grenades at Ithian nobles, before wails of desperate agony swelled, mandibles gouged out as punishment. Some called me traitor for taking lives of their children, mourning their siblings and loathing their fate so loud, it rend my mind, like fires of the Pale. More chose to forget battle’s meaning, forget teachings we tried to reclaim. Kindred became consumed by hate, made our sacrifice justification for silent vengeance...I shattered then. Broke apart from all sides.

“At that moment I believed I had not saved my Tribe, had not brought them closer to virtues I fought for, even when my kindred turned against me. I believed it my fault was. That I fractured them, made them lose their way more than it had ever been lost. Voices in my hive mind cacophonied, and I ran from the Great White City. Hoping to escape their screams. Desperate to flee the War. I wanted to die. I was coward too much to perish alone, to perish with no one else knowing the truth.”

Then, just as Veo Ru’s misery seemed to reach its pinnacle, they looked to Stroltzkin, and smiled: not sadly, but gratefully. It was a smile that the Granvull axemaideen had never seen her companion wear, and yet one that seemed to belong there, on their tired face.

“And then I meet you, Stroltzkin. You swore to protect me, whatever the consequences, because you believe it was right. You showed me resolve I forgot, proved you were ready to fight for your beliefs. You reminded me I had things worth fighting, people worth protecting,

culture worth saving. I see now I do not ruin my kindred's destiny. I help freed them, let them choose for themselves to fight for what they believe, choose how they would lead the battle. I cannot ask for anything but for sacrifices to be remembered. And I will carry those memories long as breath drawn. And I will carry the memory of the unsung Granvull hero that gave me much. Much more just than safety."

Veo Ru reached through their cage's bars, and caressed Stroltzkin's face, looking into her eyes, the warmth of her skin and her courage swelling in them.

"When I asked you first day to help me, Stroltzkin, I never thought you would *save* me in this way. From Great War. From myself. From all of it. I am...honored. Honored to have been meet you. Honored to know one sp devoted to peace, ambition. Honored you shared with me your dream. And it was dream of such beauty, even the Book of Lost Heroes, even all Magic I've ever known, cannot compare. I am honored, in ways you cannot imagine even, to privilege have of remembering you. I only hope that I will become too, a memory worthy of you, worthy to be part of you."

It happened slowly, unknowingly, but Stroltzkin smiled in a way she'd never smiled before. She sought words that could tell Veo Ru how thankful she was, for their kindness, their presence, but found none. So she reached to cup the Yuvei's face in her hand, feel the warmth Veo Ru felt in her. For a moment, both looked at their reflections dance on the surface of each other's eyes. At long last, they looked past the light on the surface of those eyes, and each saw the light each other held within. Then, those lights danced with each other, slow and quiet.

Grant comfort to those who fear death. Fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. Honor those that bless you with trust. The true heroes lost are those strong enough to show compassion before despair, that place the virtues of saviors before the needs of slayers. The words of the Book swelled as their faces drew closer, the dancing of their lights intensifying.

Between the bars of the Hearth Land Mines, far beneath one of the War's most brutal battles, two of the greatest heroes the Four Tribes had ever known, shared a quiet, gentle kiss.

No work of art nor work of history is quite certain what happened next, after the fall of the last Granvull stronghold, in that moment when two who'd known such suffering, found love.

Some claim these two lovers, two heroes, died, then and there, embracing one another even as the flametongues of an Ithian firebomb licked their flesh clean to the bone.

Others deem that Stroltzkin Vridinnink charged to the frontlines of the battle, just as the Ithian forces had entered the mines, and singlehandedly held back the entire enemy army, slaying dozens, defending hundreds, dying with a smile, knowing that she died the hero she'd always meant to.

A few believe the pair escaped, and made route for the Imperial Capital. Whether they perished during their pilgrimage under the blight of the Pale, or whether they succeeded in their journey, and together helped mend the broken bonds between the Four Tribes, none are certain.

Perhaps these two never really were enamored, and the stories just like to imagine they were. That their tale did more harm than good, and created a suite of heroes dedicated to noble sacrifice, rather than the accomplishment of great things. Some might even say, rightfully so, that this tale is fabrication, like the Book of Lost Heroes. But the reality is not what matters.

What matters are their legends that live on today, the stories they've inspired among the Four Tribes. Their kindness and courage which brought foes together, tore down barriers that once stood between enemies, given us courage to fight for what we believe in. Without them, I would not be here, writing their story, the one they told me as a child. Naïve, you might say, to believe such fairytales.

But as I look today at the Pale above, and the white light it casts upon us, I cannot help notice that its surface bears more scars and fissures, since they day my parents faded into myth.

To my forgotten heroes, whose deeds go unsung no longer.

The Book of Remembered Heroes, Anonymous Author

THE END

Third Chapter

REMEMBRANCE

We Kalleed, we have a saying. “Proper stories start at the beginning, because beginnings let us understand.” But this is a story about my dad. Don’t think I want to understand him. No more than I already do anyway. Starting from the beginning? Might change that.

Besides. This story ain’t a proper one. Lotta reasons why that is. Too many. But still. Story needs to be told. Before its too late for me to tell it no more. This story? Story’s about how dad taught me to do the right thing. Believe what I fight for, take care of my family, no matter what. Best lesson I ever leaned. But Dad taught it the wrong way. Worst way possible, maybe. Still. Never forgot that lesson. Try to live by it everyday, even now. Suppose that’s a sign the man really did know what he was doing. Took him long enough. Shame he only remembered how to do it right before he died.

Heh. Seems improper stories best start at the end. Suppose what follows should be the beginning of the end. Here goes. Listen well. Won’t be long. End’s comin’ for me too.

Was a rough day at the Imperial Shipyards. You’ve heard of it. Bad place. Bad memories. If saltwater didn’t drown you, shit, vomit and misery would. Never been? Nothing I can say’ll make you understand. Have been? Nothing I can say’ll do it justice.

Regardless. Kalleed never saw easy days out there. No one did, really. But Kalleed had it worse. Ithians had a way of making sure. Still. Somehow this day was harder than most. Weather had us riled. Pale was especially fiery. Snowed burning light every few hours. Sky would’ve torched the lumber if it weren’t for how mad the sea was. Spat and spewed as if it was the end of the world all over again. Waves were crashing into the harbour so hard, looked like they wanted to kill themselves. Workmen must have shown it how. White above glared off the water, made the horizon into writhing fire. Dad’s friends joked that wouldn’t be so bad, considering the cold. You might find that silly, since we Kalleed are from the North. But there’s something about coast wind that ice just can’t match. A blizzard’ll numb you so bad you can’t

even feel yourself die. Sea-draft just keeps slicing away like a razor. Lets you taste every breath of Pale you take in like it's your very first. Cold so raw it burns.

But that was just the weather. Weather is bad. Not evil. Shipyards were another story.

Don't need to remind you how Ithians lured us. Promised work. Money. Security. Tickets into the city. *Dignity*. Heh. That was the biggest lie of all. Specially down there. No facilities allowed for our kind. Salt and stewed feces made the air putrid. Work hours were long. Sleep hard to come by. Food half-rotten and in short supply. Jobs? Dangerous. Lives? Lost daily. Depression? Common. Suicide? More so. Ones that didn't break? Made into targets for breaking. Predictable as the tides.

'Cause the real problem was Ithians. Always is when you talk 'bout the past. Still is when you talk 'bout today. Damn shame bad ones did more harm than kind ones did good. World'd be different if that were the case.

Anyway, the Ithians. Never had an easy day with them. But, like I said that day was especially rough. Supervisors kept their whip hands busier'n ever. Took one hit too many to finish a nail? Lash. Took one step too long carrying a beam to the cranes? Lash. Took a knee cause the Pale was about to make you puke your guts? Three lashes, a slur, and a promise you wouldn't be getting paid anytime soon. Couple of us found ourselves looking at that ocean like it had the right idea. Again.

Why were they so hard? Well, none of us was sure. One silver-skin mentioned deadlines. Nobody bought it. When hadn't deadlines been an excuse to draw scars on some sorry iron-skin? Naw. I bet it was cause the Warden wanted to scare us straight. Been rumors workmen were planning a strike. Was a more of a mutiny. Didn't have much of a plan. Mostly just a lot of mutual anger. Some of it was inspired. Most of it was loud. All of it was incriminating. Either way, Warden wasn't gonna have any of it. Ordered us to haul enough wood and Platinum in one day to build the entire Shipyard twice over. Told Supervisors to keep us working till we were finished, not till feeding time. Don't need me to tell you that didn't happen. Didn't stop them from trying to make us.

Warden must've scared his Supervisors good. Those Ithians went after us like we'd just fucked their children. Beyten *was* sleeping the Warden's niece after dark, back in those days. So they weren't wrong, really. Still. Never understood why Beyten liked silver-skins so much. Not till I married one myself. Still. Some days I just have more questions for him.

Regardless. Colour the crime with any motive you want. Don't change the facts. If a Kalleed wasn't working like a machine, they beat him till he did. If he never did, kept beating him now and then, to make sure he didn't want to change his mind. Only took a few hours for tempers to get tauter than those barbed whiptails. Wasn't till they started taking a crack at me that those tempers finally began to snap. And snap hard they did. None harder than Endeym's.

I was working with Endeym that day. Lugged boards to cranes with him when trouble started. Not proud to admit I started it. Must've been walking too slow for the silver-skins' liking. Was getting tired, hungry. They didn't care what I was. Supervisor cracked me right in the back of the knee. I fell over. Endeym stumbled. Swore something I won't repeat. Dropped the boards. Ropes tore. Buncha planks got bruised or splintered. Damn near whole workshop winced at that. I was gonna get it.

Supervisor came up to me. Big old Ithian. Oiled chrome skin. Washboard chins you could see through his breathing helm. Ham-thick tentacles. Pot roast muscle. Shit-black eyes. Switchblade grin. Wore collants and dentelle and velvet coats like basting. Had a look like he could eat me. Ithians don't have big mouths, but damned if their appetites aren't. And I could tell this one was hungry.

Silver-skin walked over. Twirled his whiptails like the girls at the brothels twirled their scarves. I just sat there holding my leg hard. Cough-swore between my teeth. Cut hurt real bad. Tore my pant. Nicked a tendon. Platinum barbs on those things do a lotta damage. Still have the limp it gave me. Was trying damn hard not to cry. Doing a shit job of it.

Supervisor tapped me with his shoe. I looked up at him. Ithian with a weapon asks for your attention? You give it to him. Man asked me if I was planning to get lazy today. Told him no, sir. Asked me why I was on the ground then. Told him my leg hurt, sir. Asked me how did that ever happen to you. Ithians in the back giggled. Kalleed coughed. Supervisor smiled wider.

Didn't know what to say. He asked again. I kept quiet. Not by choice. So the Supervisor lashed me. Held the scream in, barely. Felt like I lost my eye. Damn near did. Tried to move away. Supervisor yanked on my tail. Cracked a bone in it. Told me if I didn't answer fast I was getting another one. I shook my head, and scrambled. Hit me again, and called me Nickel.

That's when I started squealing. Felt tears on me. Shook at the lips. Whip hurt bad. But nothing ever heard quite so bad as hearing *them* call you *that*. Nickel. Damn I hate that word. Damn Ithians liked that word. Hope we learn to never use it again. Whips nicked me good. But "Nickel"? Cut deep.

Ithians taught us to be tools before we were people. Nickel was used to remind us which was which. That's why they never said it like it was an insult. Or like a swear. They told it to you like it was the truth, and you couldn't argue with truth. And that's what made it hurt like hell. The word was just a word. But what it means? I can't make you understand. No one can. That word doesn't tell you what you are. It tells you what you aren't. It tells you exactly what the world says you're worth, and the world says it ain't a lot, and always will be. And once you realize you're not what you think you are, after being told, proven, beaten? You start to believe it. You crack, and you become what the silver-skins say. Nothing. Nothing but Nickel, and everything it denies you.

Never thought it'd happen to me. I'd seen other workmen end up like this. Man seems tough. Like ain't nothing those silver-skins'll could do to break him. Then one day it's just a good smack and "Nickel". Fella's on the ground screaming. Holds his face. Cries for hours. False truths set in one by one, but self-hate comes in fast and hard. Rocks the mind sideways till nothing's left, and you forget who you are. Forget what you are. Forget everything, except that you're Nickel. That's usually when they never talk again. Or choose to go swimming for good.

That day, that's what happened to me. "Nickel" broke me.

I used to consider myself a man. Smart man who knew what he was doing. Good man who was gonna make it through this. Handsome one at that. Deep peppery skin. Aquiline ears. Long tail. Snaking muscles. Eyes fiery like roiling seawater. Milk-white, milk-smooth hair. Reached all the way to my knees. Or did, before they cut it. Either way. Had a body to make old men jealous. Young boys proud. Sweet girls audacious. I was, by all accounts, a man. But I

didn't feel like one after what happened. Felt the way those girls at the brothels feel when a workman gets rowdy and don't wanna pay. Shaking, crying, holding onto what's left of themselves as though something'd in them's been taken, something painful been put in its place. Like the blood and bruises don't matter, only the thing that's been carved into you, what another person's eyes and words will flense off of what you believe.

I still wake up sometimes, wondering if something worse happened to me. That I'm just trying to trick myself into thinking otherwise. All cause of one word. Nickel. Seems too easy to be true, doesn't it? It is. That's what makes it work. The right man's words'll cut you deeper than any of his actions. And it's the simplest words that do it, most times.

See, silver-skins have a way with words and a way with tools. Makes sense really. Both serve the same purpose. They do things. Either for you, or to you. Ithians? Words and tools did things to others for them. Tools destroyed what defined. Words burnt down whatever was left. Both together made you into just another tool with a word for a name. Artificial meat, shackles, "Beast"? Shame a Granvull into being a herbivore. Pliers, dye, "Bug"? Convince a Yuvei they was born evil. Clippers, whips, "Nickel"? Right time, right place? Could make a Kalleed believe *anything*. Supervisors just happened be the best at finding the time and the place.

That was the real power of a word like Nickel. It didn't mean nothing. It's what they made you *think* it meant. It's what it *reduced* you to. Even the silver-skins didn't know what that was. They just knew enough whipping, enough clipping, enough naming, and you'd make up your own answers. Worse answers they could ever come up with. Make you kill your own self from the inside out. And they were right. No one knew how to hurt you better than you. A little push was all it took. And you could hurt yourself worse than you ever thought you ever could. All thanks to shaved hair and harsh words. That's all it took to give you your answers.

Once a Kalleed had his answers? Wasn't Kalleed anymore. Was Nickel. Was whatever the Ithians thought Kalleed should be. Believed it too. Damn shame. We weren't so different. Silver? Iron? Both ores're worth something, ores to be proud of. Ithians were just convinced ours were worth less. Made that loud and clear till you agreed silver coins deserved a prettier purses than iron ones.

So. Supervisor calls me Nickel, and hits me. Again. Again. I just laid my head on the ground and cried like I was gonna die. Begged him to not hit me no more, sir. Ithians laughed. Kalleed didn't. Just groaned. Few said nice words for my sake. Wasn't fun to see anyone break like that. Nobody was dying. But someone was obviously about to lose their life. Was like losing part of your family.

Must be why dad stepped in. Man always said that pride and dignity came second to keeping loved ones safe. Lotta people said that. Dad did it. Might have not been a good father. Was definitely a great man. In some regards. I'll get to that. I promise.

Dad yelled like thunder. Supervisor stopped mid-swing like he'd been struck by it. Whole Shipyard went quiet. Dad pushed people outta the way. Squeezed past silver-skins too stunned to stop him. Ran over to me. Knelt. Held me. Right then and there. On the ground. While I was still bleeding and shrieking. Clawed at his face. Held my hands back. Hit me. Not hard enough to hurt. Hard enough to wake me. Stung like Pale. Told me it was okay. Everything was gonna be okay. You did good. Didn't do nothing wrong. You were a going to be okay.

