

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER.

Faculty of Arts.

**Investigation and Application of Writing Structures and World
Development Techniques in Science Fiction and Fantasy.**

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Submission for Doctor of Philosophy

August 2017

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postgraduate research degree of the University of Winchester.**

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Acknowledgements

To my dad. Who I wish had lived to see me finish.

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

ABSTRACT

Investigation and Application of Writing Structures and World Development Techniques in Science Fiction and Fantasy.

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This thesis is an example of creative practice that uses contemporary transmedia storytelling techniques to build a fictional environment that content creators can collaborate in and contribute to with their own fictional works.

Within this thesis, I refine my methodology and identify new methods and processes that apply to the context of the creative project example – the fictional world of Chaos Reborn. The most notable of these are 1) making use of invented and real mythology to project depth into the work 2) presenting information to other contributors so they can switch roles as creators and consumers of the franchise content and 3) Identifying the ways in which my creative work interacts with other elements of the transmedia narrative of Chaos Reborn.

This thesis also identifies issues around continuance of production for this franchise after an initial raft of publications and suggests a consistent way to approach further development of content.

The main creative component of this thesis is a novel set in the world of Chaos Reborn. This is *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), the first of a planned trilogy entitled *The Death of Gods*, which tells the story of how the world of Chaos Reborn came about from its alternative history root in Earth's 14th century. This operates as the background to the game world and anchors the fantasy genre context to a version of our own history.

This work is only a part of the writing undertaken to build the world of Chaos Reborn. There is additional material in appendices which contain the other associated writing from this work and from my previous science fiction case study on *Elite Dangerous* to illustrate the progression and development of my methodology across the genres of science fiction and fantasy.

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Introduction

This project details my findings and reflections during a four-year engagement with two transmedia narratives: The science fiction project, *Elite Dangerous* and the fantasy project, *Chaos Reborn*.

The applied nature of this project has enabled me to construct material, reflect on it and refine it as well as identifying creative and critical work that can be used to inform and refine my methodology.

My task, in both fictions was to produce source and guidance material that would inform and co-ordinate the production and publication of other fiction texts, devised by me and by other content creators. These included computer games, audio dramas, audio books, artwork, novels, short stories and roleplaying games, all connected together by a shared invented history, linked societies and cultures.

The engagement with two sources, enabled me to draw comparisons and refine my approach. World development techniques employed in the *Elite Dangerous* project could be evaluated in the *Chaos Reborn* project and amended or rejected when working in the new fiction context.

The novels produced in these projects, *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) and *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) have two specific objectives. In *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014), I developed an example text that was guided by the world development material and utilised different modes of address to create a narrative of depth that linked a part of the older games of the *Elite Dangerous* project to the current game. In *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), my work operates as the main historical bridge between the previous games of the project and the current game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015).

Dreams of Chaos (2016) is the included novel in this project. The writing is an example of how I have made use of different modes of address and real-world history to project depth into the fiction project as a work of historical fantasy. Interspersing the fantastical concepts in amongst actual events from our past. The work is multi-layered, drawing together the legacies of previous work in the *Chaos Reborn* project from the 1980s and 1990s, along with historical characters and events and invented characters and events of my own.

My investigation identified and applied several writing structures and world development techniques that were of use in these projects. In the critical document, I have tried to reflect on this process and demonstrate the theoretical basis for the different identified concepts.

In **Chapter 1** of the critical work, I introduce the key concepts that relate to working across different publishing platforms. These include a definition of the term, *transmedia storytelling* (page 238) and the concept of *additive comprehension*, which informs my definition of the epic.

In **Chapter 2**, I investigate the referential and culture code of Roland Barthes, acknowledging imperfection and unquantifiable relationship between author and reader.

I compare the imperfect relationship between author and reader to the Nietzschean concepts of Apollonian (constructed) and Dionysian (inspirational) art.

I also connect the development of fictional worlds to Baudrillard's third order of simulacra; the attempt to create a hyperreality of 'total control', but identify the need for imperfection to be incorporated into the design, so as to make room for the reader's interpretation and imagination. This outlines a collaborative imaginative relationship, rather than an attempt by the author to dictate all the elements of the constructed world. I relate this to my work within a text and within a collection of texts and consider the concept of layered meaning generated in the relationship between texts in the same fictional world.

I identify and apply the Aristotelean concept of the epic of multiple perspectives to Roland Barthes concept of the author's 'death' and the priority of the reader's position and perception in understanding the meaning of a text. This prioritises the catharsis and additive comprehension, over the Brechtian desire "to cultivate an objective response" in the reader (Innes, 1972).

I investigate Barthes' referential code further and look at the work of Christine Brooke-Rose and Damien Broderick, introducing the concept of the megatext. I acknowledge that this concept must apply to my work as it will be the experience a reader will have when engaging with it.

In **Chapter 3**, I explain my methodology in developing the background for Chaos Reborn. I provide a close analysis of the existing background material and outline how Tolkien's work and terminology related to the creation of Middle-Earth provides a beginning for a writer who is attempting to develop this kind of material.

I introduce the concept of *narrative resolution* as defined by Mark J. P. Wolf and consider this in a process of developing low resolution information (summaries, synopses, etc) as a stimulus for higher resolution writing (novels, short stories, etc), later.

I apply Wolf's concept to Chaos Reborn's previously released material from 1990 and show how (in the process) I started to expand the narrative resolution of the original work, drawing on source themes, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (2008).

It is here that I extrapolate from Brooke-Rose's initial conceptualisation of the megatext, a second concept, the macrotext – a specific world guide that remains unpublished and mutable. I explain this concept and how I have utilised it in my work on both Elite Dangerous and Chaos Reborn and develop it further by introducing the idea of the novum (Suvin, 1978) and genre icons as defined my

Gary K. Wolfe (Wolfe, 1979: 187), both of which can be related to the macrotext (within the specific fictional world) or to the megatext (the wider genre that the fiction is located within).

In **Chapter 4**, I turn to the writing of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and outline the intentions of the novel as a 'bridging narrative' connecting our world in the 14th century to the fantastical fracture realms of the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015). I begin by drawing out the themes and elements already identified in the devised background and go through how they have been incorporated into the novel.

I introduce the triangulation of meaning as discussed by Davidson and Fiske working in different mediums (Davidson, 1982: 387, Fiske 2011: 10). I appropriate this idea and apply it to the relationship between the writer (self), text (object) and reader (other), so as to define the reader's journey through a story. I then expand it to identify a variety of triangulations that assist in the writing process and the reading process, creating a nexus of different points that can assist in conveying and verifying meaning.

I return to Mark J. P. Wolf to introduce his concept of narrative types (see page 265, Table 1) and how these threads, braids, and fabric allow for the layering of meaning within a fictional world. I also develop Gary K. Wolfe's icons further in identifying icons that exist within both the Elite Dangerous and Chaos Reborn projects that I am working on and explain how I have utilised these in my new texts, *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) and *Dreams of Chaos* (2016). My work in the latter has developed further in the way it incorporates historical icons as well, which I extrapolate and explain. Finally, I return to Mark J. P. Wolf's ideas on narrative resolution and explain how varying my mode of address has allowed for different resolution depth in different parts of the novel and how this has affected its structure.

In **Chapter 5**, I return to discuss the macrotext and how within the Chaos Reborn project I elected to solidify a version of it by publishing *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016), which is included as Appendix B. I explain the intention behind this as a source book that provides a starting point of knowledge for players of the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015) to devise their own realms as content creators, using the tools provided by Snapshot Games as part of the game's release. I introduce Henry Jenkins' term, *participatory culture* (Jenkins, 2006: 3) to explain the thinking behind this engagement.

In **Chapter 6**, I discuss the relationship between the texts of the Chaos Reborn project and the Elite Dangerous project, highlighting the different ways in which elements of each complement and reinforce each other. I outline ways in which the visual text within the project (the computer game) can provide an imaginative framework for a non-visual text (a novel) and how this can be made the best of in the writing.

I then discuss the term *transfictionality*, and how it applies to my work when developing thematic relationships between the texts in one fictional world. I look at the ways in which Wolf's narrative fabric can be built up in one text, by varying the modes of address. I explain the position of the macrotext within this fabric, as it remains solely a part of the content creator's experience whilst not published, but becomes part of a non-content creator's experience if it is solidified and published.

I conclude this chapter with a comment on mythology and how embracing imperfections and partiality in world construction leaves room for speculation in the reader and encourages further development of narratives within the fictional world at a later time.

In **Chapter 7**, I offer my conclusions on my investigation and application of structures and techniques, highlighting the themes and concepts I have found to be important through my progress in working on both *Elite Dangerous* and *Chaos Reborn*.

The included appendix material offers additional insight into my process and demonstrates how this undertaking has been an extensive task.

Appendix A is the MPhil Upgrade submission that details my work on the *Elite Dangerous* project up to 2015 and forms the basis of my work on the *Chaos Reborn* project.

Appendix B is *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016), a support text that explains the current world context of the game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015) and projects backwards, to connect with *Dreams of Chaos* and its two sequels, which will form *The Death of Gods* trilogy. A detailed discussion on this as a solidified macrotext appears in Chapter 5 of the critical component of this thesis (pages 276-278).

Appendix C is a collection of the further work I have done in returning to the *Elite Dangerous* project to assist in the development of the *Elite Dangerous Roleplaying Game* (2017). This included a summary of the developed historical material from 2013-2014 and a selection of short stories, utilising some of the writing methods I made use of in the *Chaos Reborn* project.

Appendix D is a collection of material written for a new post-apocalyptic horror fiction called *Phoenix Point* being developed by Snapshot Games, the developers of *Chaos Reborn* (2015). The computer game is due for release in 2018 and I am co-lead writer on the project. This work demonstrates my further development of the concepts I have worked on for this submission.

Appendix E is a collection of my research papers over the last four years that relate to aspects of the thesis. These papers were presented at conferences, submitted to journals and published in journals. At each stage this process assisted me in developing my reflective critical account of my work.

Creative Element: Application of Writing Structures and World Development Techniques in Dreams of Chaos – The Novel

Prologue

I remember when you were both born. That evening, just as the sun slipped below the hills, we took your mother to the circle in the woods. She was barely able to walk, so my brothers and I fashioned a chair we could carry her in. I expected no-one to be there. Those that still clung to our ways held little hope. They believed the old blood would prove too thin as it had for my parents. But as we arrived, I could hear the singing in celebration - thirty or more people from the village, all those who secretly share the faith. Each of them came to us and gave your mother a gift, then whirled away into the throng. Flushed faces, already caught up in the beginning of our ecstatic dance.

We carried her into the centre and the ritual took up its purpose, the cleansing of your souls as you passed from the divine to our corrupted world. Our hope, to re-invoke the old times, that you be delivered pure, like the ancient ones.

The music swelled, and everything became a riot of colour. I held on to your mother's hand and reached out to the swirling crowd. Hands touched mine as they went by, a thrill of energy and purpose in each celebrating soul, willing fortune and favour on you and your sister.

I remember the pain on your mother's face, the blood on her lip where she'd bitten it. A dual birth, arduous and exhausting. Five years before a woman named Anya died and she had been young and healthy.

The first time you both cried it was together, a strange united moment, then it passed, and you were both handed to my sisters to be washed; our mortal hands imperfect to the task, but our purpose joyous and clear. My eyes never left your mother's, but I heard you and welcomed you into my heart. When the time came, I held you both, praying to the sacred lady that we had brought you to this blighted world as whole and blessed angels.

I could not know then we had failed.

Timeline of Significance

1300: Pope Boniface VIII declares a Jubilee or Holy Year, with plenary indulgences for pilgrims who make their way to Rome. The formal ritual of the tea service begins to become popular in Japan.

1301: Edward I, bestows the title 'Prince of Wales' on his heir, the future Edward II. Andrew III of Hungary dies without an heir, ending four centuries of rule by the descendants of Arpad. In Bengal, King Ruknuddin Kaikaus, dies and is succeeded by his brother, Shamsuddin Firuz.

1302: In Granada, Muhammad II dies and is succeeded by his son Muhammad III. The estates-general of France gather for the first time in Notre Dame, to consider the king's relationship with the pope. Dante Alighieri, a member of the White faction in Florence, is sentenced to death. He flees the city, never to return.

1303: Pope Boniface VIII issues a papal decree, *Unam Sanctam*, to maintain Church authority over kings. King Philip IV of France sends men to seize Boniface from one of his palaces. Boniface is rescued but dies soon afterward. Edward I of England invades Scotland, aiming to subjugate it.

1304: The new pope, Benedict X dies, supposedly after eating poisoned figs.

1305: French influence in the College of Cardinals results in the selection of the Bishop of Bordeaux, who becomes Pope Clement V. People in Rome riot. William Wallace of Scotland is captured and executed.

1306: King Philip IV of France expels Jews from his realm.

1307: Muslims drive Crusaders from the Middle East, including the Knights Templar. The Templars arrive in France...

AD 1303

A forest of torchlight in the darkest of nights, the land seething with bodies, soldiers and their attendants standing outside Chittor awaiting the will of their master, Alauddin Khiliji.

Rani Padmini gazed down on the gathered army from her window. The walls of Chittor were strong and had resisted for many weeks, but in that time the people had become weak. Hunger, always a stronger weapon than swords, brought with it despair.

"The end draws near, my love."

She turned. In the doorway lit by candles stood her husband, Rawal Ratan Singh, forty-second ruler of Mewar. He wore armour and a helm of burnished bronze under his *kesari* robe, a curved sword at his side, draped with a sash on his belt.

"You ride out then?"

"Within the hour," he said. "The bells will announce us and we will finish in a storm of steel."

She felt tears. They said their goodbyes days ago and knew what must be. Rawal had the old blood in his veins, but not enough to master the magic.

"I would go with you."

"You know that cannot be."

The truth pained them both. Her command of magic had always been strong and the adulation of her people empowered her. Khiliji's sorcerer, Chetan, would want her. He would sample her flesh and learn the secret of her gift. She could not be taken – alive or dead.

"The *jauhar* is ready?"

"Yes," she replied, smiling at him through wet eyes. "The ritual chamber is prepared."

"Then you must go."

"And you – to your men."

They stood in silence, staring. Rani tried to picture his face, to commit every line to memory; the thick moustache and strong brown eyes, the scar on his nose from childhood; the strong stance and thick fingers that could be gentle when he wished. Many more things about him would remain with her and each she would cherish.

When she was done, she nodded to him. He bowed in return and left.

After that nothing mattered. She drew the *mehndi* symbols onto her palms and magic stirred in response. The oldest dye held the most potency and burned, starting a fire in her flesh as it should.

Barefoot and holding a candle, she went down the stone stairs to the lowest floor. The women of Chittor had gathered as she requested and took their places at the edge of the ritual chamber. She went to the centre and the vast pile of oil-soaked wood. At the touch of her candle, a strong flame sprang forth. Her magic fed it, gave it shape and purpose.

All around her, the women sang. The room became warm then hot, all moisture drawn from the air. She cast aside clothes, watching them burn. Then, naked but for her woven paint, she stepped into the fire.

The pain made Rani flinch and scream. Every instinct told her to step back, to run from the scarring heat. But her purpose held her in place.

In her life, she had been beautiful, admired and coveted as a possession. Few looked past the visage into her mind and soul. Fewer still could appreciate those alone. With each moment in the flames, the mortal form died and what it contained leapt free.

She became spirit and flew from the room to the sky. Below, she saw the battle and in a last thought of joyful grief, watched her husband's end.

It began to rain.

AD 1307 – The First God Dies

Chapter 1: The Old Blood

Looking back many times over the years, Piers Gaveston wasn't sure what woke him that night; a quiet footstep on the staircase perhaps? The inhalation of breath as the figure approached? A flash of moonlight upon the blade?

He opened his eyes, reached up with both hands and caught the wrist of his would-be assassin, halting the point of the knife an inch from his ribs. The man's arm in his grip and purposeful stare held him in the moment. Complete silence between them as they struggled, neither wishing to wake the other inhabitants of the house, but for very different reasons.

Two hands on the hilt of the weapon. Strength and weight told. The knife descended, its point pricking the skin of Piers' chest.

Desperately, he changed tactics, shifting his legs and kicking out, turning in the small bed, rolling the man towards the floor. The assailant gave a grunt of surprise and lost his balance, falling with a muffled thump. The blade clattered away.

"My lord?"

A concerned voice from outside, Piers ignored it and leapt from the bed, driving a fist into his opponent's face and bare foot into his gut. The man grunted again and made a grab for his ankle, but too late. Piers snatched up the pillow from the bed and dived at the window, head first.

The wooden frame and glass shattered. For a moment, he was flying in darkness. Then cold water assaulted him from all sides. Piers let go of the pillow and kicked out, holding his breath, staying underwater swimming as fast as possible. His lungs burned, but he endured. He was of the old blood. He could withstand a mortal's needs for a long time.

A very long time.

He thought of his wife and children still in the lodgings. They would be safe so long as he didn't go back. That meant leaving Sandwich – the small English coastal port town – and finding help.

An hour after the attack he swam up and raised his head from the water. He'd moved to a dark spot under a pier. He could see a gathering of people around the Inn he'd fled from. Some would be genuinely concerned, others would be looking to find him and finish him.

Quietly, he swam in the opposite direction.

Katya stared down at her brother.

He was sat in his usual place at the table, but today held his head in his hands, weeping. She knew why – *Father*.

The news wouldn't be good, so she hesitated before asking. Her gaze strayed from him, taking in their home and memorising details, as if she might never return. The gaps in the walls, where the straw thatch peaked through, the black cauldron cook pot that steamed throughout the day and the pile of blankets beneath, where she slept with her sister. It was a hot spring afternoon and flies intruded on their private moment. She turned, staring at the dividing wall. She could hear her mother murmuring in a gentle tone, accompanying her father's weakened breaths – *won't be long*.

She looked at Andrei, her brother, again, sat amidst the empty chairs, his shoulders quivering. She wanted to reach out and take him in her arms, but he would reject her touch, they all would, believing themselves sullied and unclean compared to her and her sister.

She stared at her father's chair, remembering him. The laughter and smiles were gone now, it would remain empty, a hole in their lives that would never be filled.

Finally, she summoned her courage and asked the question.

"How... long?"

Andrei glanced at her, as if she were a stranger. "Hours maybe," he said. "The apothecary says the pain is gone, but he won't last the night."

"If I tried—"

“No. He would hate you.”

They fell to silence, listening to the weak noises from the other room. Eventually, the emotion around Katya became more than she could stand and she left quietly, leaving her brother to his grief.

She walked down the thin road from the village towards the woods, keeping her eyes upon her feet as people went by. They moved aside, giving her room, even those who did not believe the legend were wary enough to respect the superstition. Those who did knew better.

They were not allowed to touch her.

Eventually, she found herself by the river at a familiar spot and approaching the person she’d been seeking – her sister, Galina, sat as always, with a pile of washed clothes beside her, staring into the water. Katya walked up quietly. No need to announce her presence. Galina always knew where she was.

“How is Andrei?” she asked, without turning around.

“I thought you’d want to learn about father.”

“I know about father,” Galina said.

Katya nodded and sat down. Galina always knew. She picked up a smooth stone and threw it into the water, disturbing it for an instant. “Andrei is in pieces. He wouldn’t let me help.”

“He was right to stop you.” Galina spoke softly, as if to someone else then turned toward Katya. Hers was a heart-shaped face with thin lips, a mirror to Katya’s, apart from the dark blue eyes and a tiny scar on her cheek from their first fight in the womb, mother said.

Galina reached out and brushed back her brown blonde hair. “Father would never forgive you.”

Katya frowned. She picked up another stone between a finger and thumb and concentrated. The magic came to life, a shivering thrill that ran down her arm. Gradually, her hand closed and her fingers came together, forcing a hole right through the middle of the rock. When she was done, she held it out. “What’s the point in this if I can’t help the people I care about?”

Galina's gaze didn't waver from hers. "Perhaps the power you have would aid him, but could you control it?" She made a face. "If he died at your hands, what then?"

"At least I'd know I'd tried."

"And the village would too. We have enemies who do not believe as we do. You have heard their names for us, *witches* they say. If you give them an excuse, they will murder us." She plucked the stone from Katya's hands and dropped it into the water. "We must give them no reasons and do as father wished until the time is right."

"But when will the time come?"

"Trust me, I will tell you."

They sat in silence together for a while, both staring into the water, Katya trying to glimpse something of what Galina saw. She asked her about it before, but never understood the answer. *I see what passes*, Galina always said.

It was a strange bond they shared, each with a power incomprehensible to outsiders and each other. The village elders claimed them as gifts from heaven, which frightened Katya even more.

She'd been told the stories of course. How the old blood guided them and gave them a shepherd to bring them to the creator. The villagers believed the world to be made by evil, and death to be a final act; a return to paradise, casting off the corrupt form of the flesh.

Katya and Galina were supposed to be the shepherds, the purest of those born with the old blood. The village watched them closely when they were young and saw the signs. The elders wanted them married off at fourteen summers, but so far, their ailing father had persuaded them to wait for another two seasons.

"We need to leave Bregovo," Galina said, voicing Katya's thoughts for her and making her smile. It was a habit from childhood, as they grew older, the bond between them had changed and become less distinct, but she still felt it.

"Where could we go?" she asked. "We have family and friends here, without them—"

"We will be fine," Galina said. "Mother and Andrei will be better without us." She stood up from the river and began gathering the bundle of clothes into two piles which she put into two large sacks. "I brought everything we'll need – food enough for a few days. We'll take the road south to Vidin. No-one will notice us gone until nightfall."

Katya watched her. "Don't you want to see Father?" she asked, "to make your peace?"

"I did that weeks ago." Galina held out one of the sacks. "I'm sorry you didn't get the chance."

Katya's hands curled into fists. "You never told me you knew!"

Galina didn't reply, just held out the bag. With no fuel, Katya's anger ran out of her as quickly as it came. She took the sack, wrapping the strap around her shoulders. "You didn't tell me because you knew I'd try to help him," she muttered.

Galina nodded and smiled sadly. "There is nothing for us here. Time to go."

Without another word, both sisters turned and fell into step towards the road.

"Through here, my lord."

Avignon. Far beneath the bishop's palace, keys rattled in the lock of a large wooden door at the behest of an old priest bent double with age. In front of him, Piers Gaveston, now exiled advisor to Prince Edward II of England, waited, impatiently. The ceremonial robes of the Temple of Solomon were itching his shoulders, but he held his tongue. It was never wise to irritate a priest in his own home, no matter how feeble the man seemed.

The door opened into a dark void. Piers gritted his teeth and strode forwards. Light sprang from old candles either side of him as he walked into the gloom, banishing the black. The spell was a simple one, reminding the wicks of their purpose and revealing a vast chamber, built for grand design and fallen into neglect.

The sound of Piers' hard boots echoed across the flagstones. It smelled damp down here, the air close and oppressive in the summer heat. "We are far from heaven in this ungodly place," he muttered.

The priest chuckled. "The bounty of our maker lies but two steps from his dungeon, my lord." His words in Latin were little more than a rattling whisper in the gloom as he limped forwards. "This way."

Piers followed him to a second door. Once again, the priest produced a key and unlocked it, ushering him through. The corridor beyond was well lit, so Piers let the spell upon the candles lapse. The murmuring of voices confirmed he had reached his destination.

"Welcome brother," a woman's voice, speaking French. She was waiting by the door, older than him, but still beautiful with the ageless quality possessed by all those with the gift. He smiled, recognising the family traits of her Plantagenet heritage – a calculating stare, strong brow and nose. "Lady Eleanor," he said and bowed.

"We were expecting you yesterday," she remarked, holding out her arm, he took it and walked with her into the room. She wore a similar temple order vestment, but cut favourably for a woman, colours befitting her rank that could never be worn in public. "How fare my scions?"

"There is some disagreement," Piers replied. "Father and son are very different people."

"*La jambe longs!*" Eleanor said her lips quirking into a smile. "Ah Edward, so like my Richard, he is, but no lion. A mind of cold steel – dull, yet strong."

"I am banished from court," Piers confessed. "I had hoped to ask the Temple to restore me."

"We are aware," Eleanor said. "The matter is in hand."

The corridor opened outward into a wide circular chamber, like an underground amphitheatre with concentric circles of steps acting as seating. A solitary stone chair was the only exception, occupying a space facing them. Piers gazed up and around in wonder. He could not see the chamber's source of light, but it was as bright as sunlight.

"Is this your first visit?" Eleanor inquired.

"It is," Piers said.

"You will get used to it."

On the benches sat an assortment of priests in the same sackcloth as the one who had guided him, and amongst them, others wearing the robes of the temple. He counted perhaps thirty of each, engaged in hushed discussions. Some faces he recognised from different royal courts. One man glanced in their direction and smiled at Eleanor, she inclined her head in return.

"A friend?"

"Once he was," she said and turned in the other direction to a vacant section of the steps. "We should sit there."

Piers guided her to the chosen place. He noted etched runes covering the slabs and the detail of crisscrossed scratches. "Has this chamber always been here?"

"No, it was constructed shortly after His Eminence came," Eleanor said. "The stones are from the first Lycaenum in Greece, moved here at great expense. More renovation is planned. Avignon will be the new Rome."

"I've never been to Rome."

"These days, the journey is worth more than the destination." Eleanor ran her fingers along the hem of her temple vestment. "Rome is not what it was. Too many of the elders have grown weary of this world and lie in slumber, dreaming grand dreams. Avignon is the future, we have seen it."

Piers frowned and leaned towards her, lowering his voice. "Seen my lady? You mean a vision?"

"Yes."

"I thought they were just rumours."

"The word of God is no rumour brother; your gift is part of his truth and there are others who can deliver his mysteries to us." She looked up from the vestment, her eyes circling the room. "You will glimpse his truth in this chamber tonight."

Piers nodded. His gaze strayed from his companion to something beside the doors. At first, he thought it to be a soldier on guard, but it remained stone still. He realised he was staring at a strange

suit of armour. The outlandish attributes that sprang from a box on its back fascinated him. He could see no purpose whatsoever in the ropes that ran from there to its thighs and neck.

“What is that?” he asked Lady Eleanor and pointed.

“The Empyrean engine,” she replied. “You will learn its purpose soon enough.”

Purposeful footsteps echoed on the stone and the conversations quieted. A man strode into the room, his long grey beard and bald head setting him apart from the tonsured priests and the groomed temple members. But the two-armed knights at his side and a long cloak of white with a red cross emblazoned on each shoulder made him instantly recognisable.

The Grandmaster, Jacques de Molay.

Instinctively Piers was on his feet, Eleanor beside him, the whole room half a beat behind. De Molay paused, looked left and right at each face, then continued to the stone chair. When he was seated the gathered audience returned to their places.

De Molay had led the Templars for fifteen years since the death of the previous leader, Thibaud Gaudin. The circumstances around Gaudin’s death were still unclear; he had apparently been ‘exhausted’.

“Bring in the seer,” de Molay ordered.

The scraping sound of metal against stone came first before two more knights emerged from the corridor dragging an old woman between them. She wore rags, the blood and grime of a captive life staining her arms, legs and face.

“Begin!”

It took all four of the knights to wrestle the woman to the centre of the chamber. Her struggle was pathetic, but desperate and extravagant. She knew her fate and fought for each extra moment of life.

But it was no good, and slowly they overpowered her, forcing her into the correct position, kneeling before the Grandmaster.

When she was in place, de Molay stood and walked down the steps to her.

"I know what you are, woman," he said.

"And what is that?" she replied.

De Molay, raised his voice. "This woman is a *sibyl*, captured from her Grotta in the Umbrian mountains. She is a witch and relic of heathen times. She has abused her gifts, but her blood retains the power it was given."

The woman spat on the stone floor. "Kill me, if that is your intent!"

De Molay laughed. "We will redeem your soul by putting it to proper use."

The Grandmaster drew a curved knife from his belt and grabbed the woman's arm, slashing open her flesh. She screamed, and blood dripped onto the stone. Piers saw channels cut into the floor and watched the red rivulets run into a runic pattern in front of the chair. De Molay's lips moved soundlessly as he held the woman's arm over the symbol. The old priest with the keys appeared by his side. "Petitioners, step forward!" he announced.

Eleanor nudged Piers' arm. He got up hesitantly, repulsed by the scene. He had seen the atrocities of war, where men lingered for days with the worst wounds. Their suffering did not compare to the torture of this woman, but if he turned away, his commitment to the temple would be questioned.

He stepped forward, taking his place in the line of eager penitents.

"What crop should we sow in the fields of Garonne?"

"Shall we gather another crusade against the devil king of Trinacria?"

"Does my father rest with the Angels?"

The answers from the women were inaudible, but each petitioner left the line promptly. Piers reached the front and spoke his question.

"How can I regain the favour of the English king?"

Bloodshot eyes held his. He saw resignation on the woman's face. She knew she was dying, bleeding for a faith she did not share, but de Molay's spell held her and compelled her to reply.

“The King will love you best after the hill and the sands. Aballava’s curse returns. In fall, be aboard ship to return to his shoulder!”

Hands pushed Piers roughly to one side, the old priest from before knelt in front of the woman, the stained knife in his hands. One swift motion and the blade went into her ribs, she gasped as blood drenched the floor and the man’s sackcloth robes. He leaned forwards, whispering a question in her ear. She shuddered and shook her head. Then he grabbed her throat, insisting. Finally, she nodded, and he released her to collapse in agony upon the stones.

De Molay stood over her. “End it,” he said to one of the knights. The man nodded, drew his sword and drove it through the woman’s chest, killing her instantly.

The chamber was silent. The knight wiped his sword on the dead woman’s rags.

“The *sibyl* has spoken to me!” the old priest announced. “Our faith is strong; we may open a path to heaven, as it was in the first days!”

“Then you all know what you must do,” de Molay’s words washed over the room. “Gather the brethren. In two days, we will return to this place and make the attempt.”

When Eochaid Ollathair left the land of Ériu, he did so in sorrow. Cethlenn of the Crooked Teeth had wounded him, breaking the mortal binds on his soul at last.

He stumbled from the field of Maige Tuired, dragging with him his great club and stirring pot. He came to the passageway at Brú na Bóinne and laid down his burdens. He bled life into the last magic brew he would make and thrust his great club into the earth that it might grow again into a tree.

He ventured into the passageway alone and to the room where life meets death. As the sun shone into the heart of Brú na Bóinne, so Eochaid Ollathair wove his last spell, opening the door to the underworld then he transformed and took his true place as guardian and watcher of our lands.

The Tuath Dé that lived came after the Dagda with the last of the beaten Fomori and pitched them into the dark, far beneath the earth. There they joined the last Fir Bolg and would dwell until the end of days.

Afterwards, the Tuath Dé went their own way. Some drank of Ollathair's brew and took Milesian form. Others made new legends of themselves before finding new passage to the world of the Gods.

Chapter 2: The First Horseman

It was long after sundown. Firelight cast strange shadows in the dark. Wrapped in a blanket, Katya prodded the burning wood, making sparks fly and imagining the shapes as flickering forms of men, women and children, leaping and dancing in celebration; a memory of the old rituals and the stories her father once told her.

She'd never been this far from Bregovo. The elders forbade her to go more than a mile from the outlying farms, but it no longer mattered what they thought.

Beside her, Galina lay sound asleep her breathing even and relaxed. Not for the first time, Katya envied her certainty and confidence. They were two sides of a coin. The old blood gave her sister glimpses of the future and a sensitivity to the nature of things. In Katya, it manifested physically. She'd been an angry child, spontaneous magic erupting whenever she'd lost her temper, until she learned to suppress her gifts.

The flames were hypnotic, gradually soothing her. The sadness she felt at not saying goodbye to her father wouldn't go away, but there was nothing she could do. He would die in the darkness, with his wife and son holding his hands. Even if she and Galina had been present, they would not have been allowed to touch him, for fear they might become corrupted and lose their gifts.

No more of that now, she realised. We are strangers to all those we meet.

The prospect excited and scared her at the same time, banishing any hope of rest.

Galina dreamed.

She knew it was a dream. The illusions of her mind held more colour than the real world. Since childhood, her sleep had been an adventure in itself. At times, she wandered out of her body as it rested, but tonight she stayed where she slept.

The woodland remained the same as the camp she remembered, but the hues of green, brown and red were vibrant and fascinating. The small fire her sister crouched over became a rainbow of colour, leaping and whirling against the black sky.

There were waving lines of light between Katya and the flames. Galina had seen this before when her sister was concentrating on something, small tendrils connected her to the object of her

attention. Galina knew what they were – strands of magic emanating from her sister and reacting with the fire.

Then something drew her attention, a movement just outside the light. A pair of eyes stared out of the darkness, watching Katya. Cautiously, Galina moved towards them and, when she was close enough, her hand shot out...

A howl of pain, humanlike, but not human. Katya's head snapped around, to see her sister holding the spindly wrist of something in the darkness and dragging it out.

"Hold still!" Galina shouted. "I'm not letting you go!"

The small creature that emerged was no more than two-foot-tall, with mottled red skin covered in hair. Bulging eyes flicked between both sisters, plainly terrified. "*Orisnizi!*" it cried out. "Please! No eat, no eat!"

Galina grabbed his other arm and pulled him towards her. "We're not going to eat you," she said. "But why were you spying on us?"

"*Orisnizi!*" the creature repeated, pointing at Katya. "Eat for power!"

Katya found herself smiling at the idea. "I'm not going to eat you," she said. "Answer my sister's question."

Their captive stopped struggling. "Not spying – brought here," he nodded at Katya. "Called me."

"No, I didn't I—" Katya stopped herself and turned to Galina. "Could I have?"

"I'm never sure with you," Galina replied. She let go of one of the creature's arms and shuffled round to sit in front of the fire. "Who are you?"

"I am *juje*," the creature replied.

"Is that your name?"

"No! Power in names, not to be given! Once told, never taken back. I am *juje* as you *orisinizi*."

Katya frowned. Both words were unfamiliar, but the creature seemed insistent. "How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Always. Always been here."

"Are there more of you?"

"Many! But not here. Away. Gone." The creature looked sad and waved its free arm. "*Juje* alone now."

Galina let go of his other arm. The *juje* didn't try to run. "You aren't alone now," she said.

The creature shrugged and also sat down. "Make no difference, *orisinizi* not *juje*. You leave when sun come."

"That is our intention."

"I no leave, not till..." the creature hesitated, as if unable to choose the right word. "End?"

Katya flinched as she thought about her father again. "I think I'll sleep now," she said.

"Let you both rest, yes?" The creature's expression became earnest. "I guard for *orisinizi*, make sure slumber peaceful." An infectious gap-toothed smile framed the end of the sentence, making Katya smile in return.

"I'd like that," she said.

"Then sleep. *Juje* watch."

Katya glanced at the creature then at Galina who nodded. "Very well," she said. "We will trust you."

"I understand. Honoured by *orisinizi* trust."

Katya lay down. After that no-one spoke. She thought about staying awake to keep watch over the creature, but her eyes wouldn't let her. She drifted off into a restful and dreamless repose.

The next thing Katya knew was the light touch of her sister's hand on her shoulder.

"Time to wake up."

Katya looked around. The fire had long since died out and there was no sign of the *juje*.

"What happened?"

"We both slept," Galina replied. "But if you mean, what happened to the little man we saw, well... if he was real, he's not here now."

Katya sat up. It was well after dawn and her sister had cleared and packed their belongings. She peered at the ground near the fire, but there were no footprints or any other clues. "Perhaps we did dream it?"

"It wouldn't be the first time we've shared a dream," Galina said. She stood up and shouldered her carry sack. "I let you sleep as long as I could, but we must leave now."

Katya nodded, quickly stowed her blanket and put on her boots. In moments, they were back on the road and walking south. Galina passed her two flatbread biscuits. Katya recognised them as Mother's from the day before. She ate one and put the other in her sack. "What's happening to me?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what happened last night? The *juje*. If he was real, he said I called him."

Galina shrugged. "You've always had gifts. We never explored them because father told us not to."

"Was it a dream or not?"

"What is a dream anyway? Things I see have been real when I woke up, or come to pass a time after. Other folk talk of silly sleep stories, I don't remember one that hasn't happened or happened a few days later."

"Is that how you learned about father?"

"It was."

Galina didn't elaborate and they walked on in silence for a time. Katya fell into staring at her feet again. Step after step after step on the dirt track, wide enough for carts, but not important enough for stones to be laid. They were fortunate. If they had left in the wet season, the road would leave its stain on them. As it was, dust made the air rough and her throat raw.

"There's a rider on the hill."

Katya glanced up and saw the figure in the distance straight ahead. The rider sat motionless, the horse side on to them. It was a man, painfully thin and wearing strange clothes, with cloth wrapped around his face. His horse seemed emaciated too, the bones of its legs jutting out prominently

through its white skin. When they started up the hill, he dismounted and began to walk down, towards them.

Galina hissed a warning and stopped. Katya halted too, a couple of steps ahead. The man didn't stop until he was ten strides away. He walked with a long thin staff, a foot taller than he was. Up close his skin was darker than any she'd seen; his eyes, bloodshot and his expression, oddly hungry. "What brings two girls to the road this fine day?" he asked, his voice soft, but carrying without effort. "How might a stranger help you on your walk to Vidin?"

"How do you know where—" Katya began, but Galina silenced her with a wave of her hand.

"Strangers have to earn the trust of those they speak to," she said cautiously. "All manner of folk walk these roads, good and bad."

The man seemed to find this amusing, biting back a chuckle and wiping a line of drool from his lips with the back of his hand. "How might a gentleman prove his worth?" he asked.

"By leaving us be," Galina replied.

The amusement in the man's face faded, but the air of hunger did not. "If that is your wish, it can be respected," he said, "for a time."

"You'll let us pass. Then, if we meet again, we'll look upon you with more favour," Galina said. Katya glanced at her. She had a fixed expression on her face and her right hand was hooked into her belt. She kept a skinning knife there, a poor match to the man's walking stave, although his gaunt appearance suggested she might have a chance.

"Agreed." The man spat on his hand and extended it to Galina, who hesitated. "If you don't take it, there is no bargain, just words," the man warned.

"Here," Katya reached into her carry sack and pulled out the flatbread biscuit she'd saved. "This will be our token, better than any handfast."

The man stared at the biscuit and licked his lips. Once again, drool escaped onto his chin, but he seemed oblivious this time. "A dangerous gift for one such as me," he said.

"You look hungry," Katya replied. "This will help."

"Perhaps not in the way you think." The man glanced at his horse then stepped forward and plucked the biscuit from her hands. "I accept. When we meet again I will gaze favourably on *you* as well." The emphasis plainly excluded Galina. He bowed and drew his mount to one side, holding the biscuit in his palm under its nose. The creature attacked it feverishly. "We will detain you no longer," he said. "I give you the road."

Wordlessly, Katya and Galina resumed walking. After a few minutes, Katya glanced back over her shoulder, but the horseman was nowhere to be seen. "We didn't dream that," she said.

"No," Galina replied, "and we've not heard the last of him, I'm certain."

The antechamber of Pope Clement V's Avignon residency was light, airy and cool, but it did not banish the memory of what Piers had witnessed the night before.

He sat on a cushioned bench, waiting with three other supplicants, each with queries for the pontiff. He'd been there an hour and was growing restive, his gaze raking over his rivals as they attempted to busy themselves ignoring him and each other. Surely, the pope would know his request was far more urgent than any of these concerns?

Piers had been a church-sanctioned wizard for many years. Aged five, he had been taken by his father to the Cathedral of Saint-André in Bordeaux and trained in the use of his gifts. The eight years he spent in a special wing amongst senior monks and specialist teachers. In 1297, aged thirteen, he had been branded with the *caduceus* serpent and staff, and permitted to accompany his father to England to complete his training and take up service with the English king. Five years later, he'd been given the opportunity to join the Temple.

Surprisingly he'd never met Raymond Bertrand de Got, Archbishop of Bordeaux, who became Pope Clement V in 1305. After his inauguration, Clement's expected move to Rome had not occurred for a variety of reasons and now might never happen. To the congregations of faithful across Europe little ever changed, but in the upper echelons of the Church, a game of politics was being played and above that, another game of real power.

A priest in a plain black vestment appeared at the chamber door and beckoned to one of the petitioners, who strode forward for his appointment. Gaveston gnashed his teeth in frustration. He stood up and walked over to a painting on the wall. The frame and canvas were ornate and expensive, but the brushwork crude and ill conceived. He hunted for the painter's name and found an illegible scrawl. The Avignon palace was not the Vatican, it had a rustic charm, but would never compare in grandeur.

The priest returned and ushered out another of the petitioners. Piers gave him a hard stare, but he didn't appear to notice and walked away with his charge, the soft click of the doors as they closed

was the perfect rebuttal. All things would happen in an order determined by the pontiff and his administrators.

Piers glanced around again. He picked up a discarded book from one of the tables. It was roughly made, the pages held together with twine, and covered in spidery writing. Here and there a drawing appeared; concentric circles, in which he read the word – *Inferno*.

“Do you like my work?”

Piers turned. The last of the petitioners was looking at him and gestured to the book. “Incomplete as yet, my research is unfinished,” he said in Italian-accented French. “I hope to conclude by the end of the year; a fitting scholastic work for His Eminence to bring to Rome.”

“Is this what you want to meet with him about?”

“I am not waiting to meet with him. I was waiting to see you.”

Piers frowned. “I’m sorry, but my audience is with—”

“His Eminence has no interest in your report on de Molay’s intentions, or his plan.” The man waved his hands. “Leave a shepherd to attend to his flock, we are not sheep.” He took the book from Piers’ hands. “Anything you say to His Eminence would disturb a mind already clear in its task.”

“What task?”

“To herald the new direction of our church, to bring heaven’s word directly to the faithful.”

Piers tried to hold the man’s stare, but found he couldn’t, such was the strength and passion in those clear blue eyes. “You cannot claim to know such things.”

The man smiled and held up the book. “With the aid of magic, I interrogated the three hundred and twenty-four cadavers, the rotting minds of the dead, disturbed from eternal sleep. Their collated confessions allowed me to shape this work and create a map of the world beyond. I have learned all I can of their resting places, but this book? It is nothing. It will be chopped up and censored into a version suitable for the masses then distributed to all with interest. Those that can read Latin will feast on these pages and ruminate on its application. By comparison, the diligent work of the Temple will ensure that in three days, the first living souls will touch heaven. That is true progress.”

Piers frowned, recalled what he saw in the chamber. “The armour in the corner of the room, was it yours?”

The man’s smile widened. “Yes indeed! The latest iteration of our work. A knight must be correctly attired to brave a new world. The lore of our forefathers informs our ritual, their faith

shows us the way. Our paladins will be clear of purpose and heart, through the purity of our ceremony.”

“The woman sacrificed last night was no believer.”

“No was not, but she carried the gift, as do you and I. It manifests differently, depending on our nature. Some, like yourself, may invoke power, others like me, examine and understand it.” The man sat down on the bench where Piers had been sat before. “You undertook the position of watcher to the English king with a clear understanding of what it meant, did you not?”

“I accepted my gifts were part of my faith, agreed to be trained and put to use,” Piers replied. “I was one of many.”

“But you rose to prominence at court and have been rewarded with entry to the Temple. Now you are seeking a way to restore your position and have come here for assistance,” the man laughed. “But, you did not expect to be given prophecy, you expected someone to accompany you to London to lean on the English king.”

Piers shrugged. “The Temple chooses to aid me as it wishes.”

“However, it means you do not know what to do with yourself,” the man said. “You expected to be trading favours for assistance, instead, you have been given time, a space from your vocation. It would be best that you use it, learn to understand the Temple’s mission here in Avignon, question and ask things of us; ask of your predecessors.” He laughed again. “The good lady of Aquitaine is always keen to educate those who attend to the interests of her *family*.”

Piers felt his face colour. “You suggest I keep my own counsel then? Look to my own affairs?”

“I suggest that if you wish to learn, you learn, rather than condemn when you know so little of which you speak.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Does it need to be?”

I write to warn you, Your Holiness, of the consequences of your actions.

Rome is the centre of our faith and has been since the earliest days of anarchy. The work of our ancestors to create order lasting more than a thousand years is being undermined by your intransigence.

For centuries, the empire of our faith relied on its beating heart. In Rome, you are but a step from sage council and ancient wisdom. Your continued prevarication in Avignon places you in a vulnerable position and threatens the purpose of our work – to bring our faith to the world.

The individuals you surround yourself with are not appropriate to your status. The work of troubadours and devouts is indeed part of understanding the word, but it is but a part and the mysteries should be discussed and debated with those who are correctly ordained to speak of them.

I am concerned that your absence from our church's heart and the removal of the Curia to Poitiers will fatally undermine our faith. I ask that you consider the matter urgently and reconvene your court in the Basilica of St Peter, as it should be.

Nicholas de Balmye – Canon of Dunblane.

Chapter 3: A Question of Honour

In the early evening, the tea house was quiet. A cold breeze blew from the ocean to the east, a message perhaps, from the edge of the world.

The garden was carefully kept. The stones washed, brushed and neatly arranged in lines. Flat slates formed wave-like patterns at regular intervals; nothing out of place – a testimony to accuracy and effort.

Teru walked up the seventeen steps to the pavilion table carrying the cups, pots and herbs he would need. A large iron flask steamed over hot coals. He drew water, taking care to fill the metal spoon with only as much as was required for each cup. The painted patterns lining the receptacles were incredibly intricate, each one different from the other and partnered to the intended guest.

The *cha-no-yu* tea ritual was new to the islands and not widely practised, but to the Tengu it was a tradition that came before negotiation and diplomacy. The distraction of ceremony prevented thoughts of violence and harm.

Teru looked up as the air tightened; the prelude to a storm perhaps? More likely the arrival of a guest before time. “You are early,” he said without looking up.

“For a ritual to have power, it must be respected and adhered to,” a woman said in stiff Japanese. “You should understand my nature.”

He turned in the direction of the voice. She stood at the bottom of the steps, a foreigner with dark eyes and long black hair tied with a simple grip. She wore thin trousers and a shirt, her arms exposed, showing the intricate lacing of scars that covered her skin. He knew the rest of her body would be the same, a testimony to her victories in battle. Only her face remained unadorned. No enemy had touched it. In her right hand, she held a bloody knife. He smiled.

“Is that to be your means?”

“It needs to appear crude, like a violation.”

Teru nodded. “I had hoped for more honour in my death.”

The woman frowned. “There is a great deal of honour in this. I have not surprised you to slip a knife in your ribs or poisoned your food. Instead, I confront you openly.”

“I am not prepared.”

“Which is understandable.”

Teru moved quickly. A hand snatched the scalding tea cup and flicked it at the woman. She didn't move. The cup hit her shoulder, the liquid staining her shirt and spilling onto her scarred skin, but she didn't flinch. The skin quickly reddened. "Thank you," she said, "you will be remembered."

She advanced up the steps, slowly, purposefully. Teru threw a second cup, but this time the woman dodged easily. He backed away, noticing her lips moving and feeling the air change, as before, when she'd appeared. The table was between them and the large metal spoon in his hands. He swung it at her, but again, she moved aside, diving across the table and slamming into him.

He fell backwards into a sitting position, a sharp pain in his stomach. He glanced down and saw the hilt of the knife sticking out of his thin robes, a red stain, spreading across the fabric.

"It is done," the woman said standing over him.

Teru glanced up at her and tasted blood. The world began to darken like an eclipse. He focused on her sad smile and tried to get up.

He couldn't.

Galina was right. As the sun went down and they stopped to camp for the night, the sisters found the strange horseman sat under a tree tending a small fire. He still wore his long coat and hat.

"You followed us," Katya said.