Called me Elrec. Called me by name. That woke me up. Reminded me I was someone. More than what they said I was. More than what they were making me do. For them or to myself. Hearing my name didn't make me stop crying. Cried different tears though. Held onto dad. He hugged be back. Kept telling him I was sorry. Kept telling me it was okay. Voice was like gravel. Coarse. Cracked. Stable. Firm. Pale had done damage to his throat. Pale had made his voice weigh. He yelled? You'd hear him. And listen. He whispered? You'd hear him louder.

Sea settled down. Workmen kept to themselves. Silver-skins didn't know what to say. Was just me crying and dad whispering. Was one of the last times dad ever showed me kindness.

No, that wasn't the lesson he taught me. That was the lesson he didn't want me to forget.

Reminded me I had a job to do. That I meant something to people back home. That they meant something to me. That we two were the only ones that could do it. Make enough money to buy everyone a ticket. Way into the Capital. Life they deserved. Was a hard thing to do. Dad swore he'd do it. I swore I'd help. Couldn't give up on him. He wouldn't give up on me. Was the whole reason I'd put up with any of this for so long. So I promised. Myself and dad. I'd do

it. I'd do the right thing. Wouldn't ever forget that lesson from that day on. Dad would. But that's me gettin' sidetracked again.

Fat Supervisor took a while before saying anything. Must've thought he was asleep and dreaming, seeing what he saw then. Disobedience. Disrespect. Words 'n tools not doing what they were supposed to. So when he spoke, he screamed. Skin went from silver to Pale-hot. Called us both Nickels. Raised his whip. Was gonna lash us dead. But then dad stood up and walked right up to him.

Ithian was big. Dad was bigger. Silver-skin stopped mid-swing. Nickel hung at his lips but never made it through. Word meant something much different when he'd use it at someone like dad. I was a tough man. Dad was a strong one. Strongest in the Shipyards, even. Strong enough to prove it. Big enough not to have anyone argue about it. Worked harder than anyone. Worked longer. Worked better, too. Even looked the part. Was like a man from a folk-song that moved mountains. Slate skin like gravel and steel. Arrowhead ears. Thick tail. Bulging muscles. Eyes hard like tempered Platinum. Pearl-white, pearl-hard hair. Still had an inch left the clippers hadn't managed to cut. He just had to be there and trouble took the long way round. No wonder dad became a symbol.

Dad showed his hands. Talked to the fat man. Told him the truth. Didn't want trouble. Wanted to get back to work. Be done for the day. Get paid. Eat. Rest. Be ready for work tomorrow. Sir. Voice was calm when he said that. Commanding. Must have learned it by example. Just like the sea. Funny how we all learn the worst things from those that hate us.

Supervisor wavered. Looked like he was gonna concede. Be good for once. Saw his tentacles go taut. Knew he wouldn't. Silver-skin rose his whip hand. Brought it down hard and wrote pain across dad's face. Fell over. Swore. Bled. Covered his eyes. Supervisor hit him again. Across the chest. Legs. Stomach. Ass. Called him Nickel once for every mark he left.

Few Kalleed stepped in then. Old Leuden and Beyten to be specific. I tried too. Wanted to pick up dad between lashes. Do the right thing. Do what he'd done for me. Keep my family safe. Didn't work for any of us. Ithians turned on us, quick. Decked old Leuden in one hit. Man was the oldest Kalleed I'd ever seen. Was like every bone in him slacked in one go and he died from old age right then and there. Beyten ate whip along the cheek. Swore. Beyten was fat –

Ithian-fat. Said worse things then than any silver-skin I ever heard say. Me? One got me along the neck. Called me Nickel too. Crawled towards dad as he hit me. Tried to cover him. Couldn't quite make it. Supervisor was at us both. Flailed that whip like a thresher on gray wheat. Chanted Nickel. Nickel. Nickel. Sea went deaf and Pale went mad. Could hear myself tear and crack. I held on. Didn't hold out long. Didn't cry. Screamed lots. Wasn't gonna break again. Was pretty sure I was gonna die though. That none of it had mattered. That the right thing hadn't meant shit in the end. That silver-skins didn't care what you wanted. That the Pale didn't care what you wanted. That Kalleed didn't care what you wanted.

That's when Endeym finally went and got himself killed.

Few things you should know. First glance, Endeym was plain as Kalleed come. Not too old or young. Not too big or small. Didn't wash much. Talked less. Coughed more. Pretty simple guy. Turned few heads. Dull waxen skin. Oval ears. Drooping tail. More chub than muscle. Eyes didn't have much light left to 'em. Head shaved clean. Unremarkable. Except for one thing.

Endeym had a creaky mind. Pale did a number on him. No protection, most of us got lifelong cough. Endeym? Thoughts always seemed to be what suffocated. Hated *Ithians* hard. Came up with slurs and tall tales of guttin' some alive. Participated in mutiny groups often. Thought he was a bit too intense about things. Often looked at the sea like it was a good option. Nodded when he saw people share his opinion and jump in. Started fights with other workmen. Usually cause he did the wrong things. Stole money. Drank spirits. Badmouthed whores. Moaned about missing his wife when he slept. They died years back. Never got over it. Never would. Was a nice fella when he didn't get lost on memory lane too long. Not a bad man. Bad attitude, but not a bad person. Troubled one. Shaken one. One that made a lot of bad choices after bad things happened to him. Not the best worker. But not a bad man. Worked with him often. Saved my life. Saved dad's too. Don't remember him very well. Don't miss him much. Still, don't think he deserved what he got.

Anyway. Endeym had barely moved since it'd all went down. But, soon as that *Ithian* said Nickel one time too many that day...White above. Poor man went wilder n' the sea.

Clocked the supervisor upside the head with a slab of plank. Hard. Supervisor went stiff then soft and fell. Endeym grabbed his whip. Thrashed at him like he'd used the thing his whole

life and dug criss-crosses deep. Ithian wailed. Loud. Hard. High-pitched. Musta been his first time getting it. Endeym didn't care. Sped up. Kept going till Supervisor passed out twitching.

Was like a fever dream, watching it happen. Endeym was damn near killing a Supervisor with his own lash. In public. Dad and me were slackjawed. Ithians more so. Most iron-skins were too. Few in the back were even cheering. Nobody never saw a Kalleed dare do that before. Was suicide. Was inspirational. Was revolutionary. Endeym hadn't meant to, but he'd changed things. I shouldn't blame him for breaking dad. Though part of me can't help but do.

Supervisors needed a minute before they could snap out of it. Wasn't pretty when they finally did. Ran at Endeym screaming. Lashed at him. He lashed back at them. No blows traded. Both sides held at whip's length. One too scared to get hurt. One too mad to stop swinging.

Was pretty clear what was gonna happen. Endeym had that look in eyes. Look a man gets when he realizes his life don't matter anymore. Hasn't meant anything to anyone for long time. Look a man gets when he chooses meaningful death over lifelong meaninglessness. He was gonna keep at it till he killed one. But Endeym was gonna get killed. Supervisors'd get him sooner or later. Tensions'd rise. Peak. Pop. Riot was gonna start. Army was gonna come. Put us all away. Locked up. No jobs. No money. No way to pay for help back home. Everything was gonna go to Pale.

Then I saw dad walk up to him. Don't know when he made it. Was still on the ground bleeding when Endeym got surrounded. Walked right for him past the supervisors. Slow stride. Wobbling limbs. Swaying head. Probably couldn't see straight. Only had one good eye left to do it. Supervisors yelled more. Dad didn't break pace. Trotted right up to Endeym. They didn't stop him. Intimidated is my guess. Kalleed that big decides he's going somewhere and won't stop? Hitting him's gonna delay his getting there, not change his mind. Once he was past the Supervisors, he walked real slow. Step. By. Step. Hands held out. Again. Shaking this time. Couldn't tell if he was woozy or worried. Likely both. Made it to arm's length before Endeym raised his weapon to hit at him.

Endeym didn't swing, but he looked real off. The workmen swore. Shouted him not to do it. Shouted dad to back off. Shouted both of em to kill off the damn Ithians already. Dad just stood and showed hands. Endeym yelled. Called him names. Not Nickel, but hard names.

Wanted him to get outta the way, to kill Supervisors, for Supervisors to kill him. Was a rough sight. Endeym still had that shattered look in his eyes. Locking eyes with eyes like those? Hurts. Don't know how dad did it.

When dad spoke to him then, he spoke strong. Soft too. Talked to me like that sometimes. Just had a second ago. Sounded different here, somehow. More strong than soft, maybe. Anyway. Told Endeym to put down the whip. Didn't want anything to happen to him. Wanted to get back to work. Wanted to finish the day. Go to bed. Sleep. Get up. Be alright tomorrow. Help his family. See his daughters. His poppa. His sister. Too late for his wife. Not for them.

That last part really hit Endeym. Saw him twitch. Slacken. Face went from mad to upset. Subtle change. Important one. Dad was getting through. Endeym said he didn't want to. Wanted to do something before he died. Dad told he already did. Made a difference. Saved two lives. Saved a family. Told him to put down the whip. More death was gonna make more problems for everyone. And everyone just wanted to work. Just wanted to get somewhere safe. Told him to do the right thing.

Might think this sounded too easy. Naïve. Convenient. It was.

Endeym knelt. Looked like he was about to cry. Dad got closer. Endeym shouted. Dunno if he meant to say anything. Raised his weapon. Moved to kill dad. Didn't get the chance. Dad was on him first. Held both arms and his tail. Endeym thrashed. Screamed he didn't wanna die. That it wasn't fair. That he was gonna kill all of 'em. Dad brained him against the floor. Once. Twice. Third time? Endeym went quiet. Fingers slacked. Chest rippled. Wasn't dead. But was out. Dad stood up. Looked at Endeym for a long time. Like he'd done the right thing and felt bad for it. Sea rocked the docks. Kalleed swore and prayed. Ithians stayed still. Pale seemed to churn into a grin. And I just sat there.

Dad called out to the silver-skins. Told them that it was okay. That he wouldn't do it again. That everyone could use a break. Supervisors were whiter than Pale. Couldn't make sense of anything that happened that day. But this took the cake. Kalleed could do their job better n' them. Better yet, he could tell an Ithian what to do and make sense doing it.

Tall thin Supervisor walked up to dad and told him to head straight to the clinic. To take me with him. Asked Beyten to take old Leuden. Warden'd be in to see us soon. Specially dad. Were all in trouble. Dad said thank you, sir. Wobbled off. Beyten slugged old Leuden onto his shoulders. Walked slow. Whimpered. Poor bastard was gonna need stitches up to his ear. Old Leuden was dead for all he knew. Old Leuden was his grandpa. Beyten wasn't a tough man. Was by no means a soft one. Still can't believe he stayed with the Warden's niece after all that. Man clearly knew war wasn't an answer. Shame man didn't know how to say it to the rest of us. Watched Beyten carry old Leuden for a while. Felt dad deserved that kindness. Some of it at least. Offered him a shoulder. He took it. Clearly didn't need it. Even half-bled the man was harder stuff than anyone in the Shipyards.

Supervisors told us, take five and move along. Nothin' to see here, Nickels. Shouldn't have said that. One word riled a lot of people worse than they were. People half-cried, half-screamed. Considered jumping at 'em, like me. Didn't though. Wasn't the time. But Endeym and dad? They'd inspired something. Showed silver-skins weren't bigger than us. No matter what words or tools they had to say different. Was a revelation. Troubling one. Kalleed were convinced. Lot of 'em were converted. Lot more wanted to make those mutiny rumors real.

When me and dad were walking off the Supervisors killed Endeym. Wasn't the first time they killed a Kalleed. Wasn't the last. Was certainly the worst. Poor Endeym. Didn't die slow. Nor quiet. Sea was raging then. Still couldn't drown any of it out. Kalleed got sick watching. Made a lot more who were on the fence about a strike convinced. Few of em swore oath then and there. They'd bring gray-coloured Pale to the silver-skins for that. All I'm gonna say this time. Won't do him the disrespect of making his passing a spectacle for an audience. Wouldn't be better than the Ithians if I did. Was hard to watch. No tears were shed. Sadness will break you if you let too much of it into you. Kalleed learned to tune it to mute early on in life. Made it liveable. Poor philosophy. Repression broke us more than sadness. Taught us to use anger to fill the void misery's absence left. Bad lesson. Learned it fast too. Don't think we've unlearned it yet. Just learned to use it different, for now.

Was a moment where dad and me stopped. Hesitated. Considered going back. Help Endeym. Lead the charge against 'em right here. Right now. Neither of us did. Kept walking.

Right then I understood dad may have taught me to do the right thing, but his right thing wasn't the same mine. Neither of us turned back. Neither of us had the same reasons not to. Dad didn't cause he knew he shouldn't. I didn't cause I knew I couldn't. Dad was still strong. Commanded authority. Could've been the one to free us. Stayed out by choice. Didn't want to rock the boat. Right thing for him was doing his job and getting paid. Someone else got in the way? He'd get them out of it. Endeym was a hurdle he'd just cleared. Me? I was too weak to do a thing. Commanded ridicule. Would've died playing hero, and have no one else play along. I stayed out by obligation. I didn't want to rock the boat anymore. I wanted to see the boat sink. Right thing was keeping my family safe. World the way it was back then? No way they would have been. Work or money or otherwise.

I wanted trouble. Dad wanted to avoid it. We wanted the same thing different ways. That's why I don't hate dad for what he did. Never forgave him. But don't hate him. Can't.

Still. Sometimes I remember that talk he had in the clinic. I feel something for him then. Something hot. Not quite hate. Definitely not love. Much less understanding. Feeling lingers today. Burns less. But the burning's still there, I tell ya. Bothers me.

Old Leuden and Beyten were patched outside. Slapdash stuff. Beyten still has the biggest zigzag grin I ever seen. Scar runs past his eyebrows. Old Leuden? Well, he's dead. Didn't die *there*. But doctors didn't do much to slow death down. Man barely spoke or worked till what was left of his brain gave out and stopped working altogether.

But dad and me were brought inside. Past the communal room. Into the back. Private space. Separate room. For Supervisors. Big room. Dark room. Had black marble walls. A fireplace. Velvet curtains. Plush beds. Big candlesticks hanging from the ceiling. Can't remember what you call those. Was beautiful though. Made me furious. Ithian clinic was warm. Quiet. Comfortable. Only place in the Shipyards that was. Had to get beaten half to death to get peace anywhere. No wonder people kept offing themselves. I would've done more than fight just for an hour in a place like this.

Nurses patched us up quick and good. Bandaged. Stitched. Cleaned. Don't remember the details. Was groggy. Shaken. Scared. Details don't really matter. Except for the cleaning. Was an epiphany. Nurses scrubbed my blood off. Felt good. Then they washed dad and

Endeym's blood off me too. Felt amazing. And felt awful. Like I'd finally put down that load of boards. Like everything was gonna be okay. Like Endeym was dead and it was all my fault. Like dad and me would never be the same. Like nothing was gonna be okay. Blood always weighs heavy. Weighs heavier when you know it's not yours. Getting rid of that weight? Double-edged sword. Never know which edge is sharpest. Not till you're too late. Not till the blood and everything it means is gone.

Dad laughed in there. Last time I heard him laugh. Pointed at me. Said Elrec, you got a scar over your left eye. Mine's on my right. Now we got an excuse not to see eye-to-eye. I laughed back. Faked the laugh, but it made dad happy. Was glad to see him smile. Thin smile though. Poor man felt worse than I realized. Dad had a heart of stone. Words and whips were broken chisels at best. But chip away at a rock long enough, and cracks will show no matter what. Dad's cracks always showed. But that day, they were deeper. Something was breaking. Lifetime of hurt and shame taking its toll.

Me? Much simpler. Was too young to feel that kind of pain. That kind of pain comes with age. I just felt queasy. Wrong. Looked at dad and took pity. Looked at him and saw a shadow of my father. Always did. But shadow was especially thick then. Was a long time coming. So I just lied to his face. Had his words reverberate in me while I laughed. Pondered. Wasn't like he made a joke. More like he made a promise. He had, sort of. We never agreed again. We fought till he died. Or almost.

Anyway. Enough of that. Was a boom, sudden and loud. Door slammed open. Ithian walked in. Dressed beautiful. Built strong. Walked confident. Shipyard's Warden himself. Man of the hour. Simpler-minded, I'd call him dad's killer. I'll call him dad's worst decision instead.

Warden spoke up. Told nurses he wanted privacy. Man had a voice like mercury. Words sounded red. Slick. Opaque. Toxic. Nurses bowed. Left fast. Gave me this look through their breathing-helmet visors I'll never forget. Dread. Warden walked up to us slow. Smiled soft. Chuckled gentle. Shoes were loud on the floor. Sounded like whiplashes. Flinched every time he stepped. Couldn't blink. Kalleed talked about him like he was the scariest man alive. Saw him firsthand. Stories weren't far off. Cracked Platinum mirror skin. Hangman-noose tentacles. Butcher's muscles. Artists' hands. Judge's stride. Guillotine smile. Fat like a well-fed carnivore.

But those eyes. Damned if I've ever seen a man with worse eyes. Small wonder he ran the Shipyards. Smaller wonder he ran them the way he did. Warden only looked at me once.

Once was enough.

I did a lot of bad after that day. Never did it if I knew he was near. Man had the blackest black eyes I ever seen. *Glowed* dark. Shone through the lens of his breathing helmet. Writhed like living ink. Felt as if I'd suffocate if I stayed too close. When he stared at me? Made me sick. Sick like no disease could. Didn't look through me. Didn't pierce me with his gaze. Didn't undress me with his eyes. None of those. When the Warden looked at me, was like he wasn't looking at *me*. Was like he had a clear, premade idea of what I was. What I should be. What I would look like. What my life was. How it would end. And he'd keep looking at me till I became what he knew I was: Nickel. Something less. Something owned. Something that didn't matter, and couldn't. Nickel. Nickel. Nickel.

Understood then and there what that fucking word really meant. Understood then and there that, no matter how bad the word, it could never be as potent as the idea behind it. Close second. Stared at me like the Pale shat me out. Like I was leftover Blight. Like I was...Damn. Can't do it. Don't have a good comparison. But that's the problem isn't it? Use words to talk about words? Ideas just step all over each other. Use words to talk about ideas? You make the idea into somethings you can understand. And that's just it. Nobody but Kalleed can understand just how thick this hate is. Just how much Nickel really means. And even then? They're giving you the fairytale version.

Warden didn't blink. Held my stare like he was strangling it. Told me he was glad I'd be able to get back to work and that I'd be wise not to start trouble and that I had a good dad. Called me Elrec when he spoke. Almost made me puke. Talked to me like I were...a mud puddle? Nah. Can't do his hate justice. Point is, told him yes, sir. Real soft. Real quiet. Real shaky. Think the only sound I made was my tongue against teeth. Warden nodded like I'd said so loud n' clear.

Then he looked at dad, and I saw his eyes change. Didn't look at him like he did at me. Didn't even smile the same way. Casual stance. Tentatively kind. Borderline familiar. Struck me he looked at dad the same way he'd look at a Supervisor. Was right. Always had been sharp. Not so much today. Talk more than I have to. Bad at staying on topic. Case in point.

Warden asked if dad was *that* Vellenge. Dad nodded. Looked like a statue of himself. Old fractured statue of an angry god. I could tell the statue was damn near about to break and kill the one looking at it. Wit's end is a long road. But dad could finally see a cul-de-sac. Mustn't've been pretty. Warden smiled softer. Dad tensed harder. Then, Ithian held out a hand and said thank you very much, my good man, Vellenge, for doing the right thing, and anger left dad so fast he damn near passed out.

Dad barely slid his hand forward. Warden saw the opportunity. Took it. Shook it firm. Backed off before dad could recover. Y'see, he said – and his voice was less like mercury and more like cooking oil gone bad now – y'see, you just saved lives today, Vellenge, yes you did, and you cannot know how important that is to me. Warden talked slow. Deliberate. Dramatic. But he talked so proud you didn't have time to interrupt. Talked to you like he was preaching. Like he wouldn't stop talking till you saw his way. Dad was tough and smart enough to not be misled by that kind of talk. But like I said. Mind was wearing thin. Lack of blood, lack of sense, lack of sleep, all showing. Man was still strong as hell. But Warden was putting that strength to work against itself. Didn't break dad at all. Made dad break himself. Was like his whole mind operated by the same logic the word Nickel did.

My associate had a husband, Warden said. A daughter. A family. You kept them all from losing him. You kept me from having to break the news. And that's amazing. I'm sure you must know this, from your family back home you keep sending money too. Immigration fees, I'm sure. Very noble of you. Couple of your kind could learn a thing or two from that attitude. Elrec here seems like he's got the right idea, at least. In the wrong way, That said, my good Vellenge, not only that, but you kept the Shipyard in order during the incident. You prioritized subduing your colleague quickly, easing tensions among my associates, ensuring the whole accident would become a delay rather than a catastrophe. In all truth, my good Vellenge, you did a better job than my own. And you know why?

Dad shook his head slow. Warden's smile got bigger and bolder. Eyes started crackling.

Because, Warden said, you're not one of *us*, my good Vellenge. You're one of *them*. And that makes all the difference. My associates treat you Nickels hard, they do, but they still listen to *you* specifically. Because they all know the threat you could be if you weren't so

dedicated to your work. Perfect employee in all regards, I must say. And your colleagues might not treat you right either, with you being the paragon that you are, so diligent and intimidating and influential, but they listen to you. They listen because they respect the judgment of their own on what is correct and incorrect, because you stand the top of your makeshift tribe's hierarchy, just as I'm sure you must have back in your old home. And if you did not, well Blight me if you shouldn't have been! You have everything you need to do what is needed, to do what is right, and I cannot respect that enough, my dear Vellenge.

Man clearly didn't know a thing about Kalleed. Dad started getting shaky. Warden's voice was doing it. Something eerie about it. Soothing as it was bugging. Words made sense. Order not so much. Troubled dad. Pushed his thoughts in circles where they should've looked ahead. Made him miss the obvious. Warden must've known. Probably knew how minds worked. Breaking minds work as good as healthy ones. Just faster. Took him only a few seconds.

That is why, my good Vellenge, Warden said, I've decided to give you a promotion. Starting tomorrow, you'll be our first, and only, *non-Ithian* supervisor. With all the benefits, and authorities, and financial increases that come with the post, of course.

Dad's eyes flared. Nostrils too. Mouth dropped. Coughed. Choked. Face went slate to reddish stone. Looked like he'd breathed in magma. I wasn't breathing. Don't think I tried to. Warden didn't lose momentum. Kept spewing lovely venoms through his helmet's mouthpiece.

Now I understand your scepticism at the prospect, Warden went on, moving closer to dad. His smile turned pleading, if only for the sake of the act. But do know, my dear Vellenge, that right now, we are as overworked and undermanned for the job as you all are. And my current lineup of Supervisors are clearly not cut out to exert discipline upon your kinds. So to have a fair, impartial, sensible sort of man like yourself helming my operations? Why, that'd be a boon unlike any other for me, *and* for your people. You take the job, productivity increases, your son – among others – save themselves big scars and bad words, my people don't need to deal with any wily insubordination, and you get enough crowns to pay your way – and your family's way – into the capital in three year's span rather than ten, at your current rhythm. But I am a busy sort, so this is a take-it-or-leave-it offer. I need to know *now*, my good Vellenge. Paperwork will

be done tomorrow, paycheck will be done tonight, position will be granted by the time you shake my hand. So what'll it be, Nickel?

Warden was so full of shit you could practically see him burp maggots. I knew it. Dad knew it. Anyone without silver skin knew it. But Warden had a way with words I never will. Made dad shake. With want. With hate.

I knew what dad hated. Ithians. Supervisors. Lies. "Nickel." But what he hated more? Powerlessness. And that was a harder hate to shake off than anything. This here? This was a gift. A gift that meant dad would become everything he hated. But in exchange? Power. Money. Status. Enough to do the right thing righter. By doing the wrong thing. Forever.

Dad reached out. Shook hands with the Warden. Two kept talking for a while. What they said don't matter. And I don't remember it. All I recall is that that day, I lost my dad. That day, I joined the Kalleed revolutionaries. That day, I decided I'd burn the goddamn Shipyards to ground. That day, dad and me both made some of the biggest mistakes of our lives.

So here we were. At the end of it all. Not long now. I won't take too long talkin' bout the years before dad died. Might seem like an odd choice to you. I have my reasons. And like I said. Improper story. Don't want to do this story right. Besides. Most days after that? Were like the Pale: Same thing no matter where you looked, no matter what happened. Just variations in pain. Don't recall them well. Don't especially want to. So I won't. Ain't much to say anyway. Dad died. I didn't. History books'll tell you what happened. Who died. What sank. What changed. The hows, the whens, and the whys. I'm just here to say what I need to. I'm not here to entertain you. I'm not even here for answers. I'm just here to speak. I don't especially care if I'm heard. I just need to sing this little song before I go meet dad who knows where. I do that, and maybe I'll know what to tell him.

Right. Dad. The Kalleed. The Supervisor. Vellenge the Kalleed Supervisor. Made a splash when they announced it. Quiet splash. But a big one. Like the tide reeling back. Right before the tidal wave comes. Silver skins? Weren't impressed. Saw dad like a tool. Voice-activated whip at best. Punching bag that did their work for them at worst. Still. They weren't going to mess with him. Kalleed that big? With scars? A whip? The authority and knowledge to put both to good use? They'd do their job. They'd talk trouble. Plot it. Sometimes out loud.

Right in his face. But they wouldn't make trouble. Not with dad around. Was like the Warden's second pair of eyes. Second pair of hands that fed them. And if they bit those hands in the slightest, they knew those hands'd bite right back. And those hand bit harder and bit deeper.

Iron-skins? Complicated reactions to the news. Most were too shocked to think about it. Few called it a blessing. A guardian angel looking that would let them get away with things. Spare them some pain. Give them honor. Few more called dad a traitor. Said things to him behind his back. Me? Was in the second camp. The deep end where mutiny-plotters sat. Thought dad was corrupt. Showed everything wrong with Ithians. Wanted to turn us against ourselves. Take away our rights. Give 'em to someone else. And give 'em the power to make sure we wouldn't get ours back. Brewed bad things.

Biggest move in the water? That was dad. Power didn't change him. And he handled power well. Dad was strong enough to handle power. That's why he used it wrong.

First day on the job? Dad was scared. Kalleed were scared. Supervisors were scared. Sea was so scared it barely moved. So of course everything went perfect. Warden seemed right. Dad got confident. Ithians thought before they swung. Gave iron-skins moments to rest. Rumors stewed. Bodies healed. Tempers heated. Weren't sure if they'd boil or evaporate.

First week on the job? Dad didn't hesitate. Yelled at friends. Hit slackers. Whipped a few looking for trouble. Made sure some'd never look for trouble again. Congratulated peers for doing the same. Dad worked hard and worked well. Always had. But now he worked for the other side. Made our life hard 'cause he had to. Never made it easy, 'cause it wasn't his job. Iron-skins began to call him Nickel. Not the same way as silver-skins did. Meant something else when Kalleed said it, somehow. But the passion was there. It had hate. Exile. Sickness. Denial. Feelings too complicated for me to explain. But it meant dad wasn't one of us anymore.

By the first month? Dad was hated, and hated hot, hotter than a silver-skin with a good wrist. Ithians weren't his friends. Acted like they were. Kalleed were his friends. Treated 'em like they weren't. Didn't make him happy to do either. Didn't show it. Was too late for him to go soft. One wrong move and dad was over. No more money. No more power. No more family. No more cause. No more reason to live. Dad was walking a tightrope. Couldn't see the rope's

end in front. Couldn't see the rope's beginning behind. Just had to do all he could to make sure he wouldn't trip. Cause then? His rope would make a noose, and snag him as he fell.

So dad fought, and hard. Was a fight I never saw. A fight I still can't quite see. But I know dad wanted to do the right thing, so damn bad. And dad never forgot what the right thing was. But dad forgot to do the right thing the right way. I never knew what he was going through. Not till he died. Now I know. But I still don't understand. I get why he did it. Did it for the same reason I made my choices. Did it to do the right thing. Never forgot that. Never would.

What I don't get? Why he didn't stop. Why he didn't ask for help. Why he never fought back. Why he never told me anything. But like I said. I don't think I want to understand. Dad was a strong man. A good man. A proud man. A man I could be proud of. I don't want that to change. I won't lie and say he was a hero. But I don't want to understand just how little of one he really was, deep down.

Point is, by then, in Kalleed eyes, dad was the enemy. He *chose* to be wrong. He *chose* to turn against us. He *chose* to stop believing what he believed in. He *chose* not to be a Kalleed.

I told him that one night and he hit me. I hit back. We kept hitting and screaming till I left with a broken tooth. Last conversation I ever had with him. All I'm gonna say. Say any more, I'll feel guilty. Say any less, I'll feel validated. Don't think I have the right to feel either.

So I made a bad choice. Bad choice that seemed the best choice to an angry kid like me. I left for the Mutiny groups. Meetings had more people. Plans getting bigger. Patiences damn near gone. Was good a time as any. And I had the biggest plan they could imagine. I was gonna need a lot of people, and I was too damn angry to wait any longer. I swore I'd burn the Shipyards down. So that's just what we were gonna do. This was the Empire's fault. Ithians' fault. Supervisors' fault. Warden's fault. Dad's fault. So we were gonna burn all of it. Were gonna make the Ithians pay. Once they were gone, we'd be free. Free to live however we wanted. Free from Nickel. Free from all of this shit. I was gonna do the right thing, and save everyone...by destroying everything. Sounds even dumber when I say it out loud now. Too bad everyone else was so blind they thought the plan was genius.

Probably cause we were just that stupid. Just that angry. Just that desperate. And me? I was just that ready to prove dad wrong. Heh. Wish the world were so simple. Pale had a way of making things complicated. Still does. Probably always will. All that white fills your eyes. Burns deep into em. Makes you see fire where there is none. And the fire draws shapes. Makes you see things where things weren't before. But I've gone blind since then. See only darkness now. Less than darkness even. Not seeing's helped me make sense of things. Ask me back in the day, would've said dad was evil. Ask me today, I'd say he and I weren't so different at the time. Not heroes. Not villains. Just men. Men with principles they lived by. Men who lived by them the same way. Just lived by them in different places. Dad was doing the wrong thing for the right reasons. I was doing the wrong thing for the right reasons. Dad wanted enough money to get his family somewhere safe, eventually, so that they wouldn't have to suffer ever again. I wanted my family safe *now*, consequences be damned. I don't think either of us were happy with our choices. I think both of us would have done different if we could have. That both of us wanted to do the right thing. That I didn't hate him and he didn't hate me. Dad and me were good, strong, proud men. Shame pride makes good men too stupid to be great.

...Gettin' hard to keep breathing. Won't be long now. Listen well sweetie. Almost done.

So. Set fire to the Shipyards. Few hundred Kalleed altogether. Won't say who. And won't say how we did it either. Most of them are friends. Most of them are alive. Don't want them arrested for a mistake they made decades ago. Ithians didn't get arrested for what they did to us. Why should Kalleed suffer the one time they did something back? Heh. Listen to me. Some things haven't changed that much, eh? Still dumb as they come. All you really need to know? Didn't take long for things to change. Plan went well. Meaning everything went wrong.

Fire went outta control. Fast. Figured the docks'd burn slow 'cause of the water. Didn't. Rot and algae made it blaze faster. Whole thing lit up in an instant, all over, all at once. Half-built war vessels at sea turned to pyres. Ocean sizzled and boiled. Chunks of burnt harbour collapsed into it. Steel beams and wood boards whistled as they blackened. Even the Pale seemed to go gold from the light below it. But the worst part? Worst parts was the dead. Didn't matter if your skin was gray or silver, if you were workman or Supervisor, man or woman, brothel whore or Imperial shipwright. Fire ate you all the same. Swallowed you like the sea, till

there was nothing left, then kept eating. Saw lots of friends die that way. Lots of enemies too. We all look the same once we're ash. Made me realize a few things about Ithians, Kalleed, and the likes then. Was a bad time to be realizing things.