"That would require me to be behind you," the man replied with a toothy smile. "Instead, I anticipated you would stop here and waited."

"What do you want?"

"Come now, we agreed our second meeting would be favourable," the man said, prodding the flames with his staff. "I have done all you asked. We are no longer strangers."

Galina sighed. She put her carry sack down and seated herself. Katya did the same. They kept the fire between them and the man. Something about it made her shiver rather than get warm.

"What is your name?" Galina asked.

"There are many," the man replied. "Faim, is a name others use for me. You need not tell me your names, I already know them."

"How?"

"Before we met, I visited your village looking for you. I learned your names from the people there."

Katya stared at him. "How is my—"

"Your father is well. Once you both left, he recovered." Faim stared directly at her, ignoring Galina. "He was holding you back."

"Do you mean I made him sick?"

"Your magic did. He was trying to protect you and keep you from the world. When you left, his health improved."

"You're lying," Galina said.

Faim smiled, but didn't look at her. "Am I lying, Katya?" he asked.

"No, he's not." She knew instinctively. Her gaze strayed to the fire. "This is magic, isn't it?"

"Yes, I cast the spell just before you arrived."

"You're like me then?"

"Yes."

"But not like her?" She pointed at Galina.

"No." Faim leaned forward. "The gift is not as strong with her."

"Are we *orisinizi*?"

Faim laughed. "An old name, no doubt dreamt up by your villagers. Didn't they tell you what it means?"

"They never mentioned it," Katya said. "We heard it from someone else."

Faim shrugged. He put down the staff and took off his hat. Unkempt straggles of dark hair spilled out. The centre of his head was bald, plainly not by choice. "I came to these lands to find you. There are less and less people born with the gift outside the established orders. I had to reach you first, before they did, to give you a choice."

"There is always a choice," Galina said. "We choose to sit and listen to you, or not."

"The day someone takes all choices from you is when you learn the value of free will," Faim replied. "The people of your village are good people, honest folk. They tried to protect you and keep you safe in ignorance – a different kind of prison. They denied you things but never used force which

is why, eventually, you decided to leave.” He was addressing them both now, his gaze flicking from one to the other. “You are of the old blood, gifted with the magic and the long life. If you stayed, you would watch everyone grow old and die.” The last of the humour faded from his voice. “If you stay free, eventually you’ll be separated too. Galina has the blood, but not in the way you do.”

They sat in silence for a long time after that. The words were like stones in Katya’s stomach. She wiped away tears, cursing herself, crying for people who weren’t even dead. Faim’s explanation unlocked feelings and awoke questions. She could sense the people of the village and knew her father was alive. Something of them reached out to her, sustained her in a way she couldn’t define.

“What should we do?” Galina asked.

“Do?” Faim turned away, picking up his hat and examining the brim. “Live and find your way. I am no teacher or sage. My purpose is to make you aware of what you are. The exploration of it is yours to share as you will. All things are hungry for knowledge and power, how you find these things is for you to determine.”

“So, you won’t teach me then?” Katya said.

“No, I will not,” Faim said. His red eyes narrowed into slits. “Unless you wish to strike another bargain?”

Katya frowned. “We have nothing to give you.”

“You have more than you realise.”

“You followed us and talk to us, merely to let us go?” Galina said. “What is it that you really want?”

“You are both powerful,” Faim said. “I wish to release that power and make it accessible for you. I want everyone like you to find their own path, unrestricted by the requirements of others.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“You ask for a future favour then? What do we get in return?”

“I will show you enough to protect yourselves against those who will seek you out, a few simple rites that you can use and learn more from later.”

“But who would come after us?” Katya asked.

“You were protected and kept secret. Now, the priests of the churches and cities will come,” Faim explained. “Only they will not offer you a choice.”

“They would kill us?”

“Not if they can help it. Many of them are gifted as you are and came from similar stock. No, they will take you to their secret places, purge you of your past and make stone of your minds, turning you into their enforcers. If you refuse, they will kill you, so as you see, another prison and not really a choice.”

After dark, Avignon was a quiet place. Piers Gaveston sat in a tavern on Rue Limas. Wine, bread and cheese improved his mood a little, but not much.

As the common room filled, he wandered out, leaving an assortment of provincial conversations. Out here in the portside establishments, the presence of the Church and its pontiff seemed less obvious, but it was a thin façade. Scratch under the surface and the growing influence of the papacy revealed itself. Pardoners harangued people on street corners and the bells of service rang out regularly in each church.

Piers found himself walking towards the multi-arched Pont Saint-Bénézet that spanned the twin forks of Le Rhone. It was a clear night and stars filled the sky. He reached the gate tower on the riverside and stopped, leaning out over the water, watching it slip by in the dark.

His thoughts went back to what he’d seen and been told, trying to reconcile it with his faith. The Church’s edict of magic did not permit what was being planned. Things were often done that broke those laws, but never beneath the house of the Pope himself. *At least not that I know of.*

De Molay and the Italian’s words of a portal to heaven, of travelling to the blessed realm troubled him greatly.

Piers’ fingers rubbed idly at the marked symbol on his wrist, the *caduceus* brand he’d been given when he’d been sanctioned as a wizard. Arrogance was a perennial flaw amongst those with the gift, but he knew his place and the correct limitation. The priests had schooled him well. The magic came from a blessing passed from the first men. It was the duty of those with the gift to shepherd those without. Those who did not accept the path became its enemies.

Which side does de Molay belong to?

Piers heard a noise from above, the sound of wings – *large wings*. Instinctively he ducked as something swooped overhead. The faint trace of a spell in the air and the shadow of a bird above,

larger than anything he'd ever seen. It wheeled quickly, screamed and dived at him again. The snap of claws and beak, close to his ear and then the creature was on him, its weight and strength pinning him to the ground. He screamed and raised his hands to protect his face. Lines of pain erupted along his arms. He screamed again, but this time coherently, invoking the words he'd been taught as a child and felt the power well up and burst forth in response. The bird cried out.

And then he was alone again, lying on his back, bleeding on the cobblestone street.

Since the times of antiquity, the gifted asked questions of their bestowed abilities. They appealed to the heavens for answers, seeking out responses in the stars, interpreting signs and fate to arrive at a multiplicity of answers.

*It fell to a lesser creature to develop a response we could understand and make use of – one of the first whose blood did not prove strong enough to wield the magic, but who demonstrated an unprecedented understanding of its workings. **The Philosopher** founded his Lycaenum on a reasoned answer determined by evidence. If creators exist, we have been chosen by them to be empowered. The purest of blood live for centuries and some find a means of transformation that renders them eternal.*

All around us, there is humanity, a finite people, blind to power and purpose. They are our chorus and our measurement, weaker in all respects to us, but above the animal with their inquiring minds, use of language and strength of will. They are related to us, loved by us, loyal to us and clearly kindred. We live amongst them as heroes, leaders and wise counsel.

We share the same light, the same soul. If there is a purpose for us, there must also be a purpose for them.

***The Philosopher** determined these purposes to be one and the same. His work, the **Manual Alchemical** is our guide. If the most powerful of us can transcend the mortal shell, becoming eternal, it follows that all lesser brethren are on a similar path toward transformation.*

***The Philosopher** claims mortal existence is preparation for the path chosen for us. Each of us can transcend this form. For some, this transcendence comes through living a life in balance of the humours, of dying and being reborn to a new life, closer to the eternal state.*

The ancient days are long past. We have learned much more. We know the truth of heaven and our Lord as imparted to us by his raised servants. We see transcendence and watched the most chosen join the eternal choir. Their guidance shapes our future that we might bring all humanity into the grace of the divine.

Thomas Aquinas – Summa Magiolaie.

Chapter 4: The Arrival of Death

"I fear her Highness's condition worsens, my lord."

Sir Ralph de Monthermer nodded absently, whilst sat staring out into the fields through the open door of the stables. It was a cold morning, the pre-dawn air, misty and quiet. The words of Benetto, the Augustinian monk who had come to find him were not news, they were expected.

He looked up, meeting the man's eye. "She has taken confession?"

"Yes."

"And been given rites?"

"Indeed, as she requested."

The sound of hooves echoed out of the mist. In the yard, a horse and cart drew up, an old man crouched over the reins. Sir Ralph did not recognise him, but guessed his purpose. "The corpseman is here. Prepare the child and instruct him my wife is to follow. They shall go together."

"As you wish, my lord."

A rustle of robes and the monk walked out towards the cart. The corpseman drew back his hood revealing an old shrunken face and bald head. Sir Ralph watched the two men converse. Agreement came with a swift nod. Benetto returned to the house through another door. The horse stirred, no doubt sensing others in the warmth of the stables, but settled quickly with a quiet word from its master.

Sir Ralph shivered and drew his cloak in about himself. His tears were shed long ago when Joan first took with child, their fifth – a chancy proposition – but she had been fit and strong still, and they took the sign as providence, a blessing of their union. Each of their previous children failed the sanction, but that was a blessing too, meaning the Church would not take them.

His gaze went back to the corpseman, catching the man's eye. He read power in that stare and something rebellious. The man nodded and touched his hood, but there was no deference in the gesture.

"My lord, you should come."

Benetto again at the door, his words soft but insistent. Sir Ralph nodded and stood up. "Who is that man, Benetto?" he asked.

Benetto glanced out of the door at the corpseman. "His name is Obidiyah, my lord."

"I've never seen him before."

"He is new to Clare and taken work before he travels to the next town."

Sir Ralph nodded. The explanation was not unusual and there were more important matters to attend to. He sighed and waved Benetto on, following him into the house.

"That was foolish."

A cool spring morning in Avignon. Piers lounged on a cushioned chair listening to Lady Eleanor. Her bedchamber in the Tour St Laurent was elegantly furnished, but reflected the past she belonged to.

The lady herself sat on the bed, a brush discarded beside her. Despite her years, she remained a beautiful and vibrant woman; a streak of silver, the only mark of time in her hair, the lines of her face, regal, rather than aged.

"I have legitimate concerns over what de Molay is planning," Piers said carefully. He had not told her about last night's altercation on the bridge. "I wished to speak to his holiness about them."

"It will be perceived as an attempt to betray the Temple."

"I cannot stop people from thinking. If this whole matter were more open and honest—"

Eleanor held up a hand. "Piers, please, you are young and like so many, full of opinions without the wisdom years bring. The faith needs your energy and strength, but you must learn the way of things here."

Piers sighed. "What would you suggest I do?"

"Ask me your questions first then see what issues remain in your heart."

“Very well, can you promise to be truthful with me?”

Eleanor arched a brow. “Would you bind me with oaths?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Good.”

For a moment, he struggled to order his thoughts then selected a starting point. “Why does his holiness not go to Rome?”

Eleanor smiled. “You read the *Summa Magiolaie* and the *Manual Alchemical*? The Vatican is a source of wisdom to the world, the basilica home to many generations of our kind whose days have passed. In the vaults beneath St Peter’s halls, there are catacombs, where generations of faithful servants lie in reverie. Occasionally, they stir and awaken, returning to bring their truth to our church. Sometimes these visions are helpful, sometimes they are not.”

Piers frowned “So, his holiness did not like the advice he received?”

Eleanor’s smile slipped for a moment. “It is a little more complicated than that. Benedetto Caetani tried to restore the primacy of the Church as instructed by representatives of the eternal choir. You recall his fate?”

Piers nodded. “If you mean Boniface VIII, I remember. He was kidnapped from his house in Anagni and tortured. He died soon after his release.”

“Indeed. The Church sought a means to mediate in this new reality. The power of kings becomes a challenge to our vision. It is difficult to reconcile this with those who have slept with Angels for a long time and are unaccustomed to change.”

“So... the Pope is here for his protection?”

“Yes. The Curia is in Poitiers for the same reason. Cardinals attend to the catacombs and the reverie. In time, His holiness may return to Rome, but only when new auguries awaken.”

Piers thought about this carefully. “So, what is de Molay’s part in this?” he asked. “Why the ritual and the sacrifice of pagan witches?”

"This is not the first time the eternal choir has caused problems," Eleanor explained. "Whilst we are afforded the luxury of being outside Rome, the Temple can offer an alternative. The grandmaster is an ambitious man. He wants to provide Clement with a means of intercession. If we could speak to heaven directly, we gain a means of surety."

"*Migdal Bavel* is the story of an arrogant people who built a tower to heaven." Piers said. "Are we not doing the same?"

Eleanor stood up from the bed and walked towards him, barefoot on the stone floor. "The stories of Babel were contrived by our peers, they were never meant as cautionary tales for us. The use of the *sibyl* woman was a practical choice. The removal of unbelievers is part of the Temple's mandate from the Church. She would have been executed by other means. This way, her gift is put to a righteous end."

"You accept this then?" Piers said. "You agree with what the grandmaster is doing?"

"I accept it," Eleanor replied carefully, "as should you."

The road to Vidin widened as they journeyed south. Faim led his horse between the two sisters, instructing them in a low voice.

"The magic manifests in many ways. The Church recruits those with the gift and sends them to asylums where they are branded. Priests indoctrinate them in a set of rituals, allowing them to use their power in authorised ways. There are spells they can cast, ones that don't disrupt the natural order of things."

"But you don't follow that?" Katya asked.

"No, I don't." Faim chuckled. "Church wizards like to think of themselves as intelligent and responsible wielders of power. In reality, they are slaves to a system."

"We were taught about God," Galina said. "We are all on a path to his glory. This world is corrupt. When we leave it, we become pure again."

"The only evidence of a creator exists in his creation – the world," Faim replied. "Something made this, something made us. The Church likes to think people get to meet him through their priests and reading their good book."

"Most folk in the village cannot read. Does that mean they cannot get to heaven?"

"According to the Church it would."

"The elders taught us to sing and pray outside," Katya said. "How can we be heard indoors?"

Faim shrugged. "People believe many different things. I choose to accept that. You must find your own way to your magic. The Church will try to force you to their path and if you refuse, they will kill you."

"Why don't they kill you?"

"Because I don't let them."

The open fields became woodland. Around noon, they passed through a small hamlet; four buildings next to the road with a small bridge over a river. Faim stopped and Galina sat on the stones next to the bank. Katya went to join her, but Faim's hand touched her shoulder. "Do you sense something?" he said.

"No, I... What do you mean?"

"Up ahead. Do you sense anything unusual?"

Katya frowned gazing in that direction. Three horses were tied to a fence post next to the largest of the four buildings. The faint sound of voices came from inside. "No, nothing," she replied. "My sister might—"

"I didn't ask her, I asked you."

"Then no."

Faim scowled, handed her the reins of his horse, straightened his hat and began to walk across the bridge. Katya hesitated. She glanced at Galina, who busied herself collecting a pile of sticks from

the stream. She walked over to her. Without looking up, Galina took the reins of the horse. "Go," she said.

Katya turned away and hurried after Faim. He was a little way ahead. She caught up and fell into step behind him. The voices from inside the building were louder now, one of them high-pitched and pleading. She couldn't make out the words.

"Stay behind me," Faim said, "and whatever you do, don't run away." He broke into a loping jog, his long coat dancing around him. She followed, slowing as he did, by the tethered horses. He undid their reins and prodded them, speaking harsh, sibilant words. The ears of the first pricked up immediately and all three bolted, making for the open road to the south.

The commotion silenced the voices from inside the largest of the buildings. The door opened and a greasy haired man in chainmail, lacing up his breeches, stepped out. He squinted at Faim. "What do you want, grandfather?" He glanced at Katya and leered. "You brought us another gift, did you?"

Katya had seen men stare at women like that before when soldiers came to the village. She guessed what it meant. To them, she was an object to be used. She remembered Faim's words about freedom again. *I don't want to be used.*

Without warning, the soldier caught fire.

She tasted magic; it was her spell, a more powerful version of what Faim showed her the night before. The flames were dark red and hungry. The man shouted, screamed and stumbled back into the house. More shouting followed. She glanced around to find Faim staring at her.

"There is an innocent in there," he said calmly.

All the power collapsed, rolling out of her like a wave. She fell to her knees, suddenly exhausted. But the shouts didn't stop and she still smelt burning. "I didn't mean..."

He was already moving, the long coat snapping as he leapt through the door. More shouting and then he emerged dragging another person with him – the woman they'd heard before. Faim threw her to the ground then turned back to the doorway. He spoke three words she didn't

recognise and the air thrummed with power. The roof caught light; even the stone seemed to be burning. Katya pressed her hands to her face, trying to shield herself from the intense heat. Beside her, the woman curled herself into a ball and whimpered.

Galina watched the house burn.

She sensed her sister's anger and her magic, but this wasn't her power, it was the man, Faim's doing. She sighed. Her sister wasn't in danger, but she didn't trust him.

She stared down at the twigs and small broken branches she'd gathered from the river. To anyone else, they would be nothing; dead cast offs left to return to the earth. She rummaged in her carry sack and drew out more discards from the lake near the village and their camp on the road. Gathered together it became a substantial pile.

As a child, the gift came easily to Galina. She'd always known she didn't have the power of her sister, but she sensed magic wherever it was, feeling the potential of living things and glimpsing the future in her dreams. Now she stared at the bits of wood, closed her eyes and let herself be guided. A curved stick in her left hand pressed together with a forked branch in her right, a twig slotting into a hole between them, a curled branch next, a straight stick into its centre, another twig and another. She felt the wood merging, the last energies of former lives converging and finding new purpose in her hands. She knew she could never unlock the magic in what she was making, but Katya... she opened her eyes and looked up, seeing the unnatural fire take hold of the building.

Katya might.

The fire was out, disappearing as quickly as it came. Katya raised her head and saw Faim stood as before in front of the building. He glanced down at her and offered a hand. She took it and stood up.

“Not quite as I intended, but no doubt they deserved their fate,” he remarked. “You are impulsive, I like that.”

He walked over to the rescued woman. She remained curled up, her shoulders shaking. Faim crouched down, touching her gently, but she didn’t calm.

Katya glanced at the house. The thatched roof had fallen inwards, the wooden beams burned through in seconds. No normal fire would have done this. The flames she and Faim had raised had been far hotter and hungrier; sealing the fate of the three men inside.

She walked towards the door and stepped into the ruin; once a farmhouse of sorts, a family had lived here, not unlike her family. Now their life was gone, burned beyond recovery. *Where did they go? Why was the woman alone with the men?*

The answers weren’t likely to be pleasant.

Katya backed out of the house and walked to one of the other buildings – a small store. Inside she found the body of a boy lying face down in his own blood, a wooden post driven through his chest. He couldn’t have been more than eight years old.

The tears came then, remembering children in her village playing in the summer sun. They’d been cautious of her and kept their distance, but she’d watched them from the doorway, seen them smile and laugh.

“Who would do this?” she said, hardly realising she’d spoken aloud.

“The Church,” Faim replied. He dropped a white piece of cloth into her hands. She turned it over to see a neatly stitched black diagonal cross with a shaped ‘P’ running vertically through it. She looked up at him. “Now you understand?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I do.”

The gift is not inherited by all of us. Since the earliest days when the watcher lay with his charge, the blessing became imperfect. Some amongst the older councils believe this was when we lost our way and became deaf to the voice of our creator, but others point to the work of the half breeds. Their blended minds understand the processes of the gift far better than those who wield it. They are the smiths, the artisans and crafters to our purpose. The crafting of totems, portals, staffs and other enchantments would not be possible without them.

It is therefore fitting that they, the weakest, but most insightful, should lead us. They are closely connected to the mortals we were given to protect and though they live long lives, they cannot transcend as we do. It is for them, our fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters we must labour to bring about Heaven on Earth, so that they may know the heart-filled joy they work with us to create.

Over time we divided. The coming of the son brought division with the Hebrew and later the Muslim, the schemes of Cerularius brought division with the East and the heresies of other wayward cults. These squabbles must end. Our purpose is the same, enlightenment and transcendence for all.

Father Bartolo of Sassoferrato.

Chapter 5: Portals

Back and forth went the knife, shaving away the layers of wood.

Tuia felt at peace as he worked. The blade stripped away years of growth, revealing history in the flesh. Trees told their story in their trunk and limbs. The circles and the imperfections spoke of stormy seasons, adversity, injury and growth. Suffering was easy to find, but the smoothness of happy times spoke to him as well. He saw rich sunlight and good, regular rain. Glimpsing these memories made him glad, privileged and proud to witness the past.

He looked up from where he sat on a rock at all the glistening trees around him. *Si*, the moon, had not risen yet, leaving her flaming offspring to light the world. The end of the rain season approached. The waters would recede, but the jungle would go on. Life thrived here, the multitude of creatures and plants crammed into the land were a testimony and celebration of the way things had always been, back through more time than the wood in his hands would know.

Amidst the living, one thing stood out. A huge arch, carved from a single slab of stone. It had existed for longer than trees remembered. Vines embraced the massive structure, obscuring much of the scratched writing on its surface. It had been perfectly aligned by its maker. Some early mornings, Tuia saw the sun rise through the gap between the two supporting slabs. A huge carving decorated the lintel – the image of a woman holding a staff in each hand – the gatekeeper, who abandoned her charge long ago.

Tuia had taken her place.

As he stared, the space between the pillars rippled and a man appeared, a man he recognised. The strange long cloth he wore, the staff and beard, set him apart from anyone else in Tuia's life. He was tall and pale, unlike anyone on the Piura river.

Tuia leapt down from the rock, leaving his knife and carved wood. He walked barefoot to the gateway, right up to the man, who bent at the waist in greeting as he always did. Tuia smiled, showing all of his teeth and returned the gesture. "Od-or-ic," he said, pronouncing the man's name carefully in the strange tongue as he'd been taught. "You here for trade?"

"Trade, yes Tuia," Odoric replied. He reached beneath his clothes and pulled out a short wooden object – two sticks, one shorter than the other joined as an imbalanced cross. Tuia took the item, examined it closely and frowned. The finish was good, but the maker had shaped the flesh against its nature, compelling the parts into union with treated twine.

"Trade this?" he asked.

"Give you this and many more," Odoric replied. He touched the cross with a slim finger. "Sacred symbol."

Tuia pointed to the sky. "Symbol of maker?"

"Symbol of world maker, yes."

Tuia frowned. Si would not have made this. She would understand the tree and shape it correctly. Odoric or one of his people had crafted it. He studied Odoric's hands, they were soft. *Not him then.*

Tuia put down the cross and opened a cloth pouch, shaking the contents into an open palm. Three tiny stones glittered in the sun, the clear stones Odoric liked. The tall man smiled and plucked them up, stowing them in a pouch of his own. "My thanks," he said.

"Welcome," Tuia replied. He had hundreds of glitter stones. Three were a good trade for the wood. He would take it apart, study the finish and improve his own craft.

Odoric bent down and laid out another six crosses, each identical in shape to the first. "Give these to others," he said. "World maker wishes it."

Tuia shrugged and nodded. He would do as the tall man asked after he learned the maker secrets of each. If they were too good to give away, he would make new crosses and give them to the strange fisherman of Huanchaco. He glanced up at the sky. Si would be watching so he would make better crosses than Odoric's. "What else you want?" he asked.

"To visit the city," Odoric said. "Will you guide me?"

"Long walk from here." Tuia pointed to himself and shook his head. "Tuia not leave gateway."

"Then find some other to help," Odoric said.

Tuia stared at him. The man's sounded like a town elder. As watcher of the gateway, Tuia did not listen to them. He shook his head again. "You find a guide." He pointed to the trees, at the path to the nearest village. "That way, you find people."

Odoric's gaze strayed in that direction. He chewed his bearded lip then stepped forward. "Very well," he said, "my thanks."

"Welcome," said Tuia and bowed again. He watched the tall man disappear into the trees. When he could no longer hear him, Tuia scooped up the crosses and returned to his rock.

In mid-afternoon, Piers left the bishop's palace to return to his lodgings.

The talk with Lady Eleanor gave him a sense of perspective. The Temple's work on intercession might resolve a problem stretching back hundreds of years or it might make it worse. The risk was being taken by others, not by him. The reason he'd come to Avignon was satisfied. He was better off staying away and waiting out the time as the dying witch had suggested. *If I believe her words*, he thought, but questioning that involved more questioning of the Temple's faith and purpose.