Was a lot of panic. People trying to run away. Get off the docks. Find somewhere safe. Wasn't easy. Sea was a storm of waves and fire. Didn't matter that there were no boats left. Sections of the floor collapsed. Cut off the usual paths on and off the Shipyards. Flames spread faster than we could run. Never got tired either. So. Only way off was by foot. Cross a section of docks where the construction buildings were. Fire was eating at them fast, and they were falling in slivers like Pale rain. Heavy. Hard. Burning. Didn't have much time. Didn't help that we all spent it fighting.

Supervisors figured out we started the fire pretty easily. Partly 'cause they wanted to go all out on Kalleed again. Partly 'cause a few of us were screamed it at them, throwing junk-bombs at 'em. I was in the latter half. Pretty vocal about it too. Still. Once it was obvious the fire was turning to an inferno, everyone got vocal. Went bad fast. Strange feeling, watching that. Saw the Shipyard burn. Heard my kind rise up and bellow victory. Saw Ithians struggle to keep us from running away from that prison. That felt like justice. Felt like vengeance. Felt like dad was wrong. But seeing people running and screaming and dying? People who meant well do horrible things just because they could? People who just wanted to live long enough to give their kids a good life burn? That didn't. Felt like dad had been right. Mustn't have been the only one to feel that way. Fights broke out fast.

Supervisors came at us hard. Lashed to kill or cripple. Wanted to punish, not discipline. Wanted us dead. Heck, *he* wanted us dead. After all, dad was on their side. Kalleed fought back just as wild. Punched. Tackled. Swarmed. Shouted they fought for freedom. Never made a move for the barges or the beaches. They were fighting to kill too. Well, *we* were. I was on this side.

So naturally, dad and me crossed paths. Seems like a coincidence right? Couple thousand people, half running for their lives, half too blood-drunk to feel or see just how tall and red those flames had got? And the two that matter just happen to meet? Well, that's cause it wasn't a coincidence. Pretty sure we'd been looking for each other. I was running from the Ithians. They'd got me good. Was dizzy and going blind, whole body burning hotter from whipbarbs

than dockfire. I was looking for help. Didn't really matter who. Just needed to know I'd make it out alive. Dad? He was looking for me. Supervisors didn't get the job done. He would.

So we met. Middle of the Shipyard. Frontlines of the whole thing. Circled by fights to the death. Choked by fire-heat, sea-steam. Sounds of people dying, water dyeing, everything collapsing into something forgotten. Fires reaching so high the Pale looked alive with gold.

I saw his eyes. He saw mine. Fire danced off both. Between both. Fires that burnt hotter than the Shipyard. Fires of convictions. Convictions we were doing the right thing. Never forgot that. Moment where I saw dad at his worst. Moment where the dad I once knew was gone for good. Saw it in all of him. The bloody whip. The snarling face. The thick-toothed smile. The uniform, lined with soot and medals. The eyes. Just like the Warden's, only brighter, madder.

Hard to believe? It was. Had this face I couldn't recognize. Face of a man who didn't care about the right thing anymore. Who had long-craved vengeance all to himself. Who forgot what he wanted revenge on, and just started swinging. Who didn't care if he lived or died, as long as others would get hurt instead of him. Was the same face dad always had. Fires just showed me something Palelight never did. Showed me just how damaged dad was. Just how hard it had been for him to do the right thing all this time. Just how bad I'd hurt him. Just how bad he'd hurt himself. Just how wrong he felt doing this. Just how loud he wanted to scream till the world started making sense again.

I screamed first. Ran at him. Thought of hitting him. Couldn't bring myself to. Just fell onto him. Partly 'cause I was short on blood. Partly cause I just wanted dad to hug me before I died. I must've yelled loud, 'cause I remember it all going real quiet then. Sea. Fire. Fighting. Screaming. All of it, gone. Just for a little while. Dad was the quietest. Man's mind was fighting itself. Wondering if it oughta kill me or hug back. Took a long time to decide. In the end, he didn't hit me. Hugged back real hard. Real tight. Real kind. Way only a man like him could. Told me it was okay. Everything was gonna be okay. Told me he loved me. Told me he was sorry, so goddamn sorry, so, so sorry, Elrec, I'm sorry.

Don't know how long we stayed there. Just holding one another, feeling pity for each other, lettin' it soak onto our skins like more blood and sweat. Hard to describe. Felt like it lasted a while. Felt shorter once he let go. Short enough for me not to want to let go.

Still. Was long enough for people to notice.

I think that's when dad became a symbol, again. A better one this time, I think. Right there, in the middle of it all, dad, the biggest, meanest, most mechanically efficient supervisor the Shipyards ever saw, the most dedicated, honest iron-skin we Kalleed ever saw, quit fighting, so he could take care of his son. Dad, with just one moment, at the worst possible time, reminded everyone that life trumped slaughter. He might not have convinced everyone to do the right thing. But he did convince them to sober up, put their differences aside, if only for now, and run for their damn lives. And dad noticed that everyone else had noticed. So he took one last chance to do the right thing again. Picked me up. Yelled. Demanded we head for the beach before it was too late. By then he had their attention. So they listened. Better yet, they followed. When reason speaks, you hear. When reason hollers? You can't really help but obey. And quick. So we all made a run for it through the fire, while dad carried me to safety.

And that's when I passed out.

I know. Not satisfying is it? Warned ya. Improper story.

Blood loss caught up to me. Wish it hadn't. Was too late when I came to. And even when I did, was too dizzy to see right. But I was woke enough to listen. Woke enough to hurt and cry. Shipyard was gone. Nothing left. Damn near a whole section of ocean was seared off the map. Smoke lingered for months. Ithians and Kalleed tried to band together. Didn't last. Was genuine while it did. People helping one another. Didn't care what colour their ore was. Empathy goes beyond that. That's a lesson people have trouble learning. Lesson I have trouble teaching. Lesson people forget so fast, you wonder if it's *worth* teaching.

But what you really need to know is that dad died. Passed away I in the flames. Simple as that. Saved a lot of people. Couldn't save a many more than he did if he'd wanted to. Died all the same. Swallowed by the fire. The fire I made. I try not to tell myself I killed him, but I did. I killed him. I killed him, because I tried to do the right thing. Because he tried to do the right thing. Because neither of us did the right thing till it was too late for the right thing to matter. Took me a long time to get over that. Don't think I quite have to be honest. But he died all the same. Died teaching me the most important lesson I ever learned. Always do the right thing. No matter what. Even if it's too late.

Heh. Began this story saying he taught it the worst way possible. That I didn't want to understand him. But now I've told the story. I don't understand him more than I did. But I think I've realized something. He was probably a better man than I gave him credit for. I think I've understood him pretty well after all. Just didn't want to admit it. Didn't want to admit he was fallible. And that I'm my father's son. A better man than I was before. Thanks to him. But a lesser man than I could have been. Thanks to him. I'll have to apologize. And thank him. Dunno which one I'll do first. Doesn't matter. I'll have all the time in the world pretty soon.

So. That's the story of my dad.

What happened after? I don't have time for that. Besides. You can see what's happened since. More wars. More struggles. But Kalleed kept fighting. I fought to make the fighting peaceful. Didn't go well. But it happened. Eventually. Did a lot of good, I'm proud to say. Saved families. Saved lives. Changed laws. Gave Kalleed homes. Taught Ithians tolerance. Gave Granvull and Yuvei support. Made the world a better place in my own small way. And did it the way dad taught me to. The right way. Caring for family. Sticking to principles. Using words where weapons would suffice. Telling the truth. Being honest. But I've done it in ways dad wouldn't have. Did it through politics, not labour. Did it through rebellion, not obedience. Did it by allying with enemies, not staying away from them. Did it by causing trouble, not keeping out of it. Cause y'see, that's another lesson dad taught me.

Dad taught me to do the right thing. Never told me what the right thing was. Had to figure it out for myself. I'm sure he'd agree with my answer. Somewhat, anyway. But I didn't agree with his. And yet he did more good than I did, in a way. So. You better find your answers too okay? Be happy. But be happy doing the right thing. Whatever that might mean for you. Your world was made by me. It was made by dad too. Parts of it, anyway. Small as they may be. But they mattered. Now. You go out there. And make a part that matters too. I know you can. I know you will. So give us something to look down on. And be proud. Always keep that lesson in mind. Do the right thing. No matter what you think that means. No matter what you think it should mean.

...Sorry I couldn't teach the lesson to you like dad did. Hope you'll remember it just as well. Still. Wish I'd taught it to you sooner. I'm too old to teach it right. Dad's not around to do

it for me. And time's so short, I can't really afford to tell it any longer than that. Don't even know if I told the right story, to be honest. Hope I did.

Hope you'll remember the right parts. Whatever they were.

Sorry, sweetie. Think it's my time. Mind's going real soft now. Life's been good. A bit too long for my tastes maybe. Bit too hard. But good. Wouldn't change it, I think. Was good enough a life to let me try to change it. And that's a damn special feeling. So don't be scared to do it either. Alright? Good. I'm gonna stop breathing now. Been sick of doing that for a while now. Hurts a little. You can let go of my hand if you're scared. You're not? That's my girl. You'll do great. I know it.

Yeah. I love you too sweetie. Make sure you tell your mother...I love her too...

...Hi there dad...I...missed you...

- First Imperial Kalleed Senator and Minister of non-Ithian Rights, Elrec daen Vellenge-Leuda, on his deathbed, to his daughter, Niora dael Doan-Elrec, morning of the 67th annual Liberation Day Four-Metals Festival, celebrating the interdiction of Kalleed Slave-Labor.

Fourth Chapter

CHANGE

Upper District, Royal Medical Institute, Dail's Office, 288 A.P., Month Miar, 1st day

“I’m incredibly sorry.”

Clinician Dail mumbles, breathes deep, wiping fat pearls of cold sweat from her broad chrome brow. “Your son’s test results were positive, Minister Riun.”

Sol Raya feels his father clench his hand tight, the Ithian politician’s grip desperate, painful around his fingers. Both understand the doctor’s words, but, clearly, Riun gleans darker meaning from them. The ten-year-old looks up, and sees the deep lines of the man’s face deepen. Sol Raya clenches back, begs fate not to do this. Fate does not listen. Outside, the Pale trembles as though laughing hungrily.

The room goes silent, save for the audibly escalating brutality of the protests. They are in the streets, far below, muffled, by glass and stone. They feel too close. Viscous venom fills Sol Raya’s insides, and he feels sick. From this day on, he would belong out there, along with the rest of the men and women who don’t get to choose their lives.

“Is there any chance, any chance at all, that this is a mistake?” the Ithian Minister blubbers, voice cracking as though already mourning the death of his child. “Couldn’t it just be something less severe? Milkbleed maybe? My wife Xu Mos died of it just a few months ago. Couldn’t this be a hereditary case? Or maybe he contracted it while she was in…”

The doctor shakes her head, movements slow, unambiguous. Something sharp grabs Sol Raya by the intestines, wrings. It is a feeling he has not known since hearing of his mother’s death, a feeling he has not forgotten since. Outside, sounds of Imperial Soldiers screaming obscenities at Protesters, twangs of crossbows firing bolts into crowds, and panicked shrieks belonging to voices of every age, sex and Tribe, rise. Sol Raya looks out the window, searching for the screams’ source, but sees only Pale. It smiles at him, low-hanging and impeccably white, save for the innumerable fissures it bears.

“I’m afraid not. He meets every criteria.” Dail struggles to speak, as though swinging a heavy executioner’s axe. In a way, she might as well be. “I’m truly, truly sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, but there’s no doubt in my mind, Minister. Your boy is a...a Magicker.”

Father and son shudder, angry, blind with rage, blind with hurt, as the slur strikes them true for the first time. It is one thing to hear the word used against *them*. To hear it used against their own, it is like being called an animal, no different than the cannibals or the dread-beasts that still roam the Capital outskirts.

Riun’s grasp slackens, his body twitching as he fights back tears. Sol Raya simply sits, wondering why he is not crying. The Clinician’s curse word echoes in his mind so loudly, it no longer makes sense to him. Perhaps it was never supposed to. *Magicker. Magicker. Magicker.*

The boy overhears Imperial Soldiers warning Magicker Protesters they will open fire, and shivers. The word grows louder, its meaning vaguer, its implications so vivid they hurt to think of. He pictures himself out there, with the rest of his kind, fighting a losing battle for his right to live. Magickers hold protests like these almost daily, demanding rights that the Empire denies them. Rights he no longer has. Rights his father may have fought to repudiate for the sake of his own pockets, and those of the Empire. The Empire, which no longer sees in this boy a child, but an abomination.

A sudden crescendo of not-so distant explosions, throat-rending screams, and unforgivable slurs warns the neighborhood that the Protests have become a warlike riot. Sol Raya squirms. Violence has always shaken him, whether witnessed from a distance, or experienced firsthand when his classmates kick him for not being like them. And yet, he feels as though this time, he needs to see it. He needs to see for himself what it means to be “Magicker”. To be one of *them*. To see what he is supposed to be fighting for, and how he is supposed to fight for it. He wants answers. But more than that, he wants a reason to hope, hope that he could someday decide what his own answers are. As he is about to get to his, his father rises, knocking over his chair, and the boy freezes.

“NO!” the Minister howls, tearing his son’s file off Dail’s desk. He bows to her, as though convinced sufficient pity on his part can change her verdict. “Please, you have to do

something. He's my son, don't you see? *My son!* He's Ithian! *Ithian!* He can't be one of them. It's impossible for Ithians to use Magic, to be a – to be anything like *them!* So *why?!* Why is - ”

“Because,” Dail interrupts, her façade of professionalism shaking with her voice, “he's his mother's child too, Minister. He might be the first Ithian, but he is not the first of the Yuvei.”

Sol Raya does not want to hear this conversation again. He hears it too often already. It is in the streets where people say he is a monster, in the school where classmates and teachers abuse him, in the home where his parents try to explain the world's contempt.

He knows he is different. He always has been. He always would be. But now, maybe, there is a place where the different like him belong, where the different like him fight to be normal. He wants to know if he can belong there.

The boy stands up brusquely, and runs to the windowsill, determined to make sense of the Protests being held for his sake, the battles he's had no part in till now. Riun and Dail make no movement to stop him. They may not even notice him anymore.

Sol Raya sees his reflection in the window swell as he moves towards it. He sees candlelight dance off the sheen of his rubbery dark carapace and his big, darker-than-black eyes. He sees the silky petals that line his shoulders sway as he moves. He sees the innumerable tentacles and pistils atop his head, each moving with a mind of its own, like a crown of silver fire. He sees the faces of both his father and mother in his own. He sees a Yuvei and an Ithian, struggling to coexist in one body. He sees a Magicker, which he has been taught to hate, and a child of the Empire, which he has been taught to honor. He sees someone that might not belong anywhere anymore. He sees someone trying not to cry, someone desperate to find truth, someone desperate to be accepted. He sees himself. He sees the Pale. And he sees the people outside, waging wars against each other.

It had been almost 300 years since the Pale's birth, when Magic was first proclaimed dead. It had never truly perished, only crumbs of its old self remaining. But, as time passed, and the Pale's surface began to chip away more and more, specks of Magic began to surge forth throughout the Capital. Reports soon came, too plentiful to be exceptional. Kalleed that laid paving stones using only their minds, geriatric Granvull that could mend wounds with a touch,

Yuvei musicians that drew moving paintings of stories through song alone. There was no denying it. The Magic the Tribes once knew had changed, but it was waking up. With its return, the revolution generations of heroes had fought for in the past would finally take place, and bring upon the long-awaited age of peace the War's end never offered. It was only a matter of time...but, like any creature at the brink of death, the Empire chose to struggle, to extend that time by any means necessary.

Magic had been illegal ever since the Pale appeared, in part out of safety, in part out of a twisted sense of ethics. But never in history had that law been enforced as viciously, interpreted as liberally as it had been today. Soldiers imprisoned, bludgeoned, murdered non-Ithians and got away with, just as they did during the War. Old Tribal laws were resurrected and rewritten, instigating a new era of hatred towards Non-Ithians, towards the children of Magic, the bringers of the end. There were even talks of "Magicker Camps", where Magickers were sent to die in droves, beyond the Capital walls; punishment for the powers fate had bestowed upon them, powers they did not ask for.

This was it. This would be Sol Raya's life now, and he could do nothing to change it.

The boy looks toward his father, a man who changes the world, rewrites laws, remakes history in a matter of words. The boy sees his father crying against the ground, his body enveloped in Dail's arms. He hears the man murmur a martyr's prayer to himself, a sequence of questions that have no answers, a flood of long-repressed guilt drowning him in further misery.

"What have I done to him. What will he do. What have I done to him. What will he do."

Sol Raya has always felt alien among the Tribes, but never has he felt so apart from his family, so alone, or so helpless, save perhaps for the day he watched his mother fall into sleep and never wake up. He is not her son anymore. Nor his father's. Nor even a person, really. He is a Magicker now, forever wielding great power, forever wielding great powerlessness, neither capable of changing the fate chosen for him, nor enlightening the minds of those that wrote it.

For the first, but not final, time in his life, the boy feels despair. It is, genuine, crushing, black as Pale is white. And yet, stronger than the boy's despair, is his hope. It is the kind of hope only children can know. It is delusional, pure, undying.

Hope that, just beyond the glass, he can find it. A path towards acceptance. A place where he belongs. A reassurance that his life is still his own to live. So, Sol Raya looks out the window, and watches, searching for answers amidst the lost and damned, the Magickers.

He watches twin crowds push into one another amidst rows of shattered glass, fractured brick, and firebomb flames. One is cloaked in immaculate Platinum armour, the other a rainbow of earthen bodies draped with fury. He watches Soldiers remain still as Magickers from every Tribe march forth, weeping as they sing songs of anguish. He watches bodies fall as crossbows fire and cudgels slam down, protesters screaming and scrambling for safety. He watches bold mages keep pushing, and a few bolder still hurl orbs of fiery white light at the other side. He watches Ithians beat children dead while parents are dragged away to the Camps, wrapped in barb-linked chains. He watches, and watches, and watches, until all the violence bleeds into itself, into himself, and into the smoke that now shrouds the window's glass.

When the smoke fades, Sol Raya finally sees it. He sees the same as the one outside smoke in his eyes, that same blood on the streets in his veins, that same pain on bodies as in his tears. He does not understand the Empire's fear. He does not understand what it means to be Magicker, regardless of which side says what. But somehow, he does understand why the magically gifted choose to fight.

As a halfbreed, he has suffered for no other reason than his darkness. As an outcast, he has felt the hatred others were capable of, and the hatred a world that did not want him offered. As a son, he has seen a loved one taken from him, while he could do nothing to save her. He has known solitude, odium, yearning. And he wants nothing more than to fight a world that believes this agony is justice.

...But not like this. The mages would not save an already-broken world by breaking it further, no more than Ithians would by clawing away at still-vivid wounds. They would only become the things they once hated, and pass that hatred along to another lineage. As much as Magickers deserved it, vengeance would not give them what they wanted. By trying to mend the wounds of their kind with death, they only carved more scars. What the world truly needed, what everyone needed, the Magickers, the Ithians, and those caught in between, was for these still-bleeding scars to mend.

As far as the boy knows, only he can see how badly his home needs saving. Behind him, Sol Raya father pleads louder, moans echoing across the room like the Pale's gleeful groans.

"What have I done to him. What will he do."

A flash of white surges from the boy's body, forcing the curtains shut. Riun and Dail spin, startled towards a tearful, smiling Sol Raya. His pistils and tentacles spark with deep, solemn Magic power, eyes crackle with conviction, grin fills with determination.

It is the kind only children can know: delusional, pure, undying.

The boy answers his father and challenges the world, all in the span of a single breath.

"I'm going to help everyone," he promises.

Lower District, Non-Ithian Ghetto, Magehaven Orphanage, 313 A.P., Month Geul, 10th Day

Sol Raya chuckles as he sees the Granvull boy's face contort into crumpled paper shapes, face sweating from the sheer effort of spellcasting. Vhengdrik has finally lifted the stick of charcoal off the floor. It had taken a good few hours of patient explanations, demonstrations, and encouragements, all in the aftermath of repeated failures, but his student had finally succeeded. Teaching Magic was always a struggle for the halfbreed, but those struggles never ceased to reveal new miracles.

"Vhengdrik! Look! Look, you're already doing it! Look how far you've come!"

The giddy chittering of Ni Toa, a legless Yuvei babe whose smile never so much as hinted at the pain those Soldiers left him with, fills the air like gentle music. Proudful oohs and aahs of orphans old and young soon follow, prompting the child to giggle and squirm in their rickety wheel-stool. The little Granvull barely has enough time to draw his eyelids apart before his concentration fades. The stick drops from the air, thuds mutely on the floor. A collective sound of pitying swells in the room, and the boy hangs his crimson mane low, dejected.

Everyone gasps as Vhengdrik sweeps his hand to the side: tables and chairs fly through the air like storm-thrown boulders, crashing against the room's walls with clatters of cheap steel on stone. Sol Raya marvels how the boy's twiggish limbs conjure such great Magic without

effort. He always knew those born with perfect control over Magic from birth like him were rare, but situations like Vhengdrik's remained fascinating to him. They reminded him of all the work he still had to do. Not only teaching the boy to live with his powers, but to heal the wounds they've inflicted on him: be it the scar across the boy's face, or the one dug far deeper, into the very fabric of his young soul.

"I'm never going be able to do this," the Granvull mewls bitterly, crossing his arms across his chest. Sol Raya fights to keep his smile from waning as he notices nerves and muscles in the child's limbs quiver beneath their scales, as if struggling not to snap. Even for a malnourished Granvull that has never tasted real meat, Vhengdrik is troublingly thin. Sol Raya prays they can afford to feed them full meals again, soon. He kneels, holds the boy's shoulder; he is firm, but gentle, like his father was.

"On the contrary, little wizard," the half-Yuvei asserts, tone half-patronizing, half-awed, "You just did, and everyone here saw. Now, you just need practice. Lots and lots of practice, so you can do learn to do even more." Vhengdrik shrugs off Sol Raya's hand, expression struggling to remain frustrated, a fanged smiled betraying the much-needed relief the words bring him.

"I still don't really see what good practicing all the time will do," comes a snide voice to his side, and Sol Raya turns to face Unila. The Kalleed girl absentmindedly braids long, wiry white hair by using thin spell-made needles. She still has bruises from when she'd first been admitted, but no longer hides them behind her bangs. They have become reminders of the justice she dreams of, rather than of what those men have done to her, and blamed her for.

"We could get sent to the Camps for this... Though we might get sent to the Camps on account not being squidscalps. I suppose it depends on the Soldiers' mood at the time, doesn't it?" she adds, focused on the movements of her Magic, the patterns it is drawing with her hair.

"Bad word!" Ni Toa squeals, almost falling off their wheeled perch, green petals flailing.

Unila sucks air through her teeth, realizing the severity of the slur she's uttered, and her spell peters out of existence, letting a shock of white fall over her eyes and pointed ears. It was often hard to remember their caretaker was part Ithian, and not only because of his odd

appearance. And yet, Sol Raya knows that she does not say such things to provoke his anger, but to incite his passion.

He grins, realizing the unruly young girl wants to give Vhengdrik “the speech”.

“Ah, but that’s exactly *why* it’s important to keep practicing, little wizards.” The Half-Yuvei tries to imitate his father whenever he gives “the speech”, but always feels as though he sounds a bit sarcastic. Regardless, the motion of his hands, and the swirling of his soft, white Magic forces in the air, catch the attention of every orphan, as bright white tendrils gently pick up, carry, and set down the debris Vhengdrik had created, replacing each item at its rightful place with motherly delicateness. The children turn his way, looking up at the Caretaker who gave them a family again, a tired man with a deep-black carapace, and even darker eyes that somehow shine brightly.

“Right now,” Sol Raya decrees, eyes scanning the room, recognizing the names and tragic tales that had brought each child one by one, “people see Magic as something they can’t control. A dangerous weapon. A symbol of end times. A second coming of the Blight. It’s up to us to show them Magic can be so much more than a cause for panic. Remember, Magic doesn’t let us do the impossible, but it lets us push the at the boundaries of possibility. It’s our responsibility to push those boundaries the right way, in the right directions, to make the world safe. For everyone.”

The youngest children go wide-eyed and beam, even those that cannot make sense of their Caretaker’s longest words. The eldest grin smugly and nod, as though agreeing with the half-Ithian man makes them smarter than the rest. Vhengdrik, on the other hand, raises his hand timidly, arm shaking from the effort. Sol Raya sees the boy is inspired, but clearly concerned.

“Won’t that take a long time?” he asks, nervous that his question will attract the ire of his new siblings, who clearly adore this Magicker – he’d only been living with for a week.

“Of course.” Sol Raya replies matter-of-factly. “But we shouldn’t force change to happen. The Empire is trying to. And do you think they’ve really been helping us by doing that?” A soft hum of sad noes wells up. Sol Raya resumes, kneels before Vhengdrik to look him in the eye, firm, kind, filled with something sparking.

“We can’t be like them. We need to be *better*. We need to *guide* change, not enforce it. Yes, this way will take time. And work. But we’re never fighting alone, not anymore. As long as you believe you can make a difference, then you’ll be sure to make one. Goodness and compassion will always win out in the end, even if the battle is more difficult to wage because of them. Alright?”

Vhengdrik nods, smiles, fellow orphans walking up to him to give him hugs and sincere variations of “we’re with you!” His eyes are moist, but overflow with more joy than they ever have, ever since that Soldier gave him that scar and took his mother. Sol Raya’s smile is gentle, but earnest. He can see himself in the boy, and can see great things in his future as well.

And yet, the Caretaker feels leaden guilt weigh in his stomach, as though he’s just lied.

Sol Raya believes what he tells the children. It is the promise he made to himself, a promise he still has faith in, day after day. If he did not have such faith, he would not be here, running this nigh-bankrupt orphanage for the magically gifted. But he has learned the hard way that convictions of childhood age poorly when confronted with reality. Laws remained strict, money was tight, and Magickers still held desperate protests, dying in the name of freedom whilst the Empire’s Camps overflowed.

The halfbreed has dedicated his life to making a difference. And yet, all he has as proof of the difference he’s fought to make, is a collection of lost children he can barely keep fed, clothed, or healthy. Children convinced that he is a hero that can save the world.

He is no hero. He is a fraud. A charlatan. And his dream is as good as dead.

...And yet, when he sees their eyes, full of hurt, but even fuller of hope, united as one in their dreams that tomorrow would be better, Sol Raya knows he can not give up. He sees Ni Toa, tiny, smiling despite missing limbs, shell and voice sparkling like polished emerald. He sees Unila, gray quartz skin speckled with freckles as white as her hair. He sees Vhengdrik, anorexically thin, but strong, proud, and fiery as the red of his mane. He sees them all, and many more still, some of which he likely has yet to meet. Many are out there, depending on him, trusting him to give them lives the Empire has stolen. He’s come too far to give up, and there is

so much left to do. Even if it just means swaying the tides the other way, for just one person, just for one moment, then his life would not be wasted.

“So that means,” Sol Raya begins, his energy renewed, “You all need to - ”

There’s a sudden knock on the door of the communal room. A tall, leanly muscular Kalleed with bright, marbled slate skin and Pale-white hair walks in, his face like that of a warrior mourning the loss of his homeland. Kelleth. Sol Raya tenses, noting his husband’s fidgeting hands, holding a scroll inscribed with the Royal Ithian Coffers’ seal.

It was them. They’d come back.

“So that means,” the half-Ithian babbles, ruffling Vhengdrik’s red mane playfully, not a trace of worry in his voice, “you all need to keep practicing! So, I’m going to ask all you little wizards to keep up your spell exercises while I’m gone, and not to give up, even when it gets difficult. And if Vhengdrik is, say, able to lift that charcoal pen *all* the way to the ceiling by the time I’m back, I’m taking you all to the Academy’s Gardens. Work hard and work together!”

Sol Raya hastily waves good-bye as the orphans resume spellcasting, excited squeals and fluxes of Magic popping all about, Vhengdrik’s gleeful determination the loudest of all.

When the door closes behind him, the Caretaker snarls foul words through grit teeth, and stomps off towards the Orphanage’s entrance, Kelleth tailing him close.

“I thought I told you not to let them bother us,” he grumbles, more afraid than angry.

“Good evening to you too, dear,” his husband responds coolly, waving the document he holds. “And I’m afraid I didn’t have a choice. Warrant from the District Minister herself. Can’t shoo them off like I do most days, not without a fine...and money’s tight enough as it is.”

Sol Raya sighs. Kelleth is right. Imperial loans are their only source of income nowadays, and they have been shrinking with every passing month. Once the District Minister learned Empire-owned property was harboring *Magickers* of all things, a hefty tax was placed on the establishment: the more children Sol Raya saved, the fewer he could afford to keep. Worse still, Imperial financiers were visiting twice-daily ever since, demanding he evict the premises if his debts continued to go unpaid. Riun had kept the Empire from becoming too merciless towards

his son's controversial foundation while in office, but he'd been dead for years now, leading Imperial accountants to grow progressively more predatory. Much like the fall of the Empire, Magehaven's eventual collapse is inevitable.

Sol Raya knows he does not have enough time left to change the world anymore. Not in the way he truly wants to. All he can hope for now, is time to foster the next generation, to leave them prepared to fight without him...But even this modest wish is becoming inconceivable.

The Caretaker freezes when he reaches the exit. He keeps one hand on the door's handle, the other around his lover's, feeling the plain, Platinum ring he'd proposed to him with between his insectoid fingertips. His eyes are clenched, his breath absent, his heart shivering.

This could be it, he understands. This could be the day it all ends. Everything I've worked for these past twenty-five years, made useless, and gone forever. If today really is that day...

"...what am I going to do?" Sol Raya shudders, surprised, abashed. He'd not meant to speak aloud, let alone whimper. His grip around Kelleth's hand tightens fiercely, the Magic in him squirming, tentacles and pistils wriggling like oil in a skillet. His husband lays a gentle, lingering kiss upon his cheek, giving Sol Raya's hand one last squeeze before he lets go and walks away, briskly.

"First of all," Kelleth chirps, voice syrupy and sarcastic in a way that always makes Sol Raya tremble and laugh all at once, "you solve every problem by being nice. Make yourself intimidating. You're supposed to be the most powerful wizard in the world, and you can barely raise your voice. Shameful really." Sol Raya blushes faintly, if only because the Kalleed's words too truthful to deny. As Kelleth pulls open the door of the increasingly noisy communal room, where spells and squeals resonate like songs, he whispers.

"Second...just keep fighting to make the world a better place. I know, you 'do everyday'. Just remember never to give up. Sooner or later, you'll have to fight for what you believe in. Just be sure it's the right battle." Then, without giving time for his husband to argue, Kelleth steps into the communal room, and closes the door, the man's body and children's voices fading.

Sol Raya chuckles, softly, then sadly. He feels the warmth of the man's lips fade from his cheek, the coolness of the Platinum ring linger on his palm. He loved Kelleth, truly, in a way

he never thought he could ever love anyone. He feels accepted by him in ways he's barely learned to accept himself. But as of late, he finds himself wondering if Kelleth's trust is genuine, or simply blind. Maybe, just maybe, Sol Raya thinks sometimes, that man would be happier if he had never run from home, and attracted the ire of his clan for marrying a dirty Magicker. Maybe, just maybe...

Chasing the anxiety from his mind with a stern shake of his petals, Sol Raya opens Magehaven's front door, and walks out into the dust-wracked alleys of the non-Ithian ghettos. Sounds of shrieking babies, breaking glass, and fierce, untrained Magic energies crackle haphazardly in the air. But louder still than the chaos of the slums, was that unmistakable, unbearable voice. It was slurry and cavernous, but fierce. It was like the sound of deep pockets and deep graves deepening.