He was close to his room on the Rue Limas and near to the place where he'd been attacked. He gazed up into a cloudless sky, turning around and spotted a tiny speck far up in the distance, moving slowly, wheeling and circling, like a bird of prey. Could it be the same creature? He judged himself safe in the daylight, but decided not to venture out that night.

He reached his destination and headed straight upstairs to his room without a glance into the commons. He unlocked the door and went straight inside...

...to find a man sat in a chair next to his bed.

"Master Gaveston!" A gnarled hand grabbed his in a fast handshake. "My name is Elbo Smogg. I hoped the lady would let you go tonight, so we could talk."

"You let yourself into my room?" Piers said.

“Just so, and would have slept in your bed too if you hadn’t returned, shame to see it go to waste.”

Piers’ guest was quite a sight. A stained tabard, mismatched hose – the sort a jester might wear – unkempt ruddy brown beard to his waist and strange bulging eyes. The faded red and green of his leggings and smell in the room suggested he hadn’t bathed for some time. Piers stayed by the door. “What do you want?” he asked.

“Right now? Mead, but I’ll take wine,” Smogg laughed, got up and slapped him on the back. “We’ll be fine friends if you’re always attentive to my needs!”

“I didn’t mean...” Piers swallowed, keeping his temper in check. “I meant what do you want with me?”

“Let’s head downstairs where the wine is and discuss it,” Smogg said. Before Piers could react, he had already passed him and in the corridor. “Come on, otherwise you’ll never learn how I got in,” he added and laughed again as he went down the hall.

Piers hesitated. It was plain this strange little man wanted something, but he couldn’t be sure what it was without the expected conversation. *That doesn’t mean I dance to everyone’s tune*, he thought. He shut and locked the door then went to the chair, sat down and waited.

After a few minutes, he heard footsteps returning. There was a soft knock. “Are you coming?” asked Smogg.

“No,” Piers replied.

“But I need to speak with you.”

“You broke into my room and assumed I would blindly listen to what you wanted to say,” Piers said. “I don’t know who you are, or what you want, but these theatrics do not impress me.” He went to the window and looked up. The speck in the sky was much lower now and clearly identifiable as a bird, wheeling in circles.

Smogg knocked again. “It is vitally important we talk.”

“Why?”

"Because lives are at stake, including ours."

Piers sighed, got up and opened the door. "Explain."

Smogg peered up at him and glanced left and right. The conversation had attracted spectators; a man on the stairs and a woman lodger from down the hall. "Not out here," he said.

Piers grabbed the front of his tabard and dragged him in. With a squawk, Smogg fell into the chair. "We'll start again then. What do you want from me?"

"I've been sent to warn you," Smogg explained, keeping his voice low. All trace of his humour from before had vanished. "The ritual is dangerous. It needs to be stopped."

"Who are you and who sent you?"

"I already told you, I'm— Oh, very well!" Smogg pulled at his stained tabard and shirt sleeve, revealing a familiar brand on his wrist – the *caduceus* symbol. "I'm the same as you."

"You're a member of the Temple?"

"No, I'm not that— I mean, no, I'm not."

"Then why do these matters concern you?"

"My charge from the Church is to explore," Smogg explained. "I work with some of the greatest alchemical engineers who ever lived. They build portals, I test them. Over the last century we've established a network that stretches around the world. That's why I'm here."

"Who sent you?" Piers repeated.

"Fulk de Villaret. He has been invited to a counsel with the Pope."

Fulk de Villaret was the Grandmaster of the Hospitaliters, the other militant order of the Church and a direct rival to de Molay although both organisations had worked together in the past. Piers stared at Smogg. The man wore no white cross, the symbol of de Villaret's order. He pointed at the window. "The bird in the sky, is it yours?"

"What?"

"The bird, did you try to kill me last night?"

"No, I only arrived—"

"Then why come to me?" Piers asked. He grabbed Smogg again, lifting him up so they were eye to eye. "What do you expect me to do?"

"I learned of your petition to the Pope," Smogg gabbled. "A friend in the administration told me!"

Piers sighed and released him. "I don't know whether to trust you or not, but I will warn you as I was warned. Don't try to stop this."

"But the result will be catastrophic. They don't know what they're doing!"

"Even so, if you persist in your message, they'll kill you, and me. Then you'll stop nothing."

Brynfrid Vigdís sat waiting; her back pressed to rock and her legs drawn up against the cold. She stared out into white land and white sky. Nothing here fulfilled the promise of *Eiríkr hinn rauð*. This was no place for farmers. The green from the stories never existed. The frozen soil blunted and broke spade and hoe, the chill wind made ice of the water for crops.

Eiríkr lied.

Six years ago, she'd arrived here, leaving behind her life in Nidaros as the southern god's priests built their stone houses and prayed to their one god. They arrived as traders first, but she knew the truth of them. The one contained many, who took their due for leading others to the path. The shrill songs they sang were just the same as the rites and rituals they sought to forbid; exhortations of faith, of magic.

She left after seeing their wares. The doubt they peddled, the talk of sins and confession. The ways of Odin did not bother with such ruin. Life should be celebrated before the end of days and the Ragnarok.

Brynfrid knew if she stayed amongst the fixed minds of the southern priests, she would waste away. She feared weakness more than death, so she left on a dragon boat for *Eiríkr's* promise.

Only to find herself here.

In times, past it had been better; farms, fields and dark leaf trees, a new kingdom for its red bearded lord who had been twice exiled. *Eiríkr* died, leaving a rich heritage for his people. His son Leif journeyed further into the unknown, bringing back treasures. Some said the old gods blessed him, but even he had taken up the southern religion, bringing the false faith to the kingdom of his father.

Brynfrid's *valkyrja* blood understood. This Greenland was the battleground *Jötunheimr* sought to conquer before the end of times and only the strength of mortals would prevent them. Perhaps sleeping Odin lay under the ice, or away in *Ásgarðr*. Whatever the case, *Eiríkr* had brought warriors here, to guard the edge of the world. The southern priests might build stone houses to their idol, but here, Odin's truth could be seen, written in ice and snow.

Brynfrid's gaze roamed, seeking difference amidst the blanket cold. Her vigil was lonely, but filled with purpose. She watched the western plain where land became sky, protecting the people of *Vestribyggð*. Animal pelts kept the cold at bay, a chainmail skin beneath would turn back the blades of frost giants. Her own sword and axe were at her feet, wrapped in cloth and had served her well in battle, but they would stay idle if the *Jötnar* came. Next to them lay a long stave, passed down from her grandfather. He had been strong in the old ways and taught her the magic of Odin, though her blood did not carry much of it. Sometimes, he still spoke to her on the east wind. The stave would be her best weapon in a war of the gods.

A shadow flickered amidst the white, at first merely a shade, but it grew darker and larger, getting closer. Her hands went for the stave, but moved to the axe. No giant approached, instead a man wrapped in strange skins – a *skræling* of the borderland, the people who travelled between the realm of men and immortals.

She stood up, shrugging off snow and ice. The man waved his staff, changing direction towards her. He was short, dark-haired and round of face, like all his people. Three steps from her perch, he stopped and bowed.

“Aguta bring word to the Austmann,” he said slowly in the unfamiliar *norraent mál* language and waved his hands around, gesturing to the sky. “This all worse, not right. A god has awoken in the ice.”

“The end of days,” Brynfrid grunted.

Aguta shook his head. “Old god, not *Tuniit* giants, older, sleep in ice. Stirs now and brings cold.”

Brynfrid chewed her lip. Odin would not use the magic of his enemies on his own people. Bergelmir the frost king wielded the cold and before him, the long dead *Ymir* of the first days.

“Cold brings hard times.” Aguta pointed at Brynfrid with his staff. “Land freeze and force people out, force south, into Austmann lands.”

“I understand,” Brynfrid replied.

“Aguta not want war, people not want war, but they must live.”

“Aye, people must live.”

They stared at one another in silence for a time. Then Aguta bowed again, turned away and began walking back the way he’d come.

“What should we do?” Brynfrid shouted after him.

He turned back and stared at her. “Cold ends with sleep or death,” he shouted in reply. “Austmenn must come north and bring death to a god or the god will come south and bring death to them.”

Chapter 6: The Use of Rituals

They reached the outskirts of Vidin by nightfall.

Galina was tired. Faim had forced them to leave the woman behind amidst the ruin of the hamlet. Galina argued and Katya pleaded, but he'd been right. Though she lived, the woman hadn't moved except to shake and moan as she huddled on the floor. Her eyes remained shut, hidden away with her face behind bloodstained hands. They couldn't carry or move her, so they'd simply walked away.

Faim made some attempt to talk to them both, asking about the village and the family. He didn't appear to be listening to the replies, just staring ahead down the road. Galina understood what he was trying to do and answered when she could, but Katya didn't speak. She stared at her feet, like she used to when she wasn't really there.

They'd walked without speaking, each step an effort to banish what they'd seen. Thankfully, they saw no-one else until it grew dark.

Moonlight illuminated a dark silhouette of the city ahead. Lantern lights and torches speckled the shadow of its ancient walls and keep. Galina heard stories of such buildings but had never seen them. It would be morning before she got a chance.

"We'll stop here," Faim said, leading his horse from the road and into the trees.

"But it's right in front of us!" Galina protested.

"Folk who enter at night are remembered," Faim replied. He laid his staff aside and with a groan, sat down on a protruding rock. He pulled off a boot, shaking it out before doing the same with the other. "You should start a fire, girl."

Galina seated herself on the wide end of a fallen tree branch, but made no move to gather wood. She glanced at her sister, who'd also stopped and sat on the wet ground. "You need to help her," she said.

"Help?" Faim sighed. "This is her journey, not mine."

"You should have helped the woman too."

"I cannot make someone want to live."

Galina glanced at Katya again. "Will she—"

"She needs time," Faim said, "and she has you. Your little village is far away. The wide world is dangerous. You have each other, more than others have."

"Why not help them?"

"We return to the same question," Faim stood up. "You need to accept my answer."

He pointed at the tree branch on which she sat, gestured and spoke a word that slipped from her mind as soon as she heard it. She felt the thrill of power and blood red flame sprang from the limb furthest from where she sat. Galina leapt up and rounded on him. "You could have warned me!"

"As I said, we need a fire." He continued to stare at the flames, his fingers becoming claw-like. The fire remained at one end of the branch. "Controlling it is much more difficult. I spent years perfecting my abilities. Your sister struggles with this every day."

"You think I don't know?"

"You do not understand." Faim returned to his seat on the stone, but continued to stare at the blaze, his gaze focused and intense. "You view your sister's gift through your own, which you accepted long ago. Occasionally, you explore your abilities, but they never endanger others. You know power, but you do not comprehend its price. You are both selfish and jealous. You do not help or encourage her, perhaps because in your heart you believe you are the lesser creature."

She went for him then, cooking knife in hand, slashing and stabbing at his thin face. He caught her hand with surprising strength, dragging it down to the ground. She bit his arm, but he did not waver or cry out. A bony knee on her wrist opened her fingers and the blade was gone. He let go and stepped back.

"You care for each other," he said, drawing back his sleeve. Red blood dripped from his left wrist. "I had no-one and was much the better for it." The bite mark was deep in the forearm. He placed fingers into the wound, spoke another word and rubbed at the flesh. Another thrill and Galina saw the blood smear and cuts vanish. "When I met you both, you were wary and distrustful, the right instincts around people with power. Why now are you concerned with me, when your sister should be your charge?"

Galina couldn't meet his eye. Her wrist throbbed painfully and guilt ran through her. As far back as she could remember, no-one but her sister had been allowed to touch her more than was necessary. *I provoked this, I lost control.* She looked at Katya, who remained sat on the ground, her head bowed. "I don't know what to do," she confessed. "What should I do? What do you want us to do?"

"I told you, I am no teacher," Faim said. "But you must help your sister master what she is. Otherwise, she will destroy you both."

The darkness of the cavern under the bishop's palace seemed more threatening the second time Piers experienced it.

After Elbo Smogg left, he sat in his room for a long time, weighing up whether to attend the ritual or not. In the end, he realised it wasn't a choice. If he stayed away, the assassin would track him down. He had to be there and be seen to be there.

He arrived at the palace early and went to the hidden spiral stairwell. The light faded as he descended, until touch and sound became his guides. This time there would be no pointless gestures of magic. He would be prepared for eventualities.

Piers counted each step to the bottom and felt his way around the room. He sensed he was alone. The runes etched in each stone spoke of ancient power and he found newly worn grooves arranged in intricate patterns. Containment spells, woven as a cage, breached only by the narrow arch that led to the staircase. The preparations reassured him and gave him clues of what to expect.

He wished for his staff and hat, but bringing such devices here would raise questions. Instead, he had memorised the most powerful protection rites he knew, ensuring his invocation would be perfect, if he needed them.

Footsteps and voices echoed down from above. He backed away from the noise, until he had the wall at his back...

...And sharp steel on his throat.

"Keep it quiet sir," whispered an old rattling voice in Latin. Piers recognised it immediately. "Just stay here with me, near the wall."

"You're the priest who guided me here the first time."

"Indeed I am."

"Did you send the bird to murder me?"

"I sent it to *warn* you and now I'm repeating the point." For emphasis, the blade against his neck shifted, nicking the skin. "You've seen what I do with this? Let's not waste your precious gift out here on the tiles, eh?"

Piers realised his mistake. Somehow, the man had concealed his own nature when they'd first met and now, concealed himself in the hall when Piers believed he was alone. "What will you do with me?"

"You'll find out."

The footsteps became louder. The light of a lantern spilled into the chamber, illuminating the man who held it. He wore coarse robes. Behind him came an assortment of others, men and women, wearing Temple vestments. Dark sackcloth shadows flanked them, more servant priests holding more lanterns. Piers counted fifteen, twenty and then lost count. He had not thought this many Templars existed in all France. "If I shout out—"

"You shout, I'll drive the knife through your throat and name you Judas."

"I betrayed no-one."

"But you came close. We needed eyes on you, to ensure this evening goes well."

The double doors at the far end of the room opened, revealing the candlelit chamber beyond. The gathered crowd moved through the entrance as one, their booted steps an echo of purpose.

"We'll follow last," the old man whispered in his ear. "You'll take a seat with me alongside. You'll keep quiet and participate in the ceremony when asked. At the end, we'll return here and... talk again."

Piers didn't reply, there was no need. The crowd thinned, the knife vanished and a hand shoved him in the back. "Move."

He stumbled forwards, joining the back of the group. The ceremony chamber was as he remembered it, with one addition. A wooden arch stood in the circle dais. The black wood shaped symmetrically and covered in runes of varying sizes. Piers could smell its power, an intoxicating heady air that demanded attention.

His companion nudged him towards seats in the upper tier, over the entrance and opposite where he'd sat before. He fumbled up the steps, without taking his eyes from the construction, which was surrounded by priests. As they reached the top, he found it easier to breathe and managed to turn away, scanning the packed benches for familiar faces, but found none. Specifically, he searched for Lady Eleanor, but there was no sign of her.

From this vantage point he could not see the armour, but near the doorway, he spotted one person he recognised.

Elbo Smogg.

The little bearded man had changed and wore the same black robes as others around him, but his jutting beard was unmistakable. He hung back in the corner near the wall.

"Sit down," the old priest whispered.

Piers turned to him. "Something's wrong," he said.

"We know all about your doubts, sit down and be proved wrong."

"That's not what I mean." Piers leaned over and lowered his voice. "Someone's here to disrupt the ritual."

The old priest glanced around. "Where?"

"Over there, I—"

At that moment, a horn sounded and Grandmaster de Molay appeared at the chamber entrance. Everyone stood and Smogg became impossible to spot. Ten escorts flanked the grandmaster as he took up his chair in the expectant hush, his back to Piers. On cue, the assembly sat. Piers looked for Smogg again, but he had disappeared. He turned to the priest. "You need to go after him."

The old man measured him with a long stare. "Like that would you? Free reign to interfere, just when you want?"

"I'm not lying, you need to—"

"I need do nothing."

Below, a procession of figures appeared. Dirty prisoners chained together, dragged into the chamber. Piers saw men, women and children, all proclaimed unbelievers, pagans and heretics. They were pulled into a circle and forced to their knees between the grandmaster's chair and the wooden arch.

"We will perform the ritual as taught by our guide who showed us the way," de Molay announced. "The blood and the body of misused gifts will form our vessel. Our blood will guide it and make it whole. By purifying the souls of the damned, we will ride to heaven's gate and demonstrate our worth to Our Father."

The Grandmaster stepped forwards and accepted a golden cup from an attendant. A flash of steel opened his palm and blood dripped into the bowl. He passed the cup to another, who did the same. "Accept our offering, Lord and Av," de Molay intoned. "A pledge of the gift you granted us, that we might journey to your side."

Beside the arch, Piers spotted the Italian he had spoken to before. The man took the cup and repeated the ritual. Afterwards, he took it to the nearest benches where men and women did the same, each taking up the chant – *Lord and Av.*

It took more than an hour for the cup to reach the upper tiers. It came to the old priest first who repeated the ritual and stared at Piers until he offered his palm. A wide 'x' slashed through the flesh made him gasp, but he didn't wince or draw back. He turned his hand, letting the blood drip into the cup, already nearly full, from the ablutions of others.

The cup disappeared, leaving Piers nursing the wound. He pulled a thin piece of cloth from his pocket and wound it around his hand. "You enjoyed that."

The priest gave him a gap-toothed grin. "Of course."

On the dais, Templars interspersed themselves amongst the prisoners, causing some to wail and beg, flinching away. Piers caught sight of the cup, re-appearing in the hands of the grandmaster's attendants. He accepted it, raised his hands, quieting the murmured chant to speak to them all.

"Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy word be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and we shalt give bread unto your people in your name. Give us your true blessing and we shalt raise up those who bless you."

As the assembly murmured its assent to the familiar prayer, de Molay moved into the centre of the dais, standing between the prisoners and the arch.

"As your soldiers, we deliver unto your care, the evil of heathen, heretic and faithless. Gathered here are the tempted, to be taken into your care and for your correction. We do this in the cause of your word, to bring Heaven to Earth. This is our purpose."

As the assembly echoed his final line, de Molay turned to the soldier nearest to him and nodded. The sound of steel being drawn brought a hushed quiet, each soldier positioning themselves behind a prisoner.

Then the screaming began.

Swords hacked at the kneeling supplicants. Men and women, blessed with gifts, but condemned for their lack of belief, died on the stone floor of the chamber. Piers gritted his teeth, watching the pathetic scene. These people were traitorous souls, betrayers of their inheritance, but that didn't make the act any more palatable.

Somewhere below, the cheering began, scattered at first, but gathering momentum. In the heart of the temple, the living had been transformed into objects and then finally into the dead. The smell of piss and shit intermingled with the heady air of power.

Piers wasn't sure which part he abhorred more.

De Molay stood amidst the gore, immobile and resolute. Blood spattered his clean robes. He held aloft the cup and poured its contents onto the centre of the dais.

"Father, we beseech thee, open for us a path to your blessed realm. Open this gate that we might know your glory and better understand your word. We beseech with the power of the gift you grant us."

Piers realised his fingernails were gouging into the hard wood of the bench. He'd witnessed the opening of portals before, but never concentrated power like this. He glanced left and right. There was no sign of Smogg, the old priest and everyone else on the row were enthralled by the ritual. Quietly, he murmured his own incantation, feeling the runes in his clothes awaken.

"Receive us father, let us open a door to the blessed realm!"

Thunder rumbled from above, resonating through the roof of the chamber. An impossibly devouring wind, stole through the space, a charge of blackness amidst the legion of candles, pulling at clothes and flesh. Piers saw the Italian he'd spoken to in the Pope's chambers step forward and kneel in front of the grandmaster, his hands grasping each of the wooden arch poles and shouting something incomprehensible. Noise in the room gathered pace, a roaring that drowned out the chants and exhortations.

Then the Italian began screaming, a sound that chilled Piers to the bone. The space inside the wooden arch went black and seemed to suck up the light around it.

At that moment, the courage of the hall broke and people began rushing toward the solitary exit, tripping over each other in their haste. The void between the poles was impenetrable; a vast nothingness – *nothing* – and he realised what that meant.

There is no god here, no heaven, no hell, only darkness.

Piers could feel the power of the blackness reaching out to claim him, to claim them all. It was a tempting horror, a nothing pure and blank. It defied his senses and any attempt to be explained. It was pure void, endless insignificance.

Piers glanced around. He struggled to breathe, the air thin, where it had been thick before. He was alone on the upper bench. The old priest had gone, fleeing with all the rest. The armour stand

fell to the floor with a crash and sections of the strange suit scraped across the floor towards the emptiness. The runes on the dais floor throbbed and the bodies of the prisoners were dragged towards the black. Everything that came into contact with the darkness vanished, claimed by that terrifying absence. People on the nearest benches were forced to grab hold of their seats as the strange wind seized them, pulling them towards oblivion. One man slipped and screamed as he flew through the arch, swallowed into its mysterious depths.

A gnarled hand touched his. Piers turned to find Elbo Smogg at his side. "I told you!" he warned. "We have to get out of here!"

"How? The way out is down there, we'll be sucked through!"

"We have to try!" Smogg said. "It'll only get worse!"

Piers nodded. He slid from the bench to the stones and followed Smogg, crawling on hands and knees towards the end of the row. They began a descent to the doors, keeping low and grabbing the end of each bench as they climbed down. He snagged his cut hand, re-opening the wound and heard more cries of despair as people slipped to be dragged away.

A tortured ripping noise made him glance up. A bench near the arch tore loose from the stone and dangled towards the void. "The whole room will collapse!" he shouted.

"It may at that!"

When they reached the row above the doors, Smogg grabbed his arm. "We can't go any nearer," he said. "Our only chance is the roof."

Piers stared at him until he realised what he meant. They would have to go over the doors, lowering themselves into the passage beyond. "The minute we jump, we'll be dragged away!"

"Then we can't jump."

Smogg scabbled along the row over the exit. He placed his hand on the rock and his eyes lost focus. For a moment, nothing happened, but then a vine sprouted from between the stones, growing at an impossible rate. Tendrils of the creeper were immediately drawn towards the arch, but others spread and multiplied, anchoring the plant to the roof of the doorway. As the growth thickened, Smogg grabbed a handful of stems and pulled at them, then judging it safe, he swung from the stones and with surprising agility and began to climb down to the floor.

Piers watched him carefully, mindful of being bigger and heavier. The plant continued to grow as Smogg scampered along, but strands were becoming fragile as it exhausted the power of the

spell. Thin strands snapped, flew through the air and disappeared into the dark between the wooden poles. The draw increased moment by moment, the creeper couldn't hope to—

“Your turn!”

Smogg was on the floor of the passage. Piers took a deep breath and lowered his feet onto the creeper, gritting his teeth against the pain in his cut palm. The plant shivered, but held his weight. Quickly he started downwards, hands and legs shaking with effort or fear.

“Hurry!”

The vines were dry, hairy and abrasive. Some came away as he clutched at them, but others held. He made it from the ceiling to the wall, the strange sucking wind, dragging at his clothes with every move he made. He didn't look up or down, just at the plant and stone in front of him. When his right foot touched the floor he stumbled and fell, gasping for breath.

The wind pulled at him as he struggled. Ignoring the pain in his knees and with one fist clenched around a thick plant tendril, he turned his back on the black void and tried to get off the floor, but his feet kept slipping on the stone.

“Help me!”

The vines began to wither in his hand. Piers saw whole sections from where he'd climbed fall to pieces and drift away back into the chamber. He focused on them, trying to add his own strength to the spell, but it wasn't one he knew. Smogg was ahead, some distance down the passage with other people around him. He turned back, but didn't move.

Then the stems snapped and Piers found himself flying backwards towards the wooden arch.