"About time, Caretaker Sol. Pray tell, were you busy getting...*the* money?" Yuof's chins audibly slap against the sweat-drenched velour of his uniform as he speaks, great breast heaving like a greasy sea. Even by Ithian standards, the man is disgustingly, wide-as-he-is-tall fat.

Sol Raya feels his temper and Magic boil at the sound of his mother-given name hacked into a single syllable, but the boiling cools when he notices two dozen Soldiers at the Cofferman's sides, halberd-blades gleaming softly in the Palelight. The half-Yuvei hangs his head in shame, silent. Even without looking, he can hear the flab of Yuof's smile flexing.

"Oh, come now, Caretaker," Yuof chides, each word slow and metered. "Don't be ashamed. I'm not here to trouble you. Not for crowns. Today, I am here, to make you, an offer."

Sol Raya's head whips up faster than he intends upon hearing *those* words.

This was impossible, or at least, impossible to process. "Interviews" with the debt-hunter were usually drawn-out, horrifying affairs. The Minister's Cofferman would patiently harass the halfbreed into begging for money to keep his Orphanage standing, and his debt growing. To hear that man propose compromise was more baffling than seeing the Pale turn purple.

Yuof does not give the halfbreed the chance to answer, and hands him a wax-sealed document, marked with the Emperor's five-pointed cross; same as the scroll Kelleth had. Sol Raya snatches it the way a hungry beggar snatches unsupervised food, and tears it open,

revealing lines upon lines of minuscule, Spirograph Ithian scripture. Most of it is circuitous legalese, save for a sizeable number, emboldened in the center of the page. It is easily triple the amount the Caretaker pays in taxes per year. Enough to buy food for weeks, a new change of clothes for each child, perhaps even renovate Magehaven. It is everything he needs to keep his dream alive, not just today, but for years to come.

A Soldier to his far left snickers at the look on his face, and reality comes crashing back.

No. This could not be real. Sol Raya looks up at Yuof for answers, and sees the Cofferman still smiling, sewage-black eyes unblinking. The man's revulsion at the sight of Sol Raya's semi-Ithian form was apparent in them, and the hatred for his Magicker blood even more so. But they gave no indication that the document was a lie...Likely, Sol Raya knew, because the truth was far worse.

"Simply put, if you choose, to appose your signature, to that document," the Ithian states, pressing bloated fingertips together, "you'll concede to receive, the amount indicated, and have your debt, to the District Minister, and related parties, erased. In exchange, you will be required to, *immediately* evacuate the premises, along with the...*Children*...under your care, currently."

Yuof leans forward before speaking again, an almost erotic sadism in his expression.

"After all, Magehaven Orphanage is scheduled for demolition, *today*. I would have truly wanted to warn you sooner, truly, but you were always, as your lover stated, *absent*...when I visited. Hardly *my* fault. Although, I will ask that you make the right choice, Caretaker. I, for one, would *hate*, to have so many deaths, on *my* conscience...Even if, they are only *Magickers*."

Sol Raya's breath vanishes so quickly it leaves him woozy, and the burning rush of long-held back anger drives him nearly blind.

This was his dream's death knell, pure and simple. This was him being asked to give up everything he'd worked for all his life, and all the lives of those that currently depended on him; to walk away with pocket change, and the promise to never challenge the Empire again. This was the day he'd been afraid of, woken up with cold sweats at night, cried about in his husband's arms whilst he stroked his tentacles softly. It had come, far, far too soon.

If he takes the money, the Empire wins. His way is proven wrong. Magickers remain pariahs. He would live on, but would never be able to start again, not without his father's help. The children would survive, but would do so alone, in the streets, stealing, killing, rioting, all because they wanted to belong in a world that refused them.

If he chooses to fight back, he loses also. Magicker lives would worsen. His would end. The orphans' would end for good. Riots would intensify. The war between both sides would just continue. No matter what he did, the Pale would keep smiling. The Empire would keep standing. Magickers would keep suffering.

Sol Raya is not being made to choose between giving up or fighting back. He is being made to choose between keeping the world the way it was, or setting it back another decade.

The Caretaker stands there, motionless, reality settling into his veins like a poison, realization leaving his body numb and weightless. It was the end of everything he ever fought for since that fateful day, and the continuation of everything his kind had fought against, long before he'd even been born. It was a victory for the Empire's hatred, a victory for this world of violence. Everything he has said, everything he has done, everyone he has tried to help, he has disappointed, let down, and condemned. The Empire was tossing him away, for he did not belong with them, and the Magickers would do the same, for he had betrayed them. It was all his fault. All of it. He'd broken his promise. He'd let down everyone that believed in him. He'd filled desperate minds with dreams that would never come true.

The world would keep moving without him, unchanged by his actions.

Sol Raya crumples to his knees, letting the Imperial edict fall. His eyes are wide open, but see nothing. His tears are the only light inside their blackness now, cold against the dark of his shell. For the first time since that day in Dail's office, he does not know what his purpose is.

"Were you actually hoping we'd be *foolish* enough, to spend *Ithian* money, on a *cripple sanctuary*, because you *need* it? After you haven't paid *any* of your debts?" Yuof snickers now, no longer hiding how the Caretaker's despair satisfies him, almost gagging on his happiness.

"I came, so close, to losing my title, all because you couldn't pay, like you were supposed to. All because I can't treat *you*, like the *rest*. All because, you get a free pass, because your

mother – if I can even call ‘her’ that – was smart enough, to fuck one of ours, and that our leaders were stupid enough, to call you one of our own. And now, you, and your damn...larval waifs...are going to go back to the gutters where you belong...Unless you’d rather have those kids meet your...*other father.*”

Sol Raya roars as Magic coils in his veins. He has chosen to kill his dream, and kill Yuof.

The Ithian reaches out, and a massive clawed hand of white-hot Magic fire wraps around the Cofferman’s body like a vice. It is large enough to squash the fat Ithian in its grasp, blistering enough to sear his remains onto the wall, powerful enough to disintegrate everything Sol Raya has built over the course of a lifetime in a mere instant. The halfbreed clenches his hand, eager to see Yuof burn away into nothingness, remembered only by the Pale.

...But the Magic hand does not close. It shakes, wheezes, comes apart at the seams. It is a mirror-image of its master. This was the first time the Sol Raya so much as tried using a spell to hurt someone. The first time he felt the hatred of his children so clearly, felt it for himself.

The truth hits him, at last. All this time, he was convinced he understood what Magickers went through. What it meant to suffer for being born different. He’d just been a lonely child, too pampered to cope with the pains of his heritage. Not this. *This*, was true suffering.

I was wrong, Sol Raya’s mind bellows, tears of liquid Magic tracing pale scars on his darkening face. *I was wrong from the beginning. None of it mattered. I couldn’t save anyone. I couldn’t make a difference. I couldn’t even make one life better. I don’t belong with the Empire. I don’t belong with the rest of my kind. I belong nowhere. I was wrong, wrong, wrong.*

A Soldier’s halberd-shaft strikes him in the stomach, hard. Sol Raya falls, the spell slipping away, along with his consciousness. There is a muffled clatter of firebombs detonating, children screaming, Soldiers guffawing as he feels his body being dragged somewhere wet and fecal-smelling, where the smoke and light does not reach.

“If only, I were allowed to kill you, *and* your blighted parasites, myself.”

Yuof’s words are the last things Sol Raya hears before nothingness welcomes him again.

Bottom District, Non-Ithian Ghettos, Magehaven Orphanage, 313 A.P., Month Geul, 11th Day

White lightning rains down from above the Imperial Capital. The maelstrom is not borne from the Pale's malice, today. Today, it is borne one man's Magic, one man's agony made fire.

Sol Raya kneels atop the remains of Magehaven, bellowing at the sky, at the Empire, at the world that would allow this to happen. He howls until his throat goes coarse, his breath vanishes, his tears go dry, and then, he breathes in, and roars once more, again, and again. He screams wordless requiems for what remains of his lifetime of sacrifice, for the ashes of his family that stain his black body blacker, blotting out whatever light still lingers within him. Everywhere he looks, the Caretaker sees those he has failed, and feels his spirit flay itself in shame, and screams.

Strands of wiry white hair, scattered in the wind and smoke like plumes of Magic. *Unila*. Fragments of glimmering shell, melted onto the scorched remains of a heat-twisted wheel-stool. *Ni Toa*. A severed, emaciated, red-furred hand, reaching skywards; a charred flower reaching for the light of a long-lost sun, reedy, but unbreaking amidst the devastation. *Vhengdrik*.

Names, everywhere, lost meanings and lost stories gone cold in Sol Raya's barren heart. Cold, that is, until he sees *it*. Another hand, buried under crossed rows of greyed coals. *No*.

Sol Raya sweeps the cooled culm away, frantic to see what it hides, praying he does not recognize it. What is left of the limb is long, leanly muscular, and forms a broken fist, like the buried hand of an honourable warrior, laid to rest in a homeland no longer his own. *No, no, no*.

Sol Raya pries the fingers apart, feels them shatter like ancestral glass in his hands. Vivid is the sensation of still-warm Platinum resting in his palm, the sensation of the ring he bought for the man who loved him. He'd proposed on the day he first built Magehaven, and that man promised to do whatever it took to help him make this dream come true, and died for it.

"...Kelleth." The name is a gag in Sol Raya's throat, difficult to breathe as fire's smoke.

Most powerful wizard in the world, and you can barely raise your voice. Kelleth's final words brand themselves onto Sol Raya's soul, hotter than the inferno that burnt his dream, hotter than any spell to kill Yuof, hotter than the burning Magic tears digging pale trenches in his face.

Sooner or later, you'll have to fight for what you believe in. Be sure it's the right battle.

Sol Raya collapses onto the bed of ashes, into himself, clenching the ring in his fist. The rumbling of the storm above grows louder, as the former Caretaker's pistils and tentacles blaze with unfathomable Magic, eyes smoulder with anguish, thoughts overflow with untold wrath.

It is wrath only those who've lost everything can know. Delusional. Pure. Undying.

The world has taken all that he's ever cared about. It is a world he has never belonged in, and no longer wants to belong to. It is a world that would not change, a world that will not change, a world that he realized too late was broken far, far beyond repair. This world, Sol Raya now knows, is far beyond saving.

"I'm going to burn all of it," he promises.

Royal District, Imperial Castle Plaza Environs, 320 A.P., Month of Haol, Inauguration Day

Minister Yuof stands at the center of the Imperial Castle's Plaza, surrounded by bodyguards and fellow politicians, smiling uniform, snide smiles. Magicker protesters, roughhousing Soldiers, and screaming Empire supporters are not enough to drown out the sound of his dripping-meat voice.

"Therefore," the bloated Ithian proclaims, as supporters stand for ovation, "registered Magickers of the Capital will have to without exception, serve mandatory minimums in Camps to receive employment licenses. These measures, among others, will ensure that our fine City, remains safe, and a home for all Ithiankind...and all other Tribes...*willing* to cooperate."

The decree earns the cheers of Ithians who crave the return of the old ways, the thrown bottles and foul curses of Tribesmen who've watched their last freedoms die too many times already, the applause of Soldiers and Minister who eagerly await easier, richer times. It has not taken long for the protests to escalate again, for the Empire to intervene, for people to die.

Sol Raya no longer has the patience to sit back and watch the world hurt itself any longer.

It happens so suddenly, even Yuof does not realize he is dying until it is too late. The sea of howling protesters, swearing crossbowmen and riled onlookers attending the rally shriek

as they see the Minister engulfed in an inferno of living fire. The bloated Ithian wails as he falls to the ground, breathlessly screaming as he burns, clawing at the tendrils of burning Magic that eat away at him, begging his hapless Knights as he dies. The riot subsides quickly, drowned out by the newly appointed, controversial Minister's death throes, and then, fear settles in, fear they have been made all too familiar with over the course of the past seven years. People from every Tribe beg, yell, scatter, pushing themselves to the ground as they try to escape the Plaza through the main gates, get far, far away from the Royal District before *he* is able to do the same to them. Soldiers try to contain the panicking crowds whilst Magickers scream and try to run for cover, before they become associated to a terrorist, before they are sent to the darkest corners of the bleakest Camps. The other Ministers scramble, sweating, silver skins blanched from fear, from knowledge. There is only one man capable of Magic such as this, they know. None of them are safe if they stay here.

Beneath the hood of his cloak, Sol Raya watches Yuof die in melancholy silence. He is motionless, unnoticed amidst the thrashing of Soldiers, Magickers, Tribesmen. He sees the Ithian's sewage-black eyes go gray as his squealing fades, the veins around his brow bulge from the combined pain of suffocation and immolation, the skin of his fat stomach boil like smelted chrome, his twitching carcass peel away like torched paper as he turns to bloodied cinders.

He has waited a long time for this day. And yet, the halfbreed feels none of the satisfaction, the pride he had expected he would, now. He only feels his hands shake against his will, another voice in his mind remind him that he can never go back to how things were before, that this is the only way left for him to live his life. But most of all, he feels sick. He realizes that the victims of Magehaven died the same way as Yuof. That Yuof might have been no different than his father, a man doing wrong because he believed it was right. That he himself is no different than the Minister at this point.

Blood pounds the inside of Sol Raya's skull as guilts, names, faces, rush back into his head. Ni Toa. Unila. Vhengdrik. *Kelleth*. The handsome Kalleed's gentle smile, the subtle warmth of his lips, flicker to life in the half-Yuvei's mind. He feels himself retch something hot in his throat, the whitish tear burns beneath his eyes aching, the feeling of the lost wedding ring linger in his palm.

It was never supposed to come to this, he remembers. I never wanted any of this to happen. But the world has left him no choice. And today, it is time for him to honor his promise.

Slowly, he walks up to the pedestal where the Yuof's remains smoulder, where the rest of his kind try to wriggle away. As he forces his way through the tides of the crowd, he casts back his cloak, reveals tentacles and pistils ablaze with white Magic like a brazier of Platinum flame. He can do this unseen, he knows, but today, this is not his purpose.

Today, his purpose is to end it all, at long last.

The cacophony begins small, then crescendos into a maelstrom as people spot Sol Raya in the crowd, and everything begins to move at once. Granvull scream, Yuvei beg, Kalleed scatter and Ithians cower; only the Ministers are silent, some resigned, some too scared to speak, once they recognize *him*. The Emperor's murderer, the destroyer of the Royal Ithian Academy, the man who has made the lives of all Magickers bleaker. Soldiers and Protesters alike turn to him, firing crossbows and orbs of burning Magic. Their attacks are useless, fading into ash by the mere force of Sol Raya's will, but the mere sight of this world is agony for the old Caretaker.

First, he sees Soldiers, hands stained by decades of slaughter, mouths shouting threats, eyes begging not to make them do this. No matter what happens, they will keep killing for the sake of an Empire they no longer believe in. Second, he sees kindred Magickers, looking upon him as though he is Pale made flesh. No matter what happens, they will not forgive him, and there is no way left for him to atone for his mistakes. Third, he sees are Ithians, Yuvei, Granvull, Kalleed; members of the four Tribes have wanted nothing to do with this, crying out at the Pale. No matter what happens, these people will suffer, and none of them will ever have the courage to fight for the world in the way he once did. Lastly, he sees his attackers, shaking with spasms and tears. They are a reflection of himself, of his anger and loss and despair, of his mistakes and regrets and fears. None of them have anything left to fight for, and none of them know how to quell the hurt in them. No matter what happens, more people like these will come to be.

In seven years, Sol Raya slaughtered Soldiers, murdered Ministers, stopped the instauration of new Magicker laws, cast away the principles that failed him. By refusing to side with the Empire, refusing to belong to the Magicker protests, he believed he could make the difference neither of the two could...And yet, the halfbreed wonders, gazing at the City falling

apart around him, so little seems to have actually changed. All the killing, all the fearmongering, all the destruction, it never really seemed to matter, and the change never seemed to last. Still, Imperials created laws. Still, Ministers preached hatreds. Still, protesters fought in the streets to the death. Still, the Pale hung in the sky, suffocating, euphoric, savoring the destruction beneath. Sol Raya fought and fought and fought, but the change he brought to the world was little more than a ripple in the tides. He could not change anything, only delay the inevitable from happening, again, and again, and again. If anything, the fighting only made the repercussions against his kind worse and worse.

And yet, this is the only way. Nothing else has worked. Hatred begot hatred. Kindness begot suffering. Destruction begot more hatred, more suffering. It is the only way left now...

...Isn't it?

The voice is ephemeral, silent. And yet it is a roar in Sol Raya's head, a scream that makes his mind tear at itself with guilt, rage, Magic, growing hotter, wilder, hungrier, Pale-like, as the voices multiply, as the memories of failures grow more vivid.

Is there any chance, any chance at all, that this is a mistake?

I'm going to help everyone.

We could get sent to the Camps for this...

Look, you're already doing it! Look how far you've come!

I'm never going to be able to do this...

I'm going to burn all of it...

Sooner or later, you'll have to fight for what you believe in. Be sure it's the right battle.

He has not been sure of anything he's done over the past seven years, he realizes.

"Cease!" Sol Raya screams at the world, at his memories, his voice like the end of all things. It was just one word, but it was spoken with such power that the entire world was suddenly swallowed into absolute, utter silence, as Sol Raya climbs to the top of the pedestal where Yuof's remains lay. Rioting Magickers' freeze in place, nauseous. Soldiers drop their

weapons, livid and defeated. Innocents huddle together, faces drained of blood and pouring sweat. All watch the dark-shelled half-Ithian stagger forth, his mane of silver ablaze with Magic, his shaking anger like that of a vengeful god. All pray wordless prayers, begging for this not to be the end, begging for this man to let them live. Even the Pale hangs low in the sky as if looking close, its cracked smile an unruly guffaw.

Sol Raya looks around, deafened by the the world's silence, by the cacophony within himself, and watches the hopeless beg for painful lives. It is a familiar sight that he's witnessed before, that he's seen in nightmares that wake him. He wishes he'd have known sooner, that there was nothing he could do for them. Not the Empire. Not Magickers. Not anyone. That the world needs saving, but that it cannot be saved. He remembers then, just how alone he truly is, how alone he always has been.

Atop the Plaza's pedestal, Sol Raya raises his hand, massive swathes of white flames swirling as they gather in his palm, forming the nucleus of a tiny white sun. Fire wraps around itself in great pallid rings, blurring the air and searing the Plaza's grasses black. Storefront glass melts, tears evaporate, bodies collapse from exhaustion as the temperature rises, as Sol Raya's spell becomes a massive sphere of light, large enough, unfeeling enough to be mistaken for the Pale's own pupil, a spell that will scorch the continent clean of the Empire, of all this pain.

Tribesmen in the crowd try to run through the gates, but countless tendrils of white Magic thorns tear out from the earth, blocking their path, snaking around the throats of those that draw too close like burning, barbed nooses. None of them will be allowed to escape this fate.

All of it must burn, Sol Raya remembers, and the promise is suddenly heavy in him. It is the only way, he knows. The only way the world has left him, and this pains him deeply.

Sol Raya feels himself sweat as the spell grows larger and larger, as his burning Magic engulfs the entire sky. The heat is not what hurts him. It is the screaming of the crowd, of his mind, that pains him, like a demonic mantra that blames the world's doom upon his weakness.

Please. No more. You've only made things worse. Make it stop. Give me my son back. What have we done to deserve this? How do I feed my family now that they've made these new

laws?! What do you want? It's all your fault. Can Magic really change the world? Why? Sooner or later, you'll have to fight for what you believe in. Be sure it's the right battle.

Sol Raya grabs at his head and snarls, the pain of his guilt intensifying, hot white tears beginning to run down his face again, the shame hotter than the flames that will purge the world clean of this pain. How can he wield so much power, and still be so weak?

Why are you doing this? the voices call out again, Sol Raya's mind calls out again. The half-Yuvei grits teeth, closes burning, moist black eyes, claws at his head with his free hand, the flames of his world-ending spell fluctuating chaotically as his conscience turns against him.

"Because you've ruined everything! All of it!" he screams, answering voices that are not there. The sound of Sol Raya's voice splinters glass and rattling paving stones.

The crowd shudders, yelps, but more than anything, people grow confused. They do not understand why this godlike Magicker, the man who killed the Emperor, and soon, the Empire, cries in such agony, seems so afraid of himself.

Why are you doing this. Why. Why. Why. The voices are no longer asking questions, he realizes. It is as if they know the truth. As if he knows the truth.

"Because!" he wails again, the air rumbling with power, "I can't take this anymore! I fight for the world, and it takes everything away from me! I make myself an ally to both sides, and both make me an enemy! I try to stop all this fighting, and you all keep killing, keep taking! I've had *enough!*"

The white sun in Sol Raya's palm pulses, unstable, spitting white mortar across the City as the Magicker falls to his knees, sobbing, as the tendrils that block the Plaza's exits wriggle and screech, dropping those in their grasps. Slowly, surely, attendees of Yuof's inauguration begin to watch the old Caretaker shatter. There is something strange about him now, something pathetic about this man who's killed so many, something deep in him that is making him hurt, terrifying him even more than he terrifies them...and yet...

“It was never, *never* supposed to come to this,” Sol Raya weeps to himself, as the voices in his head keep screaming, louder and louder, hurting him more and more. “I never wanted any of this to happen. But this is the only way left. This is the only way to change the world...”

“Now why would you of all people believe something like that?”

Sol Raya’s eyes flicker open as the howling of the voices in his mind dies, dispelled by the gentle creaking of a *real* voice, a voice like his mother’s, in the final days of her Milkbleed. Something in him moves, roils, jitters. It is not quite fear, not quite hope, not quite anger. It is something more. It is as though, for the first time since he’d lost everyone, his loneliness has begun to fade.

“*Show yourself!*” the halfbreed bellows, and the crowd cowers before his wrath, his spell swelling even larger, the Pale above’s large grin growing closer, more uneven.

“I am not hiding,” the voice replies, clearer than ever, quiet, yet close. They are wheezed words, spoken by a coarse throat, a kind soul. It was as though they were being spoken by Sol Raya himself: by the person he used to be. By the person he wished he still could have been.

“I have wanted to see you again for a very long time now, and I want to speak with you. I think I understand how you feel. And I think it is time that someone helps *you* for a change.”

The former Caretaker’s black eyes flare with white sparks, scanning the horizon of Magickers, Soldiers, Ministers, Onlookers, something rabid, desperate, needing in him.

How dares he?! something white and burning in him screams.

Please, help me, something small and broken whispers.

Finally, he sees him, just a few steps away. An old-looking, one-armed man, cloaked in a tattered hood that hides his face, surrounded by children of every Tribe. Skin clings to his bones like paint, the colour of his worn flesh so dull and darkened by wounds that the old Caretaker cannot tell what Tribe he belongs to. The man seems ancient, aching, tired...And yet, there is something about his tone, his smile, that reminds him of a young boy, that reminds him of the child he once was.

Sol Raya notes how the children next to him wear tattered clothes, stand huddled close to one another. How their eyes all shimmer, just like the stranger's, bright enough to cast away their lifetimes of pain. Eyes just like his had once been, long ago. Like *theirs*.

Unila. Ni Toa. Vhengdrik. Kelleth.

Heat and madness fill the old Caretaker's mind. He snarls, and the tendrils around the Plaza writhe, as the spirals of white flame whirr fiercely, as the miniature sun bubbles and grows larger, swallowing half of the smiling Pale. Men, women, Soldiers, Magickers, scream, and part like cleaved water, revealing a clear path between the terrorist and the crippled vagrant. Sol Raya feels his heart beat faster.

The stranger nods toward him, and Sol Raya's anger flickers, swaying wildly between hatred and relief. The halfbreed cannot recognize what he feels anymore, and shivers. There is great fear in him now, fear he has not been felt in ages. It is fear that lives only in those that have something left to lose. Pure, delusional, undying.

"What makes you think you know what I've been through?!" Sol Raya hollers, eyes going radiant from the rioting Magic within his body. He does not know what he says anymore, but cannot allow himself to stop, as though this, more than anything, *needs* to be said. "I have nothing left! These people have nothing left, and yet the Empire keeps taking, the Pale still hangs! This isn't a world worth saving! So I'll burn its pain clean! It's the only way left to save anyone now! The only way left for all this hurting to end! I just want it to end! I'll never be able to help anyone otherwise!"

The man simply chuckles to himself and inches forward, one slow step at a time, the pitter-patter of the children's footsteps following him. Sol Raya flinches at their courage, feels the almighty Magic in him waver. The halfbreed hears himself breathe faster, louder as the crowd turns to face the old Caretaker, and the stranger who so boldly stands before him, unbending in his compassion.

Suddenly, the godlike, crying killer, does not seem so powerful anymore.

"You see," the stranger hums as he walks, "a very kind, very wise, and perhaps slightly foolish man, once told me something, a long time ago. What this man told me, is that we cannot

change the world through force. We can only guide that change. Ease its happening, by time, effort and patience.”

Sol Raya goes still. Time seems to stop as the Magic in his hands putters out, as his heartbeat accelerates, as the past floods his mind, not like water, but like Palefire, an unbreakable, unstoppable force crashing into him. The stranger seems to notice, and chuckles beneath his hood.

Sol Raya notices a Yuvei child tugging at the man’s robes, a tall Kalleed supporting his weight as he walks, a gaggle of tiny Granvull huddled close. He seems so weak. They *all* seem so weak. Children, the Soldiers, the other Magickers, the other Tribes...all of them are nothing to him now. Then what is this feeling that rattles him so?

“This man taught me that Magic did not have to be feared. That it did not need to be hated, that we ought not use it as a weapon. He believed Magic could be...something more. What that something was, I’m not sure I’ve learned for myself, not yet. But this man still convinced me that, in the right hands, Magic could save rather than destroy. He said that, Magic doesn’t let us achieve the impossible, but that it let us push at the limits of possibility, and perhaps help show the world a new path, one where no one has to suffer like this. Now, this might just be because the man was just a lonely Magicker, like myself...but, still, I chose to believe him.”

And then, with a knowing smile, the hooded man adds:

“Does any of this, perhaps, sound familiar to you, *little wizard?*”

Sol Raya feels rage and happiness crash into him. His mind is tired, his Magic writhes like it wants to rip himself out of him. He feels himself beginning to break apart at the seams of his brain...And yet, it is also as though a piece of himself is falling back into place.

Riun. Unila. Ni Toa. Vhengdrik. Kelleth. I never meant for any of this to happen.

“How *dare* you!?” Sol Raya means to roar, but his voice cracks, and the threat is little more than a tantrum. “What gives you the right to take those words from me?! You haven’t suffered the way *they* have! The way *I* have! You’ve never lost *everything*! You know *nothing* of my suffering! *Nothing!*”

“Ah, but I do,” the old man sighs, looking to the children at his sides. The man’s voice remains kind, but there is sorrow in it now, a quaver that Sol Raya had not noticed. A smile grows back on the stranger’s chapped lips, inch by inch as the children cluster closer to their guardian. Just like *they* all used to, before the fire.

“But I also know the joy of finding hope again. The warmth another’s trust can bring. The power of patience, and of hatred quelled by the love of others. I know all this, and more. You are the one who taught me of kindness’ power, Sol Raya. And today, I am here to share with you that power.”

People have begun to stand now. Men and women, Soldiers and Magickers, Ithians and Yuvei, Granvull and Kalleed. All of them side by side, afraid. Hatreds and hurts still glow bright in them, and yet, still, they choose unity, still they choose not to die sitting down as the world falls apart. The old Caretaker feels the tears on his cheeks turn cool again, the white of angry Magic fading from them, and something sings in his limbs as the tiny sun’s nucleus begins to shrink, spewing pale steam as it withers. Up above, the Pale recoils, its fractured smile withering for the very first time.

It is not supposed to be like this, a voice inside Sol Raya’s mind snarls, a voice that is his own, yet no longer seems to belong to him. *The world is not worth saving. This will keep happening. None of them know the truth. The world deserves this. Do it. I said do it. Why are you hesitating. Why. Why. WHY.*

“Why are you doing this...?” the halfbreed cries, breathless, as he finds himself again.

He sees the vagrant’s eyes beneath his hood now. Eyes dark with hurt, worn with trauma, but beaming with something fierce, something compassionate. Eyes the likes of which the half-Ithian has not seen in years. Eyes just like his used to be. Eyes that the entire crowd suddenly seems to share. Sol Raya’s tears grow colder, soothing old wounds. Leaden guilt weighs in his stomach as though the last years of his life had been nothing but a lie, and light starts to spackle something deep inside him once more, something he thought he had lost to time.

The old Caretaker feels himself collapse, his pistils and tentacles ceasing to spark. The earth-scorching sun fades away into dust, the tendrils of white recede back into the earth, wither,

and die. He tastes fresh air filling the Plaza again, hears the relief, the joy, the cheers of the onlookers, who know that they will live another day, and feels an old feeling tingle in his heart.

The halfbreed's eyes drift down. He sees his arms, like white embers, burning with the insatiated hunger of Magic kindled by hatred. He sees what is left of Yuof, a stain of seared chrome and blood and coal. The Minister is only one of his countless, unforgivable mistakes. He sees a reflection of himself in the puddle left by his tears, a gaunt black face crisscrossed with pallid tear-marks. He sees a face that has meant horrible things to the world for years now. He has become something that he does not recognize, all over again.

The mantra his father cried, back when he learned of his son's fate, echoes, louder than the other voices: *What have I done. What must I do. What have I done. What must I do.*

"It's all right now," the vagrant whispers, close, kind, quiet.

Sol Raya's eyes look up. He sees the stranger's emaciated hand run along his arm, casting soft white light over his wounds, soothing scalds and steadying his heart. He sees the stranger is not old, but practically still a boy, his body covered in vivid, scarlet burns. He sees the deep gash running across the boy's face, a once-vivid scar that will never disappear, but has begun to fade, along with heart-wounds. He sees a warm, smiling face, proud and feisty eyes that remind him of himself, of great things to come, framed by tufts of a scarlet Granvull mane.

The Pale seems to recede then. Its surface cracks and shatters like glass as what is left of its smile turns into a wordless, white screech of deathly agony.

"Why...?" Sol Raya sobs, as Soldiers draw near, ready to send him to the Camps forever.

"Because," the stranger says. "I don't want to see the man who saved me suffer alone. And I don't want you to forget just how important your compassion was."

Vhengdrik kneels, and offers Sol Raya his hand. The old Caretaker feels himself shake, then smile, as he begins to bawl atop the Plaza's pedestal, embraced by the son he believed to have lost, staining the scorched earth of the Capital with tears of joy.

It was the joy only a man who finds hope again can know of. Pure. Delusional. Undying.

Royal District, Royal Ithian Academy Gardens, Memorial, 378 A.P., Month Cioh, 2nd Day

“You’re certain?” Vhengdrik asks, the Granvull’s red mane bristling in the chilly evening breeze. “I’m First Seat on the Imperial Council, you know. I can motion to delay the execution if you need me to.”

Sol Raya shakes his head, smiling, and breathes deep, enjoying the taste of crisp, clean air for the first time in decades. The old Magician groans as he strains to sit on the Garden’s worn-out bench, its wood and his bones creaking the same, broken old song.

He lays a tired, grey-coloured hand on his waist, feels at the bone beneath his dehydrated carapace, gone papery with age. *Magic doesn’t let us do the impossible*, he reminds himself, begrudgingly accepting the pain old bodies bring.

Vhengdrik clears his throat beside him, and the Caretaker sighs. He knows it is hard for his pupil to accept this. And yet, this is something he needs to do.

“The Council was already hesitant to trust a Magician with their title, no matter how exceptional, and I doubt the people of the Capital will be kind to anyone who lets a terrorist’s crimes go unpunished out of pity. I’ve lived long enough, Vhengdrik, and I promised to myself long ago that I would not run from the penance my errors have earned me. I die tomorrow. But for tonight, just let me enjoy the sight of it all.”

Vhengdrik pauses, waits, stews. Seconds later, the man nods begrudgingly, and sits next to Sol Raya, so that they can watch the Royal Academy Garden’s visitors live their lives.