A hand grabbed his wrist, yanking him away. A low boom echoed out as the chamber doors slammed shut. The roaring wind dropped to a murmur. Piers crashed to the floor. He glanced around. The spider-web of runes from before were glowing. They covered every surface, shining from the walls all around him.

“Gaveston!”

A woman's voice, shouting his name. He stood up and limped down the passage as the runes grew brighter and brighter. He reached the far end to find a whole host of people waiting there.

“Close the passage!” someone yelled.

The crowd moved back into the outer chamber, which was also beginning to glow with light from the patterns on its walls. The doors were locked and barred. Ten or more figures clustered around a huge stone and began to roll it in front of the entrance, sealing it for good.

The crowd settled into stunned quiet. The roaring noise from the assembly chamber remained as a low murmur, but it was contained and the strange wind had disappeared.

"Piers."

Lady Eleanor stood in front of him, her lips set in a serious line. "Are you injured?" she asked.

"I don't understand," Piers said. "You weren't in the chamber."

"No, I wasn't."

"Why?"

She smiled; a quirk of the lips without humour. "Perhaps I took your advice?"

"But you were so sure I—"

She held up a hand. "Sir, there are more matters at stake than you can know. Your assistance has been appreciated, now it is time for you to leave."

"Leave? After what we've just—"

"You will never speak of it, on pain of death." She turned away before he could answer. He stepped forward to go after her, but found a gloved hand on his shoulder, a soldier in blood-flecked papal livery. "This way, wizard," the man said.

For a moment, Piers considered resisting. His mind burned with questions, but he realised he wasn't going to get them answered amidst this nervous crowd. He lowered his head and allowed himself to be led away.

Chapter 7: The Right Thing in the Rain

Deep into the night, Gurda gazed out from the battlements of Horažďovice.

It was cold and her breath steamed into the air. Clouds were gathering in the east. They would bring rain or sleet, which suited her perfectly. Watch fires lined the ground below, marking the pickets outside the moat. The army of Rudolf I, nicknamed *Král Kaše* – ‘King Porridge’ surrounded the fortress as they had for weeks previous with little change, but this was the first time she’d seen them, the first time she’d been here.

“Identify yourself!” shouted a voice in German.

The soldier on the wall levelled his polearm threateningly. She held up her left hand, palm open, whilst leaning heavily on the walking stick in her right. “My name would mean nothing to you,” she said in the same tongue, “but I am here to break the siege.”

The soldier stepped forward, eyeing her uncertainly. He was older than she expected, physically as old as her; a long grey beard and shaking hands betraying his fear. “You shouldn’t be up here,” he mumbled.

“I won’t be for long, I need a way down to them,” Gurda waved at the watch fires. “There must be a secret tunnel or a gate.”

“I’m to bring all trespassers to the sergeant at arms.”

“Then take me to him.”

She was escorted from the wall to the courtyard, an uncomfortable journey with her knees and aching body. From there, they walked to a command post near the postern gate and she was asked to begin the conversation again, this time sat on a wooden stool talking to a man behind a table.

“Sergeant, you lose nothing by letting me out.”

“You may be a spy, sent to assess our defences.”

“If I am, how did I get in?” She tapped her walking stick on the floor. “I am no dextrous assassin or circus tumbler. If you believe I broke in, you must alert all your sentries. However, since I want to leave, your conclusion makes no sense, unless I have been here a long time and only now have information that will betray you,” She shrugged and leaned in. “Surely *Král Kaše* would pick a more capable spy?”

“How can I believe you?”

Gurda sighed. "Sergeant, if you trust me this siege will end tomorrow or the next day. The army of Rudolf will evaporate before your eyes and Bohemia will be free to choose a new ruler."

"And how will you accomplish this feat?"

She smiled at him. He'd been educated and knew his letters, as indicated by the parchment and quill on the table, but underneath he remained a barbarian, with all the same superstitions and fears of his ancestors. Outside, she heard the first sounds of rain and the wheezy breath of her escort pretending not to listen in. "Sergeant, do you pray?"

He blinked twice, plainly not expecting her question. "Of course, the Lord God is my saviour through his son Jesus Christ, what does that—"

"Do you remember the priest talking of revelation?"

He looked nervous. "The end of times?"

"Yes. If you thwart me, the people you protect will suffer. Your prayers and confessions will be worthless because you obstructed a servant of the divine. What would strike down your enemies, will fall upon you."

"But how can I trust what you say?" the resolve in his voice had weakened, taking on a pleading tone.

She smiled again. Her hands went to the buttons on her shirt, opening it from the bottom, and lifting it up to reveal the flesh of her belly. The smell of infection filled the air. The sergeant's face went white. She understood why.

"How are you still alive?"

"Faith," she lied. "I have work to do and you are delaying me. Allow me to leave. If you do not, the mark will be left here and the end will begin with your people."

Matters went smoothly after that. Following his master's instruction, the old soldier opened the postern door. As she slipped through, Gurda began a spell, weaving together what shadows she could find. The rain helped, discouraging sentries on both sides of the siege.

She walked slowly down the embankment and into the moat. Its waters were still and fetid, too deep for any human to wade and swimming would draw attention, so she let herself sink to the bottom and walked. The frailties of her body made her slow, but she could still surpass the strength of humans.

She reached the other side and passed through the picket line. Rudolf's pavilion was not hard to locate and the shadows protected her approach. She kept away from the entrance and walked to the back, sitting down in the mud by the embroidered canvas. There were more guards here, walking around the tents, but she waited and gradually their attention went elsewhere.

She removed a few pegs and crawled inside the tent.

"Given name?"

"Galina."

It was raining. A wooden roof held up by four pillars sheltered a balding official sat at a table. His quill scratched out the responses on a long parchment roll. When her name was recorded, he glanced up and his gaze went to Galina's left. "What about her?"

"Katya, my sister."

More scratches on the roll. "You cannot write?"

"No."

"Then I have made marks for you," He turned the sheet around and pointed. Galina could see two neat 'x's on the page next to a shape or pattern of ink. "What is your business in Vidin?"

Galina stared at Katya, but the girl's eyes remained fixed on the floor. "We've come seeking work," she said.

The official's critical gaze went over them both. Galina remembered that look – cold and impersonal. "I daresay," he replied then his eye went to the line stretching out behind them. "Move on." He waved a hand. "Hurry up now."

Putting her arm around her sister, Galina led the way along the cobblestone road and into the city.

She'd woken up that morning to find Faim gone and wasn't surprised. The argument spelled the end of their relationship. She couldn't work out what he'd gained, but somehow, she knew he didn't need them anymore, at least for now.

Vidin was a strange place. The early morning cold and drizzle didn't prevent crowds. People were everywhere, going about their business in the wet mud and damp. She felt suffocated by them.

Her eyes roamed the streets, seeking shelter and a place to catch her breath, but the buildings loomed overhead, powerful stone blocks, taller and larger than anything she'd ever seen. Noise came from everywhere, she couldn't get her bearings.

Then a boy ran into her, his head barrelling into her stomach. She recoiled instinctively. In her village, there would have been an apology, tears and a look of shame. But here, the child hardly paused and dashed off, disappearing down an alleyway.

For a moment, Galina felt sorry for him. *He'll be cursed for his ignorance*, she thought. The thought was instinctive, born from all she'd been taught about corruption and the purity of her old blood. But she couldn't reconcile it with Faim's words.

Faim's very existence defied explanation. His gifts were greater than Katya's but he clearly didn't share their faith. *How can he be chosen and not believe?* If that were possible, perhaps she and Katya weren't as special as she thought and the boy would be fine.

She stumbled in the street as the certainty of her childhood crumbled inside. There were more people here than she'd ever seen in her life. How many of them had gifts? The old man sat by the artesian well? The merchant with the heavy cart and attendants? The bored official sat at his desk? The city militia man leaning against the gate? *How many?*

She turned to her sister. Katya's eyes remained on her feet, her expression dull and vacant. "We need to find somewhere to rest," she said. Katya didn't respond, so she took her hand as before and led her to the well. The old man eyed them for a moment, but turned away as they passed.

Galina took both of her sister's hands and knelt at her feet, gazing up into her vacant face. "I need you," she confessed in a whisper. "You've always turned to me for advice, but I don't know what to do. This place is all too much."

In response, Katya blinked, but stayed silent. Galina sighed then remembered the riverbank. She withdrew her hands and reached into her carry sack, pulling out the thing she'd made; a short stave about two feet long. The interlocking branches and twigs held together by their own twists and turns. Ash from the burned house filled the gaps, giving it a strange mottled appearance. "This is for you," she said. "It's not finished, but I think it will help. I studied Faim's staff. I think it helps him control his gifts." She held out the wooden object. "Please take it, we're stronger together, stronger than anyone."

Katya didn't reply for a long time, but then gradually her eyes changed. The lost and faraway expression faded away as she journeyed back, until Galina met her gaze, sensed her recognition. She

reached out to touch the stave and touched her sister's hands. "Together," she whispered and smiled.

Galina's eyes filled with tears. "Yes, together, for good," she replied.

All magic has its price.

Cooperation and the sharing of knowledge amongst wizards remain essential to our effort. The studies of Aquinas, and others prove our worth as do the mechanisms we construct to enhance and refine the gift.

However, the greatest of our constructions are churches. The refined power of faith and belief from the mortal, codified through our written instruments empower the gifted. The shared belief of the masses provides power. Individually, they are insignificant, but in their thousands, they are mana to our sacred warriors.

The holy orders are blind to the true war. The crusades are a foolish waste of resources in a squabble over definition. The heathen is our true enemy, an enemy whose weakness we can exploit.

We must find those with the blood who deny us and sacrifice them, using their power for our own purposes. The wielders already made a path to eternity, we of lesser gift, but keener mind, can transcend as well, if we are empowered, but this cannot be a selfish cause. The pledge must be for all, to bring the world to its destined paradise.

Guido Cavalcanti.

Timeline of Significance

1307: King Philip IV of France accuses the Templars of magic and heresy and has them arrested, tortured and executed. King Rudolf I of Bohemia dies of dysentery, besieging the rebel fortress of Horažďovice in Bohemia, leaving no children. Edward I dies campaigning in Scotland. Piers Gaveston returns from to England from exile.

1308: Edward II leaves England to marry. Piers Gaveston is made regent. Later that year, Gaveston is exiled for the second time.

1309: At the request of King Philip IV, Pope Clement V officially moves his court to Avignon, away from Rome.

1310: Giotto di Bondone an Italian artist unveils his painting – *The Ascension*. The Knights of St John conquer the island of Rhodes.

1311: The aggressive Sultan of Delhi, Ala-ud-din, of the Khalji family dynasty, finally conquers the whole of India. Piers Gaveston is pardoned and returns to England.

1312: Issue of the *vox in excelso*. Piers Gaveston captured and ‘executed’ on the road near Blacklow Hill.

1314: Jacque de Molay is executed and curses the pope and the French king, Phillip IV. Dante Alighieri publishes *La Divina Commedia*. Pope Clement V dies. Phillip IV dies.

1315: Crops fail in a cold season throughout Europe, heralding the beginning of the Great Famine (1315-1322).

1316: Ascension of Pope John XXII.

1317: Total Lunar Eclipse (21st September). Philip V crowned King of France. The Pope decrees *Sancta Romania* against spiritualists.

1318: Go-Daigo becomes Emperor of Japan.

1319: Earthquake in Ani, Armenia.

1320: Pope John XXII authorises Inquisitors to prosecute sorcerers.

1321: A drought begins in Japan. Dante Alighieri dies from an illness while returning to Ravenna from a diplomatic mission in Venice.

AD 1324 – The Mustering

You will never know truly how hard things were.

After we came to Vidin, you were not yourself for some time. The moment of focus and clarity that came when I took your hand soon faded. You withdrew, plainly damaged by what happened at the village and what you did with your magic.

The first few nights we slept in the street. The cold stone houses were shelter from the wind, but offered little warmth. The watchmen moved us on and made threats about being sent back through the gates. I fed you, cleaned your clothes and bathed you in the river when I could. Occasionally, you would return to me for a while and talk, but you'd barely remember it.

Some days, strangers were kind and gave us scraps. On other days, I learned to pick the discarded fish from the catch in the early morning and to cook on the rubbish fires. At times, I had to leave you so we would eat, but then you had already left me.

One day I came back to find a man near you, whether he wanted your blanket or your body, I'll never know. There was a blinding flash, he screamed and burned up right there in the street. Afterwards you went far from me, your slack mouth refusing food and water.

I thought you might die.

But you did not and came back, for a time, in the spring. Those days in the sun I remember and treasured. I blocked out the cold and hunger, remembering only you, your fragile smile and gentle face.

Weeks became months. I found shelter in the stone houses of the Church. I listened to sermons and learned the ways. Eventually, the priest called me to him and asked of my life. I told him little, but saw something in his eye. He gave me work and coin. At times, I brought you with me. We sat at the back and I learned of their Heaven and Hell, with this world as a place in between. The people are not so different to us, but believe the path to good is through their priest. I remembered Faim's words and wondered whether the man might be of the old blood.

It was in church I met Milen. He smiled and pressed a coin into my palm as I worked in the dust. His touch was strange to me after all our years being untouched. A few days later, he asked me how I was and how you were. I told you of him and his gentle way. I smiled at him and he became kind.

Letters to Katya – Galina Purvanova.

Chapter 8: We are Angels

A dry day. Hino Suketomo sweated under his monk's robe in the noon sun.

He waited in the shadow of a wooden fence outside the servant's entrance to a wealthy home – the Tokimichi residence. The street was dusty and surprisingly quiet, but he kept the hood around his face. It would not do for the Emperor's *dainagon* to be found in these streets meeting strange associates, so a disguise was required; one complete enough to ensure nothing aroused suspicion, meaning he could not wear the *tachi* sword of his house. Without it he felt naked and vulnerable.

But Hino knew people were watching. Jiro Katsuchiyo, the bushi assigned to escort him lurked somewhere close by, though not near enough to draw attention. Keyo Tokimichi's people would be watching as well. The servant's door would be guarded and others would be concealed in the street. This was welcome, but further observation would not be.

A man appeared at the end of the road, walking towards the Tokimichi house. Hino eyed him as he approached. He was taller than most Japanese men and moved with the ease of one accustomed to long distances. His clothes confirmed his identity, the foreign dress of an African or Arab. A formal conversation between this man and the Emperor Go-Daigo's chief counsellor would be the subject of inquiry. Powerful nobles would use such information to imply his corruption and petition for Hino's removal, lest he 'affect the Emperor'. Such games were the obsession of petty minds. Hino understood the fragility of his place, but the Emperor had sent him here and required that he meet an assortment of individuals who others might deem unsuitable. In some ways, this day and this man was no different than the others.

The man stopped in the middle of the street ten yards from where Hino waited. He kept his eyes on the ground but didn't move any further. Hino muttered a curse under his breath and walked over to him.

"Greetings *Suketomo-sama*," the man said. He was painfully thin with a long face and the tanned skin of desert lands. "I hear you wish to speak with me?"

Hino moved closer and kept his voice low. "Indeed *Faim-san*, but the middle of the street—"

"Is the perfect place for two individuals to learn trust." Faim smiled, revealing shrunken gums and exposed teeth, yellowed and blackened in places. His sunken eyes and bony frame gave him a haunted look. Hino had seen similar expressions on starving children in the orphanages.

"There are more comfortable places – seats, food and drink that befit your stature..."

"I require none of these and prefer the comfort of the open road," Faim replied. "What is it you require?"

Hino hesitated. Such conversations were not meant for street corners, nor should they be delivered in such blunt sentences, but the stranger's question gave him little choice. "You have exceeded the request you were given," he said.

Faim nodded. "Indeed, my efforts prove more effective than I thought."

"We require you to stop."

"If the Emperor requires this, he should tell me himself."

Hino frowned, his hand aching for a sword that was not there; the old blood in him burned. "You know this will not happen."

Faim smiled again. "Your people have been sleeping whilst oppressors assume control of their lives. Your Emperor feels this. These usurpers stand between him and his nation. I act to awaken them, you cannot control their enlightenment."

"Your methods are excessive," Hino said. "Most of Japan has been without rain for three years."

"And you believe that is a result of my work?"

"You and the spells of your followers, yes," Hino replied. He stepped closer. "I did not conclude the arrangement between you and my master, but it falls to me to end this work. The Emperor wishes you to leave Japan."

Faim stared at him. "Your master wishes the *bakufu* regime undermined. My work will do that and has already done much, but change is not something you can impose or govern, it is a necessity that all of our blood be free and understand the slavery of your kingdom."

"You speak of the end of all law and organisation," Hino said. "The Emperor does not want this."

"Then your Emperor should know better the people he hires," Faim laughed. "I will leave and the effort will end. There will be a price."

"Name it."

"No, instead I will arrange it to be paid." He stepped back and bowed – a mocking gesture with no shred of courtesy. "Inform your master if he wishes to speak again, he must use his own voice." With that, he turned his back and walked away.

Hino watched him go and glanced around. The street remained deserted. He walked back to the servant's entrance and looked again, seeing no-one at first, but then a gleam of metal caught his eye from across the street. A figure stumbled out of a doorway and ran in the opposite direction. For a moment, Hino considered going after him, but decided against it. Instead, he recited an old incantation under his breath and made a hooking gesture with his left hand.

The figure froze in midstride and fell to the ground.

Hino slipped back through the door. As expected, Tokimichi's guard stood to attention as he passed. He beckoned him over. "There is a person lying in the street. Bring him into the house and to a room. Keep an eye on him until I return."

The man hesitated for a moment, then bowed and slipped out of the door, leaving Hino alone. He walked back to the house and to his guest room, shedding the monk's robe and pouring a cup of cool water from the jug on the floor. He sat down and sipped thoughtfully. The meeting had been successful; he had gained the agreement he had been asked to obtain. *What will it cost me?* he wondered. *What will it cost the Emperor?*

The palace had no name.

Janak scrubbed its floors. He was old now; much time had passed since the first times he remembered as a child. He recalled little of anything else. For most days, from then to now, he scrubbed, stopping only to fill his troughs from the well, cleaning stone, tile and trammels of all things left behind by those who lived within these halls.

He was unclean, named 'untouchable' by birth and so cleaned to wash away the dirt in his soul.

In the first days, he learned to keep his eyes down and ears open. Men of wisdom and counsel did not tolerate the stares of those beneath them. Whip scars remained on his back from those times. He never screamed and so never invoked sympathy or malice. Years later, they took his tongue as a precaution. He did not miss it; there was no-one he would speak to.

They gave him clothes and food, so long as he cleaned. The exquisitely painted tiles became stories that filled his mind. Others like him worked in different chambers; men and women made equal by their mixed blood and inherited sin. He avoided them and they avoided him, for each knew, association increased their unworthiness.

As he worked, he learned of the world through the fragments. All manner of people came to the city through its gateways, travelling from faraway lands. Some spoke Urdu, but many others did not and their words were strange, but the inflection and passion remained similar. Some part of his mind catalogued and ordered the words, seeking repetition and phrasing. In time, he learned Latin, Cantonese and French by listening; the travellers who spoke each he recognised by their feet and sandals as he scurried from their paths. He saw women's feet in equal number to men. When he took meals in the tunnels, he heard them murmuring together in the vast stone chamber.

"Our agreement will bring much for both our peoples. Maps that show routes of trade and travel make the world smaller for those who cannot use magic as we do."

"Indeed, but you must remember to leave out the secret places, like Teku Benga..."

He struggled to remember when the voices first became urgent and angry, but there was a marked change. In the later days, he barely recalled laughter in these vast halls. Feet hurried on their way, with less and less casual visits. The vibrant community of the masters became a tense counsel. The rooms were full or empty, never anything in between.

"Ala-ud-din is the only leader who can resist the Mongols and unify our kingdom!"

"He is an unbeliever and not of the blood."

"We will use him and when we are done, bring in others who are more suitable."

Janak aged and the rooms became harder to clean. As a young man, he washed everything in two days, but he was no longer young. He learned the cunning ways of the old, to be busy when watched and to perfect the tiles that would be examined, leaving the less used places until last, or not at all. In these times, it was all he could do to prepare the meeting chambers, but no-one looked at his work. Their bare feet and sandals replaced by hard boots and hard minds.

"You must control these fanatics!"

"We are trying to, we have—"

"Trying is not enough! What are these rumours they have opened a portal you cannot close that seeks to devour the world?"

"I assure you these are lies. We have the matter in hand!"

Janak slept on the same stone every night, in the lowest chambers near the ancient tombs. As a child, being close to the long dead sultans and kings frightened him, but the Brahmin masters tolerated no complaint and told him how privileged he was to be near such royal blood and how others like him would sleep with no roof in the rain. He could not touch the resting places, but by

being close to pure blood, his soul had the best chance of being reborn amongst the *chaturvarnya*, when the time came.

“You must accept our rule. It is the way of things. If not, the death of your people will be on your hands.”

“We will not agree to these terms, we must—”

“Please, do not dishonour yourself, this is not a negotiation.”

“Then why are you here?”

Janak knew these days would be his last. At night, he shivered on the sleeping stone and could not get warm when he woke. Once, he found his left arm held no strength and his face became numb. When he went to the well, he dropped the pitcher of water, slipped, and fell to the floor. He lay there for a time as the sensation spread to his legs, believing this would be the end and he had won his right to a new life, but when he awoke, he was not born anew; the tiles remained cold and dusty from neglect and his belly rumbled with hunger.

He worked harder, fighting the weakness of age. He was the last and saw no feet or others of his kind. He caught rats and ate them raw, not daring to sully the floors of the palace with the smoke and ash of a fire. When he couldn't catch rats, he fasted and prayed.

In some chambers, he found bloodstains and worse, but no people. As he washed away the defilements, he wondered if the Brahmin masters had died? If so, they left nothing of themselves. Perhaps the other untouchables had worked harder and already been delivered from corruption.

At times, he felt a presence with him. It made him look around cautiously from the corner of his eye, expecting to see someone watching him work, but no-one appeared. He came to understand the presence, riding behind his eyes and seeing what he saw in each room. The visits were regular at first, but gradually died away.

Eventually the silence became his friend, waiting everywhere for him as he crawled around the halls. He could not walk far anymore and struggled with the troughs and pitchers. His clothes were gone, rotted from his back or used as cloths for the floors. Naked and old, he cleaned with bare hands and saliva, rubbing away each stain and blemish in a smaller and smaller circle.

One evening, knowing he was alone, he looked up and finally saw the beauty of the grand chamber; the huge domed ceiling and painted characters rising from the ground to high above at the top. His gaze lingered upon all manner of creatures, each with their own story, like the figures on the

tiles under his feet. By looking he had sinned and deserved the whip, but he felt no shame or guilt at seeing such wonders.

In the centre of the room, he found a massive spherical rock, held up on a pillar. Carved into its surface were green shapes in recesses of blue. A whiteness adorned the top, like a crown of painted hair.

He awoke one morning after that unable to move from the stone where he slept. He tasted blood in his mouth and found breathing hard.

After a time, he gave up trying and closed his eyes...

Tuia knew no peace.

He crouched in the trees; miles from the stone arch he had spent his life watching. Now he watched something else. Below, a long line of prisoners from a nearby village shuffled past, dragging and carrying huge lumps of rock. Around them, men with spears, mantle clasp cloaks and feathered headdresses. They were stern of countenance and purpose, leading the procession onwards to the north.

These new people did not worship Si. Instead, they named her *Mextli* and themselves Mexica. They followed many gods of wind, sun and more. Their words were strange, but Tuia could make himself understood if he chose.

Tuia had travelled north after his time as watcher of the gate ended. He remembered the day the woman came through and turned her magic upon the arch, cracking the huge lintel and ending its power. Quietly, Tuia followed her and after three weeks, his journey led him here.

The broken stones being transported by the prisoners were the remains of his charge, scattered amidst other carved rocks. The woman remained at the head of the procession. She was different to the others, shorter, with an angular face and narrow eyes. As they journeyed on, she discarded her strange clothes and took up the feathers and mantle of the followers who joined her, revealing a lattice of scars, the worst upon her back and arms.