Plump, tittering Ithians women approach a muscular Soldier, the armoured Granvull’s facial scales pinkening as he offered gracious replies to the beautiful girls’ audacious flirts. A troupe of Yuvei buskers snickers and cheers, as a waddling Kalleed babe in their audience engages in a waddling, babbling song-and-dance routine for all to enjoy. Academy Students from every Tribe hustle down the Garden’s paths, bickering sarcastically to one another. Their eyes are baggy from hours of sleepless research, but their smiles are broad at the thought of cold spirits waiting for them at the nearest taverns. A pair women, a Yuvull métis and an Ithilleed halfbreed, lay down a bouquet of dark flowers before a Platinum monument of Vhengdrik’s

honor. The two of them mutter words of solemn thanks to the man who had spent years fighting to abolish the Empire's harshest dogmas.

It is, by no means, a perfect world, Sol Raya knows. And yet, it is a beautiful one. A world that the Caretaker is proud to have fought for, all these years.

"I often think about how unfair it all is, you know." Vhengdrik sighs, tired eyes looking up at the sky, its light dim against the grooves of his countless scars. "Our roles could have been reversed, had things turned out differently. I've no doubt I would have become just like you, if I had never met you as a child. I don't think I'd be the man I am today if I'd stayed on the path you saved me from. You could have been free instead, and I, the one suffering...and I don't know how to feel about it."

"I do not doubt it either." Sol Raya answers. His eyes drift to his trembling, insectoid hand, marked with lines of time, and pallid blemishes left by years of excessive spellcasting. "But that is why I am content with my fate. The fate I have been able to give you, and the rest of the world. My life was my own. It was lived on my own terms, defined by my own faiths. I will not lie and say I've achieved my goal. But I do think I've given others the chance to achieve their own...And looking back, I think that's all I've ever wanted, really. All I've wanted, ever since I was just a little boy..."

The Caretaker chuckles proudly, coughs weakly. Vhengdrik feels his eyes begin to sting.

"So do not bemoan me, little wizard. I do not regret my life. Only...please promise to me that you'll keep fighting to make the world worth saving. Compassion *can* triumph, in the end. Do not let anyone forget that again. Not like I did."

"A selfish child till the end, I see." Vhengdrik smiles, a tear running down his cheek.

Father and son embrace, both weeping in happy silence, as Sol Raya looks up at the sky.

Through the scars in the Pale, he, and the rest of the world, could see for the first time in centuries, the night sky, and its countless twinkling stars, smiling back at them.

Conclusion

Although Fantasy's propensity to let authors "play God" has resulted in a tumultuous and self-troping heritage of racial hatred, this legacy stems from a misuse of the genre's inherent ability to recontextualize real-world systems and ideologies: not only by placing them in otherwise impossible settings, but by fundamentally rewriting them from the ground up. In fact, thanks to this unique capacity to rewrite institutionalizations of racism, or even the very ways in which we perceive, comprehend, or define the idea of race itself, Fantasy has centuries' worth of untapped potential as a method to rewrite popular and sociopolitical imaginations of race. And, both *because of* and *despite of* Fantasy's pre-existing history of racism, the genre's traditions of derivation, pastiche, and monomyth-reiteration become one of the genre's best tools in making us rethink the very stories and worlds that transmitted popular racisms in the first place. In fact, JanMohamed argues that "genuine and thorough comprehension of otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions and ideology of his culture."¹⁹⁵ What better way to attain this state is there, than by literally forcing readers to consider worlds where those same values, assumptions and ideologies, are drastically unfamiliar? What better way to achieve this, than through Fantasies, be they innovative and visionary, or offering new takes on familiar otherworlds?

That said, despite the creative component filling in blanks that theory could not hope to, and the theory portion's structure allowing me to overview the genre in its entirety as opposed to relying only on a select few works, this project is, at best, a paltry introduction to the genre. Hundreds, if not thousands of authors and oeuvres have been overlooked entirely¹⁹⁶, and those

¹⁹⁵ JANMOHAMED, Abdul R. "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonial Literature", *Race, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.84

¹⁹⁶ This not only includes authors like Terry Pratchett, Balogun Ojetade, China Mièville or Miyuki Miyabe, but books (the *Arc of Fire* series' depiction of racism between light elves and dark elves closely mirroring real-world instances of racial discrimination, or *The Bone Season's* portrayal of xenophobia towards psychic "Voyants" resembling real-world immigration denial), films (how the recent *Lord of the Rings* films either addressed or failed to address Tolkien's more problematic racial depictions, or how the *Underworld* movies create allegories of "animalizing" racism using vampires and werewolf genocides) and even video games (*Tales of Symphonia's* use of Fantasy to exemplify how racism takes place in globalized contexts, or the ways in which *The Witcher* game adaptations take Sapkowski's own recontextualisations of Fantasy racisms even further).

that *were* given closer attention did not receive the extensive analyses they rightfully deserved. While I could have narrowed my project's focus by only touching on a select few writers, the works of a specific era, or by resorting exclusively to didactic argumentation, none of these approaches would have been sufficient or satisfying. The truth is, Fantasy literature is still so stigmatized, so misunderstood, and so insufficiently studied, that a condensed, critical survey of its history such as this is practically *necessary* in order to understand how genre-specific tropes have allowed outdated racist ideologies to endure within it. As a result of the genre being so shunned by academics, scholars, and institutions, there is no real way to explain racial representation issues in Fantasy without first explaining Fantasy as a whole. For instance, it is nearly impossible to properly comprehend the extent to which modern Fantasies emulate and rework the racializing traditions of predecessors, if one does not first understand how or why those traditions became so prevalent in the first place; nor is it wise to proclaim Fantasy's generic signifiers as inherently racist when one is ignorant of their purpose, or how certain elements actually influence narrative depictions of race.

For decades now, Fantasy has been – and continues to be – one of the most popular, influential genres in all of art and media, and at a planetary scale no less. With swords-and-sorcery sagas, superhero epics, and urban Fantasies pervading modern cultures worldwide in such a way, the fact that basic Fantasy literacy¹⁹⁷ also continues to be (for the most part) lacking, underdeveloped, or outright flawed, is dangerous. When one is aware of just how backwards and absolutist the genre can be when it comes to depicting race or racism, of how it helped internationalize Eurocentric conceptions of race, updating them to suit region-specific 20th and 21st-century needs and legitimizing new logistics of xenophobia, segregation, or genocide, this widespread (and at-times willful) ignorance becomes flat-out alarming. As academia and the humanities continue to consider Fantasy a contemptible field of study¹⁹⁸, a large majority of the genre's aspiring authors remain doomed to unintentionally misuse the genre's pastiche-like nature, and repeat the worst ideas of their greatest inspirations. As a result, less informed or less analytical readers and fans of Fantasy risk being blind to these problematic stories' subtexts or

¹⁹⁷ Let alone fundamental understanding of what Fantasy *is*, or of what makes Fantasy, Fantasy.

¹⁹⁸ This can be the result of a general lack of interest in the genre, or of an internalized belief that Fantasy is somehow juvenile or "unworthy" of being studied this way. Regardless of motive, this willingness to bypass the subject altogether is both short-sighted and irresponsible.

rhetorics of discrimination, having their real-world understandings of race, racism, and racial identity, altered, damaged, or hazardously reoriented. Because of this, it is my belief that, for Fantasy literature to remain escapist and imaginative *without* propagating problematic, autocratic representations of race through narrative, no side can remain passive. Authors, readers *and* critics must take responsibility, and work together in order for the genre to achieve its full potential, to take it in a new, yet undeniably “fantastic”, direction.

With my thesis, I aimed to prove the effectiveness of this “shared responsibility” between Fantasy fiction and literary criticism – not by making the theory and creative components utterly co-dependant, but by proving each one to be an independently viable method to tackle the subject of race in Fantasy, in a way that neither oversimplifies the issue, nor makes it inaccessible. At the same time, both halves are meant to complement one another, providing perspectives, information and proof of Fantasy’s capacity to address racial representation, in ways neither theory nor fiction could achieve individually. In doing so, I hope not only to legitimize Fantasy literature as a “worthy” object of study, but also to prove that the genre’s potential for studying the nature of race and racial representation is not limited by its tropes, but by the ways in which authors choose to use them. It is true that, in the wrong hands, Fantasy can do irreparable, unidentifiable damage to sociopolitical and cultural zeitgeists, corrupting real-world understandings of race in such a way that fantasized narratives of racial hatred and real-world instances of racism become indistinguishable. But in the right hands, Fantasy can also do the complete opposite. It can dismantle the very logics by which real-world racisms operate, force readers to reconsider the nature of institutionalized knowledge, and reshape the way we think about race and discrimination as a whole, by teaching us perspective, empathy, and tolerance through stories...But the genre can only accomplish these things if we learn to *understand* what it is, fundamentally, and know how to *use* it in such a way that it does not become something different, something completely alien to itself in the process. For that reason, my goal for this thesis was not to “solve” the debate about racism or racial representation in Fantasy. Rather, by illustrating how Fantasy’s most defining features could be retooled to address its own history of racism, and drawing a chronological map of the events that led to our modern-day works of Fantasy, I hoped to open up the discussion on the subject in some small way, rather than pretend to close it. By alternating between narrative examples of Fantasy’s

power to upend racist discourse, and critical analyses of the genre's history with race, my aim was to encourage others to write on the subject either theoretically or creatively. In many ways, I wanted this project to work as a starting-off point for other, larger-scale works on the topic, and as an accessible, concise and condensed introduction to the subject of race in Fantasy that could guide future research or writing.

Having said that, I ought to briefly talk about the inherent difficulties that come with writing about race – both theoretically and creatively – from the position of a non-institutionally racialized body¹⁹⁹. In regards to the theory portion, I was often, to quote Barbara Johnson “stopped by conflicting conceptions of the structure of address into which I was inserting myself. It was not clear to me what I, a white deconstructor, was doing talking about” the subject of racial representation in Fantasy²⁰⁰. On one hand, being both an avid reader and writer of Fantasies who has grown increasingly unnerved by the prevalence of racist discourse in works of the genre, I felt it necessary to tackle the subject in some way, so that I could be both informative and supportive regarding the issue, all while attempting to find solutions for a lingering problem. On the other, I was unsure how to approach the topic with the depth, attention and gravitas it so rarely receives, without unintentionally misappropriating a discussion or speaker position better left to someone that has experienced Fantasy's racial discriminations firsthand, either in everyday life or in reading the writings of Lovecraft²⁰¹. Meanwhile, when writing the creative portion, I faced a different set of challenges and concerns. For instance, there was a balancing act involved in racializing the four Tribes. None of these species could afford to be seen as stand-ins for real-world ethnicities, but neither could they afford to be oversimplifications or euphemisms of real-world experiences with institutionalized racialization or racism. This was only made more complicated as a result of the position I was writing from, since careless storytelling on my part could easily lead to offensive misappropriations of P.O.C. experiences or discourses relating to race. Similarly, even though I'd taken steps to avoid creating Fantasy equivalents of real-world minority experiences, there was still was the uncertain risk of misusing genre tropes, and yielding stories that embodied the very racist trends

¹⁹⁹ That is to say, a white one.

²⁰⁰ JOHNSON, Barbara. “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston”, *Race, Writing and Difference* (ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr.), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.317

²⁰¹ Among countless others.

I was hoping to upend, thereby discrediting any arguments I was hoping to make on the topic of racial representation. Dominic Lacapra echoes these feelings, arguing that, for those who are not “people of colour”, writing about race “is fraught with difficulty even when one attempts to go about it in a critical and self-critical manner.” This is because there is always “the risk of repeating in one’s own approach the stereotypical features and debilitating consequences of one’s objects of investigation”, since “one’s own existential or ‘subject’ position inflects what one says independently of the propositional content of assertions.”²⁰²

However, upon further reflection, I’d argue that, by approaching the topic from dichotomous angles, illustrating the means to enforce *and* to deconstruct racism in Fantasy, using both fictional *and* theoretical writing, my thesis was able to sidestep many of the complications that result from writing about race in Fantasy. While the mere act of discussing race comes with a set of inevitable hazards and limitations, I believe that working within and around the conventions of Fantasy actually allowed me to address the subject in greater depth than would have otherwise been possible, rather than it hindering my progress in any way. Fantasy fiction, if used correctly, is able to theorize about race *and* offer personal accounts or experiences on the topic that can avoid the issue of banalisation or appropriation. When considered from this perspective, the genre’s focus on escapism and recontextualization makes it better suited to address concepts of race or racism than “realistic” fiction or conventional theory. For example, by focusing on how the *mechanics* of racial representation in Fantasy evolved over time, I was able to reorient the creative portion to focus more on the *hows* and *whats* of racism, rather than simply “recolor” existing reactions to race and experiences of racial identity. Likewise, by having each chapter evoke a different period of Fantasy literature’s history, I was able to demonstrate that the genre can address diverse themes of race, all while proving that Fantasy’s more destructive tropes could be retooled in a variety of different ways. And, perhaps most importantly, by examining how Fantasy has both failed and succeeded in addressing race over time, I was able to create convincing forms of fictional, institutional racisms in my fiction, and then work backwards to deconstruct, challenge, or complexify them, in a way that felt both organic to the narrative and in line with the theory portion’s arguments.

²⁰² LACAPRA, Dominic. “Introduction”, *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance* (ed. Dominick Lacapra), Cornell University Press, New York, 1991, p.2

Therefore, the idea of “shared responsibility” between theory fiction actually becomes *necessary* to understand the Fantasy genre, and to push it towards new, more inclusive and socially conscious territories.

In closing, though many decry that Fantasy literature is little more than mass-market, “comfort zone” escapism that relies too heavily on retreading the ideas of past works, it is specifically *because* of these qualities that the genre is so relevant to study, let alone why it can be such a driving force in reconfiguring our understanding of race for the better. Fantasy’s popularity and accessibility does not come at the cost of big ideas or experimental writing. The genre can simplify complex concepts without running the risk of excessive vulgarisation, and can bring radical new perspectives to real-world issues by forcing us to consider them in new contexts. With its reliance on creating awe-inspiring worlds, the genre can transcend cultural barriers through sheer creativity alone. The tales and subtexts of popular fantasies can redefine the foundations of popular imaginations across the globe, break down barriers of difference without leading to destructive homogenization, and transform the way we look at society, globalization, the “universal” human experience, and of course, race. Because authors so often rework and pay homage to the ideas of past oeuvres, Fantasy has the potential to become a self-updating, permanently expanding, international mythology: one that draws from all cultures, all voices, and keeps growing indefinitely in its pursuit to remain relevant, awe-inspiring, eye-opening. And with the world the way it is today – both rife with anti-intellectualism and more multi-faceted than ever before, teeming with dogmas of prejudice, yet welcoming more openly diverse identities – Fantasy’s potential for escapism, its power to transport readers away from the harsh realities of the world, if only just for a moment, is to be applauded, not condemned. After all, what better way is there to make sense of real-world problems – racism-related or otherwise – than by understanding the worlds so many people in so many places willingly run off to, time and time again?

It is precisely because of these qualities, that, as academics, we cannot allow ourselves to remain illiterate to a genre that defines so many zeitgeists across the planet; *we* must learn from *it*, and make *it* learn from *us*. It is precisely because of these qualities, that, as writers, we cannot allow the worlds we create or the stories we tell to promote racial intolerance or widespread ignorance the way they currently have been: just as Fantasy needs to be a reflection

of reality, it needs to challenge the rules of the world it stands apart from, in a way that heightens our understanding of both real and unreal. It is precisely because of these qualities that, as avid readers of Tolkien, as *The Legend of Zelda* maniacs, as *Harry Potter* fanatics, we cannot mindlessly consume the Fantasy we love: we need to learn to see it as more than just escapism, as more than “just stories”, as more than just an author’s questionable ideals about ethnic purity. If we hope to address issues of racism in Fantasy, we must *all* take responsibility. And, in choosing to make sense of this genre, we may soon find ourselves far better equipped to tackle the issues of racism that plague our day-to-day lives.

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