She took up a spear like the Mexica soldiers and called out the largest of them, besting him easily. His corpse was drained that night, the blood boiled for a feast and the body burned. After that, the Mexica obeyed her without question.

Tuia spied on them all from above in the branches. He made his way from tree to tree, taking care to avoid their scouts and watchers. At times, groups would go off and return with captives until eventually, the gathering grew huge. Tuia wondered what he hoped to gain by following them, but he had nothing else. The arch had been his life; a strong magic, broken in an instant. He would find the source of this new power and attain its worth or he would kill the woman in revenge for taking the purpose of his life.

He was not a young man. These days, the carving of wood gave him no comfort. His hands, not as strong as before, would shake at times. The time he spent in trees, awake and asleep, planted aches in his joints. As they journeyed further from land he knew, he became hungry. The plants here were different and he struggled to find the right ones to eat.

One morning they came to a vast lake. A temporary village of shelters clustered around a collection of wood and broken rock. Tuia lost sight of the woman, but studied the people. They were a mixture, some black as night, others pale like milk and a host of variations in between. The majority were short and brown, wearing the feathers and mantle like the warriors.

The prisoners were set to work on breaking the larger stones. People busied themselves everywhere. From a great tree on a hill above the shore, Tuia saw the stones being loaded onto rafts attached to ropes then pulled out into the waters, disappearing into the mist. At times, people were placed on the rafts instead and taken away.

At night, the prisoners were fed then gathered up to sleep in a large pen guarded by soldiers. He spied the cooking fires and his belly rumbled. He waited and when it was quiet, stole down into the camp. In the embers, he found slivers of charred meat and scraps dropped on the ground. He collected up what he could and snuck back into the trees.

When he returned to his tree, he found the strange woman sitting where he had sat. He stared at her and she stared back.

"You take everything from me," he said at last in his own language. "First my stone, now my seat."

"It was never your stone," she replied in the same tongue with only a slight hesitation. "You were its guardian while its purpose remained. That purpose is over now."

"Who are you?"

"I have many names, most would mean nothing to you." She waved at the valley below. "They call me *Teotl* which in their tongue means magic. It is more of a title than a name. Others call us *Egregoroi*, which means watcher."

"Why do you need stone?"

"Because the age of old things is past, we need swift strength if we are to survive the coming storm," the woman sighed. "The old ways are slow and sure, but there is little time. The new path will be ruinous and wasteful, yet brings power we can use. The stones of the arch will be added to what we make and find a new purpose, as will all those who venture across the lake."

"You send your prisoners across the lake," Tuia said. "No-one returns."

"Most are sacrificed," the woman admitted. "But this is necessary. We are building a city, the last city before the end of days. It will save those who are worthy."

Tuia considered this and the woman. She sat as he had; the bare skin of her arms and legs showing the scars he noticed before, but this time, up close he saw just how many and their variety. These were not ritual wounds, they came from war. "You are accustomed to getting your way," he remarked.

The woman inclined her head in assent. "I am not a builder," she said. "My gifts destroy, yet in this purpose I find a chance to be free. I am willing to help builders for a time, if they bring me towards what I seek." She got up and approached him. "Tell me, what did you do with the crosses Odoric gave you?"

Tuia frowned, but reached to his belt and pulled out the last of the wooden keepsakes and held it up. Three sticks in a perfect intersection of height, width and depth. "The old ones were wrong," he said, "a confusion of the message."

"May I?"

"Yes."

He dropped the object into her outstretched hand. She smiled and turned it over, studying the axes. "A prophetic warning given thirteen centuries ago, misremembered and turned into a religion. How did you know to fix it?"

Tuia shrugged. "I just did, I am a worker of wood. Sometimes it speaks to me."

"You are gifted. This is why you were chosen to guard the arch. You will find new purpose in the city, one better suited to your talent."

"You aren't going to kill me then?"

"No."

Tuia should have felt relieved at the admission, but the woman's demeanour belied any assurance. Restrained violence oozed from every pore of her.

They sat for a while staring for different reasons. Finally, she spoke again.

"We removed your gateway to prevent others coming here unless we want them to. We removed all gateways from these lands, save for the one across the lake. Odoric will not come here again. He and his kin stand for the old ways. They would not understand what we do."

"And what is it that you do?" Tuia asked. "What will you use this power for? What do you offer?"

The woman smiled. "Immortality."

The washbasin water clouded quickly with dirt and Katya sighed. Seventeen years since she arrived in Vidin and took a job with Milen at the Prancing Horse and it was getting harder and harder to keep the old tavern clean. The wooden tables and chairs were mopped and dried every other night, the stone hearth swept, cleared and refilled, the ale purchased and restocked, the wine watered a little and rebottled. All things that needed doing, all things that needed more than one person to do them.

She wiped a metal plate and caught a glimpse of the stretched face reflected on its edge; her face – hardly changed since the day they arrived. Galina carried her years a little more and now people believed she was the elder sister. She'd married Milen more out of necessity than love, so they gained a purpose and a place to be. The second son of a wealthy merchant, he'd been good to them both, accepting their story with quiet forbearance, but he had none of the old blood in him. His thirty odd years were now fifty odd years and now he looked like Galina's father, not her husband.

The years were not kind to most people. Seven failed harvests stirred talk of judgement and the Lord's wrath. Katya kept away from such conversations in church and the common room.

Muffled coughing noises came from upstairs. Katya bit her lip. Six rooms were available for lodgers, with only one currently occupied, but the coughing didn't come from there. Instead, it came from the room Galina shared with her husband. When he'd first got ill, she'd thought herself cursed and remembered Faim's words about her causing sickness to her Father, how her magic affected

him and made him sick. Death seemed to follow them wherever they went, but these days, disease was everywhere and few survived. The corpse cart bell rang on the street every morning and evening. People prayed more and sinned less, but no-one rightly knew the cause.

Footsteps on the stairs and Galina appeared, a hint of crow's feet around her dark eyes. Plainly, she hadn't slept. "He's worse," she said.

"How long?"

"A day maybe two at the most."

"Is it us?" Katya had asked this question every time they learned of someone dying.

"I don't think so," Galina said. "I think it's the same as everyone else."

"Am I doing that too?"

"No, if someone is, then it's intentional and far more powerful than anything you could manage." She faced her sister and their eyes met. "Since those days, you've learned to control yourself. I sense that about you."

Katya nodded, accepting the answer, but something instinctive within her squirmed. Magic lingered here in some way, a magic she didn't understand. "We should ask the priest," she said.

Galina's expression darkened. "*They* are no friends of ours."

"All the same, he may know more."

Katya watched her sister weigh up the idea. They both remembered what they had been told and saw that night in the abandoned hamlet, the woman shivering on the ground. They had not seen Faim since, but his mistrust of the Church remained with them and echoed their own upbringing. In Vidin, they held regular services in their stone house. Both Galina and Katya attended, more to prevent talk than anything else.

"If the priest has knowledge he would share, unless he has reason not to," Galina said. "If we reveal ourselves, we'll gain trouble, not answers."

"Then what do we do?"

"I'm not sure."

They took a table and sat together in silence for a time. After a while, Katya got up, found a stopped bottle of watered wine and brought it back to the table with two clay cups. Galina accepted one gratefully.

"If he dies, we'll not be able to stay here," she said. "People already wonder why you are not married. The talk will worsen."

"Talk worsens anyway," Katya said. "Many are dying to this plague; people seek answers and see sin as the cause. Those who are different are sinners. I see the looks and hear the whispers."

"Perhaps we should leave?"

"Where would we go?"

"Back home?" Katya missed her family, her father especially. If he'd recovered, the old blood in his veins might keep him alive for many years yet. But the moment she mentioned the idea she knew it was wrong and silently accepted Galina's shaking head.

"We cannot walk away every time something happens."

"Then we must try magic."

Galina sighed, reached for the bottle, poured herself a measure and drank, leaving nothing in the cup. "I tried charms and herbs as we were taught. I prayed and wished, asked others and taken up their remedies. I bled him and tried to find the source of corruption, but it eludes me. What else could we attempt?"

"Perhaps it is time I helped," Katya said.

"That could be dangerous."

"Do we have another choice?"

They stared at one another, Katya noting the changes in her sister's face. There was a trace of age and the lack of sleep enhanced it. The old blood they shared manifested in different ways. Faim had been more interested in her gift than Galina's insight. Katya never thought their differences might separate them.

"We've hidden your power all this time," Galina said at last. "Faim told us others would come if we didn't."

"On the Sabbath, the priest spoke of the plague being a mark of sin," Katya said. "Merchants from Sredets say it is there too and in all the outlying villages. We cannot run; there is nowhere to run to."

Galina nodded and stood up. She held out her hand. Katya took it and followed her up the stairs to where Milen lay in his marital bed. The large hearty man Katya remembered was now shrivelled

into a sweaty, feverish patient. His skin glistened like parchment and his were eyes bulging and staring as they both entered the room.

"It's all right, he can't see you," Galina said. "I'm unsure of what he actually sees; some waking dream that tortures him alongside the other afflictions." She sat on the stool beside the bed and touched a finger to his balding temple. "He burns constantly, as if the evil is setting fire to everything within. When he speaks, he claims to be cold."

"When I last used my gift properly, my anger and fear brought fire," Katya recalled. "It drained away when Faim mentioned the woman being in the house."

"Can you remember how?" Galina asked. "Can you concentrate and bring forth the magic?"

Katya approached the bed, going to the other side, next to a bowl of water on a small table. She knelt and stared at Milen's eyes. They were raw. He didn't blink or focus, the fever ravaging his mind as much as it devoured his body.

In seventeen years, she'd mostly kept to herself, experimenting with her gift in small ways, so as not to draw attention. She started with the rites Faim had taught her. A few weeks after they'd settled she'd learned how to produce sparks to light candles and conjure small gusts of wind. Each time she succeeded, she practised hard to repeat the same action and thought. It was difficult to remember things precisely and the raging flames were never far away when she lost control. Priests learned to read and write. She guessed they would have books recording their achievements to pass on to new initiates – another reason for her to learn her letters.

Katya stared at Milen and tried to focus on the strangeness, conjuring up images in her mind of him when he was healthy, but it was hard. The smell of infection and rot blocked her, as did her natural caution. She remembered the rite she'd cast on the small bush tree across the street outside, making it grow a little taller before catching fire. *Could I use that?*

"I can't see what do to," she said. "I don't have your eyes."

She felt Galina's hand in hers. The steady mind of her sister gave her immediate reassurance and heightened her perception. Their connection from childhood renewed itself. Katya brought power, Galina direction.

Together, they sought out the disease and the faint stirrings of Milen's breath. Quickly, Katya realised she could not break the infection, she had not mastered such a use of her gift, but with her sister's help, she understood Milen.

Her lips moved, uttering sounds she didn't comprehend. Magic came to her, pouring from her fingertips into him. His heartbeat steadied, his breath strengthened and colour returned to his face. She looked into his eyes and watched him blink and focus. Then frown in pain.

Galina grabbed her wrist and snatched her hand away. "That's enough," she said.

"I'm sorry." Katya stood up. There were tears in her sister's eyes. "I didn't mean to—"

"I know."

Milen sat up slowly and gazing at them both. "What did you do?" he whispered.

Katya flinched under his scrutiny, but Galina took her hand again, squeezing her fingers tight in gratitude. "What we were born to do," she said. "Help people. Help you."

Chapter 9: They are Demons

“Ho! Man! We’ve horses, attend!”

An English voice speaking French. In response, Piers Gaveston shuffled out of the stables, keeping his hood up. A long grey beard meant most folk wouldn’t see his face; an important consideration for a man who died twelve years ago and doubly important amongst these people.

He recognised the blue striped livery of Aymer de Valence, the second Earl of Pembroke; once his jailor and now the advisor of his former king, Edward II of England. Twenty horses and riders would fill the Inn to capacity. The soldiers would be grateful of the barn, the earl and his companions would lodge in the guest rooms.

He took the bridle of the first beast and led it to a stall. The earl remained on his horse whilst his steward spoke to the innkeeper, Jacque Renarre. He could feel the eyes of Pembroke’s groomsmen on his back. Gradually, the man’s caution faded as each animal settled. The Englishmen were wise to be on alert. Relations with France stood on the edge. Pembroke’s mission might bring peace or war.

Gaveston busied himself with his work. He helped bring stew to the soldiers when they were settled and drew more water from the well. The earl asked for bread and mulled wine. Renarre fawned around him and his attendants as the cook and servants brought what was asked. Gaveston burned to speak to his old acquaintance, to find some way to help the man still considered King of England, but there would be no chance yet for a discreet conversation.

I’ll have to wait.

The hours wore on and the day drew to a close. Gaveston eschewed his own bed and loitered around the stables. Pembroke retired at sunset, a guard posted to his door. His steward remained with the other attendants. Gaveston stayed outside, noting the candlelight in the earl’s room. A group of soldiers stayed up, talking outside the barn around a fire; too many eyes all around.

He went back to the stables and hunkered down in a corner. Horses kept the place warm, the smell of straw and shit had been part of his life for the last twelve years, after being left by the road at Blacklow Hill to die. He’d been in the custody of Pembroke, but kidnapped by other barons who determined his guilt. *A man condemned for loving his King...*

The prophecy of the *sibylline* witch had come true. King Edward I died on campaign in Scotland at a place known as Burgh by Sands. Piers returned to England to renew his allegiance to the newly crowned Edward II. Elevation to an earldom followed, along with the role of royal counsellor. But

long before that he'd sensed the shift in things. After Avignon and de Molay, a mark remained against his name. Support shifted from Edward, to his wife Isobella and his son. Piers kept his oath to never speak of the ritual, but it no longer mattered. The Church would find other reasons to kill him.

He'd abandoned his family, his name and everything else, selling rings to obtain passage to France. Then he took up a new life, travelling as much as possible, working for food and lodging. It was a life the *caduceus* training prepared him for. Those strong with the gift lived long lives, outlasting their peers. Eventually, the road or the cloister became the only realistic choices until those who once knew them were long dead.

He could not return to a cloister, so only the road remained.

The moon rose and the shadows drew in. Piers ran through what magic he knew. His staff and book were long lost. Only the spells he remembered perfectly would be useful. The power did not come easily anymore, not since the day he'd seen the void through the portal under Avignon. *God does not exist, he never existed. We are all alone.*

A flicker of movement across the road drew his attention. At first, he thought it was one of the soldiers gone to relieve himself, but the figure who emerged from the woods wasn't anyone he recognised. A large, stocky woman, walking with a stick approached the entrance to the Inn, her limping gait slow, but purposeful.

He stood up and stepped out of the stables towards her, glancing left and right. The soldier's fire had burned down and no-one seemed awake. The candlelight in the upper windows had gone out.

"Who are you?" he called out to the woman.

"I might ask you the same," she replied, coming to a halt a few steps in front of him. "You're in my way."

Piers made no move to step aside. "The inn is closed to visitors," he said. "Come back in the morning."

The woman shook her head. "You would be wise not to detain me, stablehand."

He sensed the magic in her then, a boiling cauldron, fed by hate, seething just beneath the surface of her calm. "I can't let you—"

Without warning, the world went white.

In Kyoto, the mid-afternoon sun began to dip on the horizon when the first shouts were heard. Hino Suketomo knew what they meant.

We are betrayed...

He stood up on the wooden *engawa* outside the Tokimichi house, the folds of his black *sokutai* rustling in the faint autumnal breeze. The household bushi soldiers were already running to the compound gate; as a guest of the house he would be protected, but it was only a matter of time.

"It seems they know you are here *Suketomo-sama*," said his host Keyo Tokimichi from the doorway.

"It seems so."

A crowd gathered in the streets to watch the *bakufu* break down the doors. Already, some had tried the walls, to be forced back with long spears.

He wondered who might have elected to betray his mission. The politics of Japan had become complex in the last decade. The Emperor Go-Daigo had sent him into the country to seek out and meet with those who were prepared to stand against the shogunate. Minor nobility, wealthy merchants and mercenaries stitched into a coalition ready to turn on the council who ruled in the Emperor's name, but not by his wish.

Above the games of those in power was the game of wizards. The uneasy truce between the Emperor and the shoguns kept the country under stable rule and safe against the threat of the Mongols, but it would not last, it could not last. So, the Emperor had chosen to act first.

One by one he recalled the faces invited to the secret meetings, remembering names and opinions. It was a gift that came from the old blood, a talent that made him an ideal councillor. Now he was *dainagon* – first council to the Emperor, a worthy emissary to his allies and significant prize to his enemies.

He glanced at his discarded staff on the steps. Its power would enhance his own, but only delay the inevitable, leaving behind a story his Emperor would not want. He did not wear his family sword as the Emperor expressly ordered he should play the part of a monk. To be captured without it would be shameful.

"Respectfully *Suketomo-sama*, you may make of use my grandfather's blade if you wish—"

"No, but thank you. Such an act would be honourable, but it will not placate them." He turned to face Keyo Tokimichi; an old man, no doubt with memories of the golden times before the *bakufu* and split succession. "They are aware of my presence. To not be here implies guilt. To be dead, implies the same. You may do as honour dictates, of course."

"My thanks *Suketomo-sama*."

Tokimichi bowed and left. Alone now, Hino picked up his staff. There would be a use for magic here, but only a subtle one. He closed his eyes, and repeated the phrase he'd been taught, casting his mind away into the sky.

A moment later, a rook landed on his shoulder. He coaxed it to his arm and clipped a small message tube to its leg then cast it back into the air, projecting a clear picture of where and to whom he wanted it to go. The bird flapped its wings three times, gained altitude and glided away over the wall, just as the gates were forced open.

"I am here, *Suketomo-sama*."

Hino looked around. Jiro Katsuchiyo, the bushi assigned to escort him, appeared from inside the house. He wore his full set of armour, including the fierce *kabuto* and face mask. His hands were tucked in his belt, close to the hilt of his curved *tachi* blade.

"Offer them the terms," Hino said calmly.

"Can they be trusted to agree?"

"We will see, but it is discourteous not to offer."

Jiro nodded and strode forwards towards the milling crowd, Hino a careful two steps behind. As they approached, the Tokimichi bushi moved aside and lowered their weapons. The *bakufu* soldiers outside did the same.

"Honorable *Suketomo-sama* wishes to leave the House of Tokimichi and return to his own lands," Jiro declared.

"This is not acceptable to us," someone shouted in answer. A foreign woman stepped forward. Hino recognised her from the meetings, but couldn't recall her name. An *onna-bugeisha*, she wore a simple kimono, carefully cut to allow room for movement and carried a six-foot naginata, its curved blade catching the afternoon sun. "We will fight, champion of Suketomo. If you win, your master may leave."

Jiro nodded in response and the bushi of both sides cleared a space around the gates. Hino stepped back as well, eyeing the woman and trying to recall what he knew of her. Nothing more than the memory of her face came to mind. She had betrayed them, but he had no idea why.

Jiro drew his sword and took a step forwards. In response, the woman adopted a fighting crouch and gripped her polearm in both hands, but did not advance. The expectant crowd quieted and Jiro took another step, but still the woman didn't move. Her eyes remained fixed on a point on the floor in front of where he stood.

Jiro raised his sword and moved forwards again, this time, bringing the weapon down in a high arc towards the woman's head. She dodged aside, but the blade nicked her left shoulder, tearing through the kimono and making a small cut in the bunched muscle. Around the thin line of blood, Hino could see many other scars. Plainly she had fought many times before.

"Thank you," the woman said. Hino wondered what she meant, but then she moved forward on the balls of her feet, nimbly evading Jiro's attempt to crowd her. The naginata flicked out, its curved blade scoring the paint on his left greave before she brought the wooden shaft up to block another katana cut and circled away.

Jiro stalked her down; a flurry of strikes was exchanged, the katana cutting gouges out of the naginata, but the polearm held. In turn, Jiro took a succession of blows, one slicing into the flesh along his thigh.

Hino sensed power in the woman. She all but glowed as she moved around, impossibly fast, seeming to know where and when Jiro would strike, evading and parrying the katana with a twist or turn at exactly the right moment.

Then Jiro grabbed her wrist, dragging her towards him and thrusting the blade into her chest. She gasped and coughed blood into the dirt. Jiro let go and kicked out expecting her to slump to the ground.

But she didn't. She reversed the naginata and jabbed the blade into his throat, all but severing his head from his shoulders.

Jiro fell backwards and crashed to the earth, his body thrashing before she stepped forwards and rammed her weapon into his chest, cracking the armoured plate and the breast bone with impossible strength.

The woman stepped over the body and stared at Hino, a widening red stain spreading across the front of her kimono. "You will come with me," she announced through bloodied teeth.

Unable to speak, Hino could only nod and accept his fate.

Two days later, Milen was dead.

Galina couldn't stop crying. She hadn't loved him, but she had grown to care for him. The way he gave up part of his life to share with her and Katya meant so much. When she'd confessed her reluctance to be touched, he accepted her choice with a rueful smile. In seventeen years, he never once tried to persuade, or force her to change her mind.

He had been an honest and good man.

She went downstairs to find Katya asleep in one of the large chairs near the smouldering hearth. She looked exhausted. Every night, they'd used the magic, repeating their efforts to help Milen rally. The previous evening had been busy and he was well enough to work for a little while before growing tired and returning to bed.

Galina walked over to her sister and gently shook her awake.

"He's gone."

Katya nodded. "I think I felt it, or dreamed he passed. What do we do?"

"We leave or we stay," Galina said. "Maybe we'll be let alone, as people turn to their own problems."

"Teach me to read," Katya said.

"What?"

"Teach me to read. You learned some letters from father when we were children and have practised since. I need to write to remember what I've done."

"More experimenting may not be wise," Galina warned. "We'll attract attention."

"If we aren't prepared for when we are discovered, it won't matter," Katya said. "We need to be able to defend ourselves and help others."

Galina felt the tears returning. "Milen was a gentle soul."

"If I knew more, perhaps I could have helped him."

There was a knock at the door to the common room. Katya got up and opened it. Their only lodger, a middle-aged German woman, was there.

"My apologies I did not wish to disturb..."

"No, its fine Gurda, what do you need?"

"I thought to make breakfast. Perhaps I could cook for you both?"

Galina sighed. "That would be... nice... I'm sorry I didn't sleep..."

"Of course, leave it to me."

Gurda negotiated her way into the kitchen and busied herself without question or complaint. She wore a simple green cassock, tied around her stocky body with a thin rope. Her hair was a mixture of grey and brown, bundled up into a ponytail. She'd arrived at the tavern three days ago with few belongings and paid for two weeks, mostly keeping to herself, with an occasional venture out into the city.

Galina took her sister's hand. "You want to stay," she whispered. "But it will be dangerous. Our best chance is to leave, go back to Bregovo and see if they will accept us."

"I'm not leaving," Katya said.

"There is nothing for us here."

"There is everything for us here. We didn't come for Milen, we came to be more than what we were. We've made a life here, but we've hidden what we are. Perhaps it's time—"

"Time you embraced your nature?" Gurda said, emerging from the kitchen carrying a tray with three steaming bowls; *bob chorba* by the smell. "The world is a difficult place for women alone without friends."

Galina frowned at her. "How long were you—"

"Listening? For most of the morning and at times in the days before that. You are the reason I came here." Gurda put the tray down on a table and drew up a chair. "Come eat, I mean you no harm."

Neither sister moved. Galina could see Katya flexing her fingers and guessed what she might attempt. To forestall, she moved forwards and took a seat. "Who are you?"

"I am who I said," Gurda replied, dipping a wooden spoon into her bowl and slurping down the contents. "I did not lie to you."

"But you didn't tell us the whole truth," Katya said. She stepped to the empty chair, but didn't sit. "You are of the old blood."

"I am."

"And you know what we are."

"Yes, as I said, I came here for you, although you hide yourselves well and took some time to locate," Gurda continued between mouthfuls of *bob chorba*. "I had to be certain of you and be sure you were ready for what comes next."

"And what would that be?"

"To learn of the world and your place." The bowl was empty. Gurda tipped it sideways to spoon up the dregs and then pushed it aside. "You said it yourselves. You built yourselves a mortal life here, but you are not mortal, you are gifted. You are starting to understand what that means. People will grow old and die around you. Some, like Milen, you can help for a time, but not for long. There will be talk, whispers about your solitary ways and the like. Eventually the Church will come here and you will be marked out." She grimaced. "In the south lands the papacy names us sorcerers and witches, passing laws to have us hunted down and burned according to the directives in their book." She favoured them both with a bitter smile. "Words, like many things, are granted power by those who believe in them." She tapped a finger on the table and fixed Katya with a stare. "Come, your soup grows cold. You must eat before we leave."

"Where are we going?"

"As I said, to find your place in the world."

I urge you your holiness, to empower our cause. The heathen and heretic walk amongst us, provoking the wrath of our Lord. You have given us sanction, but now we need active support. The churches of the faithful must ring out in denunciation of the devil's practice.

We have seen omens. People starve all across the land as sin rampages unchecked. The witch we hunt here is but a symptom of what lies ahead. Armies of demons rise from the east to consume the light of our faith. We must be strong and true. Only by purging dissent and heresy can we be forged as true soldiers of the Lord. We must carry his banner to the maw of the beast, so that we may cleanse the world of its taint.

Richard De Ledrede – Bishop of Ossory.

Chapter 10: The Stones

“*Suketomo-sama?*”

Hino glanced up from where he sat on the cold stone floor of the prison cell. A woman stood at the door, carrying a staff and dressed in the strange clothes of another land. She was beautiful, in a way that many women were in drawings and paintings, pristine, perfect and different all at the same time. She was not Japanese, but he recognised her immediately and smiled.

“Lady Rani, you are a long way from home,” he said in halting Urdu.

She remained at the door, eyeing him with a look of pity. He accepted it. He knew what he was, a man in rags with a black eye, broken fingers and toes, a frustration to those who wished harm to the Emperor. His lodgings were stark and odorous, a full bucket waiting to be taken away and rice cake scraps littering a straw bed. “I asked the *bakufu* to release you to me,” she said. “I will take you to other lands, where you can do no further damage to them.”

“What did they say?”

“They are deliberating, but want admissions from you, implicating the Emperor.”

“That will never happen.”

She nodded. “I understand what you want, but we cannot permit it. A war would undermine our efforts for everyone.”

He smiled again. “War is already here. If I had succeeded, the disturbance would have been minimal. Others want what I want and what the Emperor wants.”

“Then petition for reform,” Rani urged, “not this.”

“It is too late.”

She sighed. “People fear change.”

“People fear the loss of power,” he replied. “Change must come if the path of the old blood is to reach its end. We cannot achieve *nirvana* without change.”

Rani sighed again and a line marred the perfection of her forehead. “You are strange. Nobles of your land usually value honour and death above these things.”

Hino smiled. “Your experience teaches us all. My death is certain. What it achieves in this life remains in question.”

“So, you sacrifice yourself for this?”

"Your own moment of ascension was similar according to the legends. I may yet attain the eternal state. I am respected by those around the Emperor."

"The longer you remain here, the more likely they will forget you."

Hino shrugged. "And what of it? How long since you vanished from the lives of your people? You are forgotten, whilst others you remember ascend and dream."

She let the words hang between them in the damp air for a long time. Finally, she spoke again. "The day of the martyr is long past for you. Do you hear what they say? *Let Lord Suketomo be struck down*. They care nothing for you."

Hino shook his head. "There is always a day for martyrs. Do not think other religions monopolise such things."

Rani stepped towards him and knelt. "I need you alive," she said in a low voice. "The point is proven here. If you disappear with me, your supporters will not believe the *bakufu* when they claim you left Japan."

"Your plan is agreeable if I make no admission," Hino said. "If the shoguns agree to that, I will come with you and learn the ways of other gods."

"I would prefer you kept your own faith," Rani said. "You are far more enlightened than you realise."

Within an hour, Katya and Galina had gathered clothes and packed their belongings. Gurda did the same. She moved slowly up and down the stairs, getting in their way at times and leaning on her stick as she went. When everything was ready, her gathering of possessions was the smallest of the three.

"When you travel as I do, you get a better idea of what you need," she said, smiling at Katya's confusion. "Don't worry about me."

Another knock at the door interrupted the conversation. Gurda went over and opened it, letting in an old man in a hooded cloak. Katya recognised him as the corpseman who drove the cart on the street. "Katya, Galina, this is Obidiyah, he is here to help with Milen."

The old man bowed. "My sympathies to you both," he said. "I came on foot and wasn't followed. The house will remain unmarked and no folk will learn what transpired."

"Are you from the Church?" Katya asked.

"You mean are we sanctioned wizards?" Gurda shook her head. "No, we hold no allegiance to them."

"Do you know Faim?"

Gurda smiled. Despite her dour face, the expression was warm and reassuring. "Yes, although I have not seen him for some time."

"Did he send you to us?"

"No."

"Then why should we trust you?"

"If I were here to kill you, I would have done so already."

A tense silence ensued. Obidiyah drew back his hood, drawing stares from them all and breaking the standoff. He appeared older than Gurda, but moved lightly, like a young man, and was long-faced and bald with wisps of white hair above his ears. Light guileless eyes made him seem honest. "I'll take your husband away and bury him deep, so the dogs won't find him. Whilst you're gone, I'll keep an eye on the place too. Can't be too careful."

Galina frowned. "Milen's family will wonder—"

"We have a plan for that," Gurda said, cutting her off. "But, if you're both ready..."

"We're leaving now?"

"Yes."

Katya picked up her belongings. Reluctantly, Galina did the same. They followed Gurda through the door and out into the yard.

A misty overcast morning greeted them, with few shadowy shapes of people outside. Gurda gestured and they made their way towards the harbour. The mist rolled from the Danube into the town and they walked straight into it, Gurda taking care on the uneven portions of the road.

Katya glanced at the houses as they went by. Some bore the plague mark on their doors, a cross daubed in blood red paint. As they neared the riverside, she saw more and more people huddled on the ground, or watching them from alleyways. Their looks of hunger and despair invoked feelings of guilt and shame in her. She drew her hood up and focused on the road.

Gurda led them from the main street into a darkened alley between two tall houses. "From here on, the world gets smaller," she said and lifted her walking stick above her head. It seemed to grow in her hands, until it became taller than her, a mass of writhing vines and worm-like bodies, undulating in her grip.

A flicker of movement in the shadows drew Katya's attention. The air rippled and flexed like water. She felt power here; a strange dislocated sensation, as if she were in two places at once.

"Follow me," Gurda said. She walked toward the distortion and disappeared.

Galina gasped in surprise. Katya almost ran, but managed to control herself, sensing her sister's panic. She looked at Galina and nodded. *If we hesitate, we'll never go*, she thought.

Boldly, they both stepped forward and vanished.

Piers Gaveston awoke in darkness, shivering.

He was soaked through, propped against a slimy stone wall, his right arm bent at an awkward angle. Twitching his fingers sent shooting pains through everything. *I've broken bones then*, he thought.

Slowly, he raised his head to peer upwards. A small circle of light illuminated some of the brick work and he realised where he was. *I'm in the well*. The revelation didn't bring much comfort, nor did noting his position propped on a ledge, his legs dangling below. The water level reached his knees and gave no indication of its depth.

He guessed he'd been pushed in and been lucky to land on the shelf, otherwise he might have drowned. As it was, the landing had caused injuries, probably enough to prevent him climbing out.

That meant a slow death.

Ignoring the pain, he shifted around, levering himself into a sitting position. He thought about magic; in this state, his only hope for escape. The limited number of spells he remembered would need a plan attached to them and, a clear head.

He recalled the last time things were this desperate, kneeling in the road at Blacklow Hill, a sword stuck through his chest. With the second blow about to sever his head, some instinct brought out his magic in a raw utterance of power, killing both of his captors.

Here, such an answer wouldn't help.

His thoughts turned to what he'd given up, his wife Margaret and their new-born daughter. He'd seen her for a few days after his return from exile, days he would treasure. *Will she have the gift? Likely I'll never know.*

His thoughts turned to Edward. They'd become friends as soon as they'd met. Piers knew what he was being asked to do by the Church, to manipulate the prince, but the task never came between them, not until the end.

Now he was alone and Edward was king, surrounded by men like Pembroke.

Aymer de Valence was honourable. By all accounts, Edward trusted him now, otherwise he would not have been sent to France, but he would never be the king's confidante. *Not like I was.* Piers could reason with the man, if he got out of the well.

He took a deep breath, stilling himself, searching for the magic. The process was difficult. The ritual in Avignon had shattered his faith, meaning he no longer accessed the vast stream of power other sanctioned wizards used. He could not tap a source he did not believe in. *The sleeping eternalists in the tombs of Rome are deluded, no God exists; no paradise waits for the dead.*

Instead, he had to reach inside and draw from his own sense of self and certitude. In any weaving, an amount of the wizard's own energies would be used, but the benefit of being part of the Church meant the support of thousands affirming their belief. Those without the gift could not comprehend the power they held as a massed congregation. Wizards within the faith could access that power, which was why the religion had been built as a structured hierarchy. The path to God and heaven lay through priests, ascending toward the pinnacle, the papacy, *the voice of the Lord on Earth*, that was the doctrine, the lie and illusion.

The spell opened like a flower in his mind, floating petals unwrapping into bloom. The surge of power flowed through him, warming his hands and feet, awaking fresh hurts and injuries, things that required attention.

Piers grabbed his left wrist with his right hand and pulled, hard. Splinters of bone in his forearm ground against each other; he heard screaming and realised it came from his own throat, but he was too far gone to stop. The bones must be aligned correctly, or the magic would heal them as they were, and he would never regain full use of his limbs. Piers was no expert, but had healed himself several times and knew what to expect. He turned his attention to his hand and did the same, straightening his broken thumb and index finger. Then he felt along his body, pushing and prodding

at ribs and hip, probing for internal damage, his hands passing over the puffy scar on his chest. This time, mercifully he found nothing worse than the arm and some cuts and bruises.

With a groan, he let the spell go and sagged back against the slippery stone wall, exhausted.

Galina stumbled as she stepped into the distortion. For an instant, she sensed a between space, a cold nothing or nowhere, but then it was gone and the shadows of the alleyway seemed to draw back, revealing something startling.

She was no longer in an alleyway at all, no longer in a town. Instead she found herself standing on a grassy hilltop under a sunny sky. The thin green shoots gave off an earthy smell, as if she had awoken in the early morning dew. The air had a crisp feel, a freshness that banished any thought of rest, and demanded attention.

"Where are we?" Katya asked.

"The Giant's Dance," Gurda replied, her staff writhing and contracting into the walking stick it had been before. "We're a day or so from the south coast of England. This has always been a place of power, from the earliest days."

Galina blinked and looked around. Standing stones surrounded them. Each was at least eight-foot tall, arranged in a circle and bridged by a lintel of almost equivalent size, making a perfect ring of archways. She turned all around and caught sight of a familiar flicker from the one behind her.

"These are portals," Gurda explained. "This is a nexus of entry ways, used by those powerful and skilful enough to navigate them. From here we can go to any number of locations across the world."

Galina approached the arch, touching the stone gingerly. A faint tingle of remembered magic thrilled in her fingers and for a moment, she glimpsed writing on the pillar's surface, but then it was gone. "Who made these?" she asked.

"Lesser minds like yours," Gurda said, "those with the eye of the gift, but little ability or power." She waved her hand at the stones. "These passages were crafted long ago, by people who are long forgotten. It is said this site is dedicated to an old Goddess of the Moon. Some gifted hag of the blood, no doubt. In the last two thousand years, hundreds have been constructed, enabling wizards to travel vast distances in little time."

"Why did you bring us here?" Katya said.

"To show you what is possible." Gurda pointed at the archway they had used. "For now, that door is connected to the old Dunonian passageway in Vidin, but it can be shifted elsewhere as well. I will teach you the spell that opens these and how to move them. Each requires a different touch, but gradually you will master them all." She hobbled toward another archway and passed through it, onto the grass beyond. "The stones are harmless unless invoked, although this place can be busy, come!"

Galina followed her out of the stone circle. "If I am a lesser mind, why are you bothering with me?" she asked.

"Because of the bond you share," Gurda replied. "There are many with the gift remaining unaware, living mortal lives as mortals do. Some in their ignorance age and die as mortals. Such a waste! But you two, one with the power, the other with insight, you are special and different. That is why I brought you here."

"What do you want?"

Gurda smiled. "To win your loyalty to my purpose and not see you murdered by the Church."

By nightfall, Piers reached the top of the well.

The vine spell he learned from Elbo Smogg all those years ago proved successful in helping him climb, but left him exhausted and starving. The use of magic drained him utterly and he collapsed in a heap on the ground.

He lay there for a while, gazing at the stars and shivering. The gift made him stronger and less frail than ordinary folk, but the same weaknesses would end him as it would anyone else. Only the most powerful transcended their mortal form and became eternal, to live forever as a guide to all humankind. He smiled bitterly, *the chosen of a God who never existed*.

He stood up on wobbling legs and stumbled towards the house. There were no lanterns lit and moonlight gave everything a greyish cast. When he got to the door he discovered a painted red cross on the wood. Inside windows were broken, tables turned over and everything ruined. He remembered the woman. *What has she done?*

Piers' fatigue vanished. He went to the stables. The horses were gone. The lifeless body of Renarre lay in the straw staring up at the sky. He'd been stabbed in the chest several times. Piers knelt and closed his eyes.

He returned to the house. He found flint, steel and a candle. Nursing the flame, he went upstairs to Pembroke's room. Less had been disturbed, but the sheets were bloodied and the earl's clothes were in a pile on a chair. *What happened?*

He picked up a long cloak and wrapped it around his own wet garments then checked the other rooms – all empty and abandoned. A lady's necklace and rings had been discarded on a table. He pocketed them, and went back downstairs. He lit a fire in the hearth with the flint and steel, righted an arm chair and sat back to think.

The woman intended harm to the earl, that much was certain. The bloodied sheets and Renarre's death meant she'd probably killed him. Without Pembroke's mission, England and France would go to war, *which must be her plan.*

As his clothes dried, Piers wondered what he could do. The events were beyond him, even if he crossed the distance to England and alerted Edward, the effort would mean nothing, but his heart ached to go anyway. If Pembroke's soldiers were alive, they would head back. A journey to Paris and King Charles would only see him branded a liar and found by the Church inquisitors.

His thoughts turned to the woman; stocky, overweight and middle-aged, more at home in a mill house or on a farm, than murdering earls. She had the gift and would be anxious to leave the region. *She'll make for a portal*, he thought. *She may have come here through one in the first place.*

When he was dry, he got up and went to the kitchen. He found the room in a worse state than everywhere else; the stores emptied all over the tables and floor. *They were looking for something...*

He collected up the unused stale trenchers, biting into one. It was hard going and tasteless, but it was food and by that count, better than anything he'd eaten in more than a day. Three disappeared before he acquired a knapsack to stow more. They would serve for a short walk. He picked up a knife, slipping it into his belt, before reversing the earl's cloak to conceal its emblem, then stepped out of the Inn and into the darkness, making for Amiens, the nearest town and the most likely place the woman would have gone.

The trail would be cold, but still there.

Chapter 11: Giant Dances

"And how do you intend to win our approval?" Galina asked.

"Watch and judge for yourself," Gurda replied.

Katya felt a tingling in her hands. She looked over her shoulder at the stones and the space between the pillars they had come through rippled. A man in robes appeared and stepped through into the grass circle. She recognised him as the priest from their local church. He glanced at the other archways before catching sight of them on the hillside then smiled and made his way towards them.

"I had hoped to catch you, it is time we had a proper conversation I—"

"Come no closer," Gurda warned, placing herself between him and Katya. "We know what you are."

He halted and the smile became strained. "You brought them here I take it?"

"I did."

"To what end?"

"To let them choose for themselves."

The smile disappeared. "There is no choice to make," the priest said. "The lonely existence of parasites like you is no comparison to the kinship we offer. By working together, we further everyone's path toward heaven."

Gurda gave a bitter laugh. "Ah yes, your pyramid of faith, proclaimed to all religions; the blind mortals sing and chant, invoking their God through their prophets and priests. You all share in this soup of lies, promising them paradise for their life of confession and honest tithe!"

The priest's expression hardened. "You mock me."

"You peddle a mockery to the world in the name of morality! What proof is there a better world exists at the end of your promises?"

"Both of you stop!" Katya shouted and surprisingly, they did, turning towards her with matching expressions of curiosity. "You're fighting over us, as if we're to be owned," she said. "What makes you think we'll accept either choice?"

"Because I offer you the truth," the priest said. He glanced at Galina. "I helped you, gave you a life when you were cold and alone on the streets."

“And for that you expect me to serve you?”

“No! That’s not what our path is about, let me explain!”

“Then do so,” Katya said.

The priest straightened his shoulders. “You know me. My name is Petŭr, I was raised in Sredets as a boy, before being taken into the Church when I came into my gift. The elders schooled me in channelling my talent and taught me of its origins. We are the Angels, descendants of the Lord’s chosen, granted magic in this world that we may serve him better. By leading the mortals in worship, I gain his favour and his aid,” he raised his right hand, which began to glow. “I humbly walk with the trust of nations, the support of thousands; we will deliver our people to the Promised Land.”

“You have been lied to, priest,” Gurda spat. “Your ancestors lie in tombs, dreaming of a paradise that does not exist!” She took a step towards him up the hill and raised her walking stick. “You call me a parasite, but in truth, you are an institution of parasites, following the direction of the mad and deluded!”

“And the alternative? A lifetime watching your friends and loved ones die? Of being vilified for being different?” Petŭr’s hand grew brighter and he clenched his fingers into a fist. “Outside of order and purpose there is no legacy, you will fade and be forgotten.”

“And this is where you fail,” Gurda said. “I know your ways. I was once one of you. Other paths exist beyond your rigid world.” She stepped into the ring of stones, her walking stick, expanding once more. “This place was built by people who worshipped different gods and dreamed different dreams, a vibrant world with many voices. In your reality, we are condemned to believe ourselves unworthy of our lives, continually yearning towards a perfect world we will never achieve.” She pointed at Katya. “You would condemn these women to a world of self-doubt.”

“You wrong us.”

“No. I see you clearly!” Gurda raised her staff and spoke guttural words. Katya flinched as power surged through the air, focusing around her then splintering into six points on the grass, two of them next to Petŭr. “Worship is not the only source open to us, priest!” Gurda snarled. The hilltop groaned as dark wood trees ripped themselves out of the earth, their branches hooked and spiky, grabbing at the priest’s arms and legs. He screamed as his robes tore and the coiling limbs seized him, digging thorns through skin, flesh and bone.

Then he vanished.

The vicious trees remained, their limbs groping the air for something, anything. To Katya, they were unnatural; leafless and animated, eager to maim and rend.

Gurda grunted disconsolately. "I might have guessed."

"Is he dead?" Galina asked quietly.

"No, he escaped. A little trick sanctioned wizards can use if they're prepared, a spell that ports them to somewhere safe. Utterly draining though, we'll not meet him again," she turned to Katya. "It wasn't wise to let him talk."

"The alternative was to accept what you tell us," Galina said. "Faim told us to make our own decisions, not blindly trust anyone."

Gurda sighed. "I am not Faim. He would have the eyes of the gifted opened and the Church starve, yet this provides no answer, only suffering. Time turns and we must act to change the course. With Faim's freedom, you wasted yourselves in a mortal life, a snare to capture the ignorant. How do you think Petŭr followed us?"

"He tracked your magic," Katya said, "when you brought us here."

"My spells would not have roused him, despite the burden of bringing your sister," Gurda said. "The death of his creature however..."

"His creature?" Katya glanced at Galina, whose face paled in shock. "You mean Milen?"

"Yes." Gurda also stared at Galina. "Your dead husband and benefactor, a tool of the Church."

"That's not true! He loved me!"

"Only as much as you loved him."

The depths of night. Hino raised his head from the straw mattress. Keys rattled and the door to the cell creaked open.

"Quickly, *Suketomo-sama!*"

He rose from the bed. A hand grabbed his arm and led him swiftly into the dark corridor, along to the end and down a staircase. His eyes were used to the gloom, but the speed they were going

made his injured feet unsure. He stumbled and the hand let go, he fell to his knees on the stone floor.

“Get up, quickly!”

A black shadow stood above him. Hino blocked out the pain and struggled up in answer. There was a shout and footsteps behind. He turned to see *bakufu* bushi arriving bearing torches, their curved swords drawn.

The shadowed figure moved fast, throwing blades with both hands. The knives caught the first two pursuers, one in the throat, the other, the leg. They both went down.

Hino ran the other way and didn't look back, passing through a series of rooms into a large open courtyard. A solitary candle lit the space and Lady Rani stood at the far end, beside a wooden frame set against the stone. The air rippled within it.

“Hino!”

He didn't need to be told. He sprinted towards her, eyes fixed on the distortion. More shouting followed; then orders and screams of agony. Then something slapped against his right leg, driving him to the left. When his foot came down again, pain shot through him and his leg refused to bear his weight. He stumbled again, but caught himself, limping the last few steps and diving head first into the frame, towards the wall, trusting the magic...

...and found himself flat on his face in grassy mud.

Hino glanced up to see the rising sun from a hilltop surrounded by standing stones. Strange waving trees guarded two of them, gradually crumbling away as he stared. He felt the pain in his leg again and rolled over. An arrow was sticking through his calf. He clenched his teeth, fighting down the pain and panic. Lady Rani appeared in the stone archway he had passed through. She waved at the rippling air and the portal spell ended. Then she knelt at his feet.

“Can you walk?”

“I fear not.”

Her hands on his leg were cool and gentle until she grasped the arrow, snapped off the end and started to push it back through the flesh. He almost screamed, but kept his mouth clamped shut, so the noise came out as a long whimper. The shaft popped out, making the pain even worse if it were possible, but then her fingertips brushed the wound, soothing the hurt. He caught her mumbling words and felt the tingle of magic. “You'll live,” she announced as it faded. “We need to get moving.”

He stood up again, favouring the leg. “Who was your companion?”

Rani smiled, "Someone brave." She held out a bundle of cloth. He took it, finding a wrapped *tachi* inside. His family sword. He stared at her.

"How did you..."

Rani pressed a finger to his lips. "You know what I am and what I am capable of. Come." She hurried to another arch, Hino a step behind at his best pace, noting the expanding ripple as she cast the spell and went straight through. He followed...

Tuia stood on stone – the platform of a large unfinished structure – a hollowed four-sided pyramid, built with huge blocks. He'd watched them being made, some were gigantic bricks, others, fusions of the broken rocks transported from the other side of the lake to this strange island.

Torchlight surrounded him and below, the workers chanted. The phrases were an incantation and prayer, proclaiming their faith to the Gods who brought them here to build this city, the last city of the world.

On one side, a set of steps reached down to the ground. Already the building was taller than houses, at least three times the height of the largest in Chimor. On the steps were prisoners. They shuffled forwards, flanked by soldiers in mantles and bright coloured headdresses. Some of them were the people he'd followed through the jungle. Each flash of recognition struck a blow against his resolve.

Tuia turned away and drew the knife from his belt. A wide blade, curved and with a hooking point, unlike anything he'd ever owned before. The woman had given it to him when he'd sworn the oath she demanded, nicking his chest with it to seal their bargain in blood. He knew what it would have meant if he'd refused – *execution*.

The second wound the knife made was in her wrist. She made him drink of her. That night he dreamed of power.

A lifetime ago he'd carved wood into shapes. This knife was made for a different sort of carving.

The platform wasn't quite flat, but raked slightly at the edge on all sides, descending to the centre. In the middle was a small round hole, no bigger than a baby's head. Beneath Tuia he could hear expectant voices, waiting.

The first prisoner stepped forward; an old man, naked, grey haired and fearful. He wore a clay symbol on a cord around his neck. Tuia grabbed it and snapped the string, dropping the keepsake into the hole, provoking a shout in response. Then he seized the man by the hair, dragging him into position, forcing him to kneel and tipping his head back.

The hook of the knife tore into the soft skin of the man's neck. He made a gurgling gasp and bright red blood poured out, soaking his emaciated chest. Tuia reversed the blade and drew a second line from collar bone to penis, opening the man's flesh and pushed him forward, to fall, face first onto the stone.

Blood pooled and ran into the cracks between the stone, the angle of the platform driving it all to the centre, to the hole. It dripped through, running down onto the people below...

Who cheered.

Carefully, Tuia licked the blood from the blade and kicked the corpse from the platform, to fall onto the ground below. He gestured to the mantled guards who pushed the next prisoner forward, a child no more than ten, his stare an accusation.

The guilt came back, but Tuia ignored it and brandished the knife, stepping towards him.

Chapter 12: The Ancient City

"You're safe now."

Bright sunlight made Hino blink back tears. The pain of his wounds had faded and he stared into the smiling face of a little boy, his little boy, Kumi.

"Where am I?"

"I don't know," the boy replied.

Hino tried to raise his head, to take Kumi in his arms, but he couldn't move, only stare. "You're not really my son," he realised aloud.

"No, I'm not."

"Then who are you?"

"Someone who cares." The boy's hand stroked his forehead. "Relax. They will need you and without my aid you will not be able to help them."

For a moment, Hino thought about asking more questions, but Kumi's expression had become serious, the hand on his head was insistent, and his eyes strained in the light. Time to let go, sleep and let the healing begin.

He closed his eyes.

At the monastery of Sado Island, a boy stood in front of the middle gate.

A monk came to meet him. "Is there a reason that you wait here?" he asked.

The boy stared. A solitary tear ran down the side of his cheek. "I am the son of Lord Hino Suketomo come a long way on foot to be with my father at the last."

The monk stared at the boy for long moments before inclining his head. The boy did the same. Without another word, the monk turned away and disappeared inside.

It began to rain. Heavy droplets that soaked the boy's shift and sandals, but he did not move or seek shelter, he stayed and waited, waiting long into the afternoon.

Eventually the monk returned. "Homma of Yamashiro will see you," he said and opened the gate.

The boy walked down the path, following his guide to a small hall. Another robed man knelt in the centre of a wooden floor. He stood, turned and bowed.

"I am Homma of Yamashiro and you are the son of *Suketomo-sama*, Hino Kunimitsu also known as Master Kumawaka."

The boy nodded. "Where is my father?" he asked.

Homma frowned and his gaze slipped to the floor. "You may not see him," he said.

"I am here to be with him."

"Nevertheless, it cannot happen."

The boy cast himself to the floor to catch Homma's eye. On bloody knees, he clasped the robes of the monk. "I beg you... please," he said.

Homma pulled away and went to the door. "You will remain here, until I decide what to do with you," he said.

When he was gone and the door closed, the boy let himself cry.

At dawn, Piers reached the small church. He felt better than before, the trenchers in his knapsack had vanished. Bland fare, but fuel to his exhausted body.

He put a hand to the wooden doors and found them slightly ajar. He pushed gently to ensure he made the minimum noise and slipped inside.

The two lines of pews that greeted him were empty, just as well. He walked between them, his footsteps soft and careful, reaching the rood screen. Once there, he touched the wood, exploring it carefully, trying to find magic.

A small thrill went through him as his fingertips brushed the arch to the left of the aisle. *Here!* Quickly he traced along the whole section, ensuring there were no imperfections or breakages. This was the portal and it had been used recently.

"How may I help you my son?"

The priest's voice over his shoulder was calm and gentle. Piers froze, gripped with indecision. A sanctioned wizard left to monitor this church would quickly overpower him with magic, but if the man was an innocent...

He didn't turn around, but his hand went to the handle of the knife he'd taken from the inn kitchen. "I came to pay my respects, father."

"Then why are you here and not seated as others would be?"

Piers turned slowly. A priest was standing between the pews, some distance away with a lantern, wearing clothes he'd hastily thrown on and staring blearily. Piers raised his hands, palms open, fingers spread. "I didn't mean to disturb you father," he said, taking a step towards him.

"The Lord is always watching, but his servants need their sleep," the priest said with a tired smile. "What troubles you so much that you must be here at this hour?"

"When a man is troubled, sleep is the last thing on his mind," Piers replied. Another two steps and he stopped. "I must lay my sin aside before I can rest."

"Confession is not something I can grant you now, I—"

Piers dived at him and grabbed him by the throat, driving him backwards and into the wall. "Forgive me father," he said then dashed the man's head against the stone. His eyes rolled and he slipped to the floor, unconscious.

Piers went back to the rood screen. *Have I the strength to activate it?* he wondered. A portal spell on his best days as a sanctioned wizard had been difficult with the power of the Church behind him. Now, as a faithless heretic, the cost would come from him alone.

I must try.

He traced the line of magic, trying to focus on the previous spell. The trace remained faint, but he managed to grasp it and spoke the words, sensing the air tense and ripple.

Will it hold?

Gritting his teeth, he stepped forward.

Galina sighed with relief when, finally, light welled out of Katya's hands illuminating the rock around her.

"Well done," said Gurda, her voice laboured, betraying her exhaustion. "The cave entrance should be around to the right."

After the priest disappeared, they'd transported from the hilltop through a different arch. When they were through Gurda ended the spell and sat down, declaring she needed a rest and bidding them keep quiet for a time.

Galina seated herself and tried to get comfortable. She'd shut her eyes, only to be shaken awake what seemed only moments later. Then she waited, whilst Gurda instructed Katya in how to use her magic to make light.

They were in a hewn cave. Writing lined the rough walls, mixed together with paintings and symbols. Galina saw a strange cut groove in the stone, running upwards in a rectangular shape, like a doorway; the exit of the portal perhaps?

"What is this place?" she asked.

"Somewhere forgotten," Gurda replied. "Abandoned when the great orders discovered what is happening to the world." She got up from the floor and Galina caught sight of bare skin beneath the sleeve of her thin dress. Her arm was covered in pustules and swellings. Gurda looked at her and jerked the garment back into place.

"Are you all right?" Galina asked.

"I'm fine," Gurda snapped. "Tired, owing to the effort of dragging you with us, I only hope you prove to be worth it."

"But... you are unwell..."

"The infections I carry are no concern of yours."

"They are if you afflict us."

"I will not."

"How can you be sure?"

"Trust me." Gurda moved past them both, feeling her way along the wall into the darkness. "Hurry," she called.

Galina glanced at Katya who shrugged. "We need to know, otherwise we're trapped here."

"Agreed."

The passageway curled to the right and opened out into a wide hall of smooth marble stone. They found Gurda in its centre. A florid gesture from her and candles around the room sprang into life.

“Behold the council chamber of the orders,” she announced, “now a relic to their fear. In this place, the wizard lords of all religions came to discuss the future of the world.”

Galina stared. The room was larger than any she’d ever seen. Light reflected from the floor and more painted pictures covered the walls. “Why abandon such a place?” she asked in wonder. Her eyes alighted on a strange stone sphere in the middle, held up at eye level by a vertical pillar. “What is this?” she asked.

“Our world,” Gurda said.

“The world is round?”

“Yes.”

“In our village, the elders told us the world is flat,” Katya said. “Which should we believe?”

Gurda chuckled and sat down next to the sphere. The two girls did the same. Galina noticed there were pins in the object, metal needles, sticking out in different directions. “The council of orders built this to represent the centre of all things. Around it, circle their ideas of the domains in existence, places like heaven on the ceiling, purgatory on the walls, hell on the ground and many others. The spiritual kingdoms of all religions are depicted here.”

“But this is all the artifice of the last two millennia. These halls are much older, built in a time before people sought dominion over each other, when those with the magic stood apart, leaving the different peoples to rule themselves,” Gurda fixed Galina with a stare. “But then, legends say these ancients chose one people over all others because that people offered them worship as gods. As you know, worship conveys power and the old ones could not resist the lure. This began the age of humanity and their spread across all lands.”

“Through power, the ancients discovered a way to shed their mortal forms. Humanity prayed to them and revered them until they became the gods they once aspired to be.”

“But the ascended ones fell into slumber. The reverie is a world of dreams, but those within perceive the dreams as real.” Gurda gestured around the chamber. “Some say they visit other worlds and places, which is where these realms come from.”

“Over time, some ancients became too close to their charges. The old blood mixed with that of mortals and much was lost. Yet, this blending brought new insight. The children born to gifted and

mortal cannot wield power, but they can perceive it and understand how it works. Their keen minds developed our understanding, enabling the construction of devices to enhance the magic of wizards.” Gurda tapped her strange walking stick on the tiles. “Items like this.” She smiled at Galina, but the expression didn’t reach her eyes. “You made something similar did you not?”

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

Slowly, Galina drew out the half-finished stave she’d made at the river seventeen years ago and held it out. “I couldn’t find any more pieces,” she said.

“You weren’t meant to,” Gurda replied. “By this method, a staff can take years to construct. The fragments must resonate for it to work. Some are never finished.”

“You could have told us this story back at the tavern,” Katya said. “Why bring us here?”

Gurda turned on her. “Would you have believed it? You’ll see shortly,” she said and smiled as if laughing to herself about a private joke. She cleared her throat. “The mix-blooded have a mind for structures and patterns. So, it was that they began to stratify the worship of the mortals. To begin, they created pantheons, with elaborate rituals for each god. Later they constructed the monotheistic religions, placing those already in reverie at the top of their hierarchies. It is not known if there ever was a true creator, but many faiths speak of this and teach mortals that the path to this god is through their exalted servants; the priests, the cardinals the—”

“The wizards,” Galina finished for her.

“Exactly so.”

“But you were part of this,” Katya said. “You said you were to the priest who followed us.”

Gurda nodded. “Yes, I was.”

“What changed you?”

“Two things. The first was our mutual friend Faim. After an encounter with him, I learned to question what I was being told. Faim has this way of opening your mind and freeing you of preconception. He left me hungry to learn the truth for myself.”

“He told me he wouldn’t be my guide,” Katya said, “that I needed to find knowledge on my own.”

“Better to be shown to make your own choice as I promised,” Gurda said, “another reason why we are here.” She raised her walking stick and pointed to the wall. “To the left of me is another

passageway, go there and down the steps to the end. Explore the room, come back and tell me what you find.”

Katya got up and walked into the shadows. Galina got up as well, but Gurda motioned her to remain. “Not you, we have more to talk about.”

Galina sat down again. “You didn’t answer my question from before. Why is this place abandoned?”

Gurda pointed at the roof. “Seventeen years ago, far from here, a small group of wizards performed a ritual to open a portal to heaven. They failed and instead opened a door to nothing, which being nothing, began to pull everything into itself,” she frowned. “I don’t rightly understand it and I wasn’t there, but the portal never closed and continues to devour everything it can reach. The orders learned of this and tried to fix what had been done, but failed. They met in this chamber trying to work out what it meant and eventually determined the truth.”

“What truth?”

At that moment, Katya emerged from the passageway, her face pale and expression grave. “There’s a man lying on a stone,” she said. “He’s dead.”

“How long since he died?”

She swallowed and struggled to keep her voice level. “I don’t know, but no more than a few days.”

“Good,” Gurda said. “He was the last. They may yet come back, but I doubt it.” She closed her eyes and muttered strange words. Galina recognised the signs and the building tension in the air. What spell was the woman casting now? What could she possibly want to—

“Orisimizi!”

The voice came to her, echoing out of her long-forgotten past, she turned around and found herself grabbed and hugged by small arms and legs.

“Juje?”

“Juje!”

Katya joined them, her embrace encircling them both.

Chapter 13: Revelation

The boy, known as Hino Kunimitsu and Master Kumawaka waited on Sado Island to see his father.

He could not count the days. He dwelt in the personal hall of Homma the monk and to make a tally mark in the small room might offend his host. When it grew dark, he slept on a thin rug. When it became light, he rose.

Each time he awoke, he found food beside him. With nothing else to occupy him, his intention turned inwards. He meditated, studying his magic and the ways it might be expressed. He exercised, remembering his father's wisdom to train the body while young, so he remained flexible, supple and strong.

He was thirteen years old, not yet a man, but making the decisions of one. His mother had begged him not to come here, he had begged the monk called Homma to let him see his father. Now he could do nothing but wait.

In the fading afternoon, Homma returned. He brought with him a leather sack drawn closed with rope. "Master Kumawaka, I am able at last to resolve our differences," he said.

"What day is this?" the boy asked.

"The thirtieth of the fifth month," Homma replied. He held out the sack. "As you requested."

The boy accepted the gift, drew it open and reached inside. His hand closed around something hard and dusty. He pulled it free.

He held the blackened thigh bone of a man.

"The counsellor's death was honourable," Homma said, "performed by my brother Saburō with a clean blade befitting his rank."

Sudden shock weakened the boy's fingers. He almost dropped the burned remains, but to do so would sully his father's name. Instead, his grip tightened and he stared at it. "Father," he said.

"Unable in the end to be together, I behold you now, burned into ash and dust."

Homma bowed. "Your purpose here is ended," he said.

The boy did not reply.

Hino opened his eyes.

He lay fully-clothed in a soft bed, unlike anything he'd ever slept in before. The padding beneath him made it feel like floating and helped him recall the dream. For a moment, his son's smiling face was there again and he smiled in turn.

"Good, *dainagon* you are awake," said a voice in accented English.

Kumi's face faded away and Hino raised his head. An older man of European descent dressed in red robes sat on a wooden chair at the foot of the bed.

"My thanks for your efforts, Cardinal," Hino said, recognising the garments.

The cardinal smiled, bringing more lines to a careworn face. "What little rest we granted you helped. I commend you on your powers of recovery."

Hino returned the smile, his gaze drifting to another figure in the room. A woman, also European, stood by the door. She wore the long ornate garb of a *caduceus* wizard, belted at the waist. The hood was drawn back from her face and the mask hung loosely around her neck. "We have little time," she said.

"We have some moments," the cardinal replied. "*Dainagon*, I am Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, this is Lady Eleanor, formally of Aquitaine."

"*Always* of Aquitaine, Cardinal."

"Of course, my apologies, Lady."

Eleanor smiled. "A fine welcome for guests, a shame more do not come here."

Colonna sighed. "Those days are past I fear."

"We need to bring them back," Eleanor replied. "What is abroad is beyond us, we need the counsel of others with the knowledge we lack."

"We approached the old orders many times," Colonna said. "Few remain true to the alliances and the purpose which once held us all together, but you are right."

Hino inclined his head to them both. "You must call me Hino, *dainagon* is no longer a title I hold. The Emperor abandoned me on the moment of my capture."

Cardinal Colonna rose from his seat. "I accept your gift not to remain on ceremony. Hino then. Can you walk?"

Hino swung his legs over the edge of the bed and cautiously lowered his feet to the ground, putting weight on each in turn, before attempting to stand. His injured leg did not protest and when he bent down to examine the wound there was barely a scar.

He raised his head again. "Where is Lady Rani?"

"Your rescuer left shortly after leaving you with us," Lady Eleanor replied coolly. "She believes you will be useful."

Hino shrugged and bowed. "I will try," he said.

"Then get dressed," Cardinal Columna said, pointing to another set of robes. "We need you."

Hino nodded and did so, strapping his *tachi* scabbard to the belt of the garments and following his hosts out of the room.

Eventually, the *juje* released them both and Katya stepped back. The little man hadn't changed at all since they'd last seen him – around four-foot-tall with thin spidery limbs and a shock of hair.

"You are proper *orisiinizi* now!" he crowed. "Proper three!"

They all looked at Gurda who scowled. "Such nonsense," she said. "Dwarf, have your people returned?"

"Some are here," the creature admitted. "Nervous of you. Believed all had left."

"They did," Gurda said. "We are here for the seal."

The *juje* nodded and took a step towards the far end of the chamber, but Katya stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. "What is the seal?" she asked Gurda.

Gurda stood up and gestured to the stone sphere, her fingertips brushing the metal spikes. "As I said, the ritual to heaven made a hole in the world. This needle marks the location and is driven through to determine the corresponding location on the other side. Six places were located by the orders before they left, forming an intersection in the centre of the sphere—"

"A seventh seal," Galina said.

"Yes, exactly a seventh seal."

Katya stared at the globe. "This place is one of these locations?"

"Yes, that is why it was abandoned," Gurda pointed through the doors at the far end of the room. "Events are already in motion. Through there is the ritual chamber, we believe it will break open and become a rift, like the one in Avignon."

"Where it started?" Katya asked.

"Yes."

Galina frowned. "But why involve us? We haven't the strength of the people who fled. What could we possibly do?"

"You are *colonnazi*," The *juje* said proudly and smiled, as if the word explained everything.

"You are twins," Gurda answered, "one with power, one with insight. In all I read, such a birth is unprecedented. It would be recorded in a legend or story."

"So, you believe we can stop the end of the world?" Katya laughed, but could force no humour into the sound.

"Perhaps we deserve an end?" Gurda said. "Each day inquisitors murder more gifted people like you. The orders strangle change in favour of their past masters and use the weapons of sin and guilt to make their congregation shout into the void after our long-lost creator. Mayhap it is time for transformation and a second chance for others, like the *dvergr* or *jötnar* of legend? I brought you here to show you what transpires. Now you make your own decision of how you intervene." She pointed toward the other side of the chamber again. "Go there, see what you find and make your choices."

Katya stared in the direction Gurda indicated and glanced at her sister. For a moment, they were children once more and shared the same thought – apprehension at what might await them. She walked over to Galina and took her hand. "Come on, let's go."

"She's not telling us everything," Galina said, eying Gurda.

"Then we'll go and talk about that."

They stepped forward together, reaching a half open door. Katya pushed it wide. The shadows retreated from her light and a circular room revealed itself. There were no pictures here, just etched symbols on every inch of the stone. She recognised repetition in places, but once again, her lack of reading made the knowledge unobtainable. The whole room smelled of power, the air hazy with it, making her feel lightheaded. "Can you make sense of this?" she asked Galina.

"A little," her sister replied, kneeling in the corner. "There are many layers. There were different writers placing messages over the top of others, each imbued with an enchantment." She traced her

fingers over the indentations. "There is one repeated rune. It appears in the upper layer and the oldest work at the bottom – a circle with a cross inside... I think..." She raised her head and looked at Katya. "I think it's a warning."

Outside the room, they heard a muffled shout and scream then the door slammed shut. Katya ran to it immediately and pulled on the handle. It didn't budge.

"We're trapped," she said.

Accompanied by his hosts, Hino made his way carefully down a wide set of stone stairs.

Having spent years at Emperor Go-Daigo's court, Hino had access to a vast library of information on the different magical orders of the world and recognised a competent bureaucrat as a kindred spirit. Cardinal Colonna was that and more. The Colonnas were old blood, Italianate royalty, closely associated with the *Summa Magiolaie*. Giovanni himself was a scholar of magic, his gift not being strong enough to invoke power. Whilst the family did not hold the papacy, in the absence of the Pope and the Curia, they controlled the Vatican.

Lady Eleanor was more of a mystery. He knew the name, but little else and as they walked, tried to recall anything he had read from the journals of the Emperor's missionaries to different courts and councils. He could sense the power of her gift.

"All knowledge of the spell cast in Avignon has been eradicated. The membership rolls of the Temple of Solomon were assiduously kept and with your help, we eliminated every loose end."

"Apart from me."

"You are no loose end, m'lady."

They made no attempt to explain their conversation, so Hino pieced together what he could. He remembered a story of magic in the vaults of the Avignon palace, but couldn't recall the details.

"What about a reversal of the ritual?" Eleanor asked.

"Our best minds contemplated this ever since the event, consulting each eternal as they awoke," Colonna said. "We are no closer to understanding what was unleashed."

The corridor below led to an arch, Hino followed his hosts through and found himself in a vast empty hall. The wooden rafters of the ceiling were high above and arches decorated the walls. At

the far end sculpted trees of stone framed panels of glass, which illuminated the chamber. He stopped and stared.

“What is the purpose of such a place?”

Lady Eleanor turned and smiled at him. “Welcome to my home,” she said. “This is the hall of lost footsteps. It is in these spaces we come to understand power.”

They walked across the floor and as he followed, Hino thought he understood. The sound of each step he made disappeared in the enormous space, making him feel insignificant. He saw more passageways and a raised stone level. “I held court here,” Lady Eleanor said, “sat in a simple wooden chair. Nothing else was needed. That life is over now.”

“The demonstration is well executed,” Hino said. “I am brought here and abandoned by my rescuer into your care. I am given no explanation of purpose and disturbed by mysterious dreams. What do you wish of me?”

“Rani left you with us because you are a powerful wizard, Hino,” Cardinal Colonna said. “Your political life is over, as hers was and as Lady Eleanor’s is. Your face is unknown in these lands; useful to us.”

“Lady Eleanor is stronger than I.”

“Perhaps,” Colonna replied. His eyes narrowed. “Seventeen years ago, a spell was miscast and cannot be reversed, a spell that threatens the stability of our world. A cabal of wizards planned this. You met one of them in the streets. He called himself Faim.”

Hino held his gaze. “I answer only to the Emperor,” he said.

“I care not for the reason behind the meeting,” Colonna said, waving his hand. “Your politics are not our concern; keep your loyalty as you wish.”

Hino shrugged. “Very well, I met an outlander to end his service. Sometime after this people came for me, one of them was of the old blood and had betrayed us.”

Eleanor turned to him. “You are sure? Could it not have been some spy from the *bakufu*?”

“The *bakufu* are not stupid. A spy of theirs would quietly arrange my capture or assassination, not bring an army to the doors of the Kyoto residency in which I was staying,” Hino replied. “Someone wanted to provoke conflict, humiliate the Emperor and begin a war,” he frowned. “There was a woman, scars all over her. I saw her at the secret meetings before. She duelled with my escort, toyed with him before the end.”

Colonna bit his lip. "Scarred you say? All over, apart from the face?"

"Yes, that's it."

The cardinal nodded, his expression grave. He produced a handful of parchments from his robes, knelt and spread them out on the floor. "These commissions and reports were for an assortment of positions in the first crusade to establish Outremer in 1095," Colonna explained. "At the time, the expeditions were not given such names, but the papacy under Urban II and the eternalists wished to see a projection of Christian power in the east. The mission drove a wedge between the eastern mystics and the orders here. At the time, the senior council was concerned about the number of illustrious noblesse being sent into the unknown, so appointed a set of powerful escorts to journey with them. These wizards were amongst the most gifted of our kind and took positions in the entourages of the Kings and princes sent forth." Colonna divided the paperwork on the table. "Many of those who went were killed, as the sorcerers of the enemy targeted them, seeking to remove our eyes and ears, but a few survived. I remembered one description when you mentioned a scarred woman."

Hino bent forward over the document. His Latin was not perfect, but good enough to manage the words aloud.

"A woman from the furthest lands, small in stature, but within her chest beats the heart of a lion. She walks and fights as a man, her body covered with the scars of her enemies..."

"What you said, reminded me of this," Colonna said. "There are more accounts of the individuals given positions and sent to Jerusalem, but this woman appears many times in the writing, where the fighting is worst. There is also an ominous sign which always disturbed me."

"What is that?" Eleanor asked.

"There is never an indication of what side this woman fought for," Colonna replied. "She has no name or title; she is mentioned only as 'the warrior' and features in every description of a major battle."

"It must be the same person," Hino said. "That would make her more than two hundred years old, strong in the old blood and in her magic." He tapped a finger on the parchment. "It would seem choosing a side is less important to her than the war itself. The woman I met lives for conflict and proving her mettle. Perhaps that was the reason for her betrayal?"

"It might be," Eleanor said, "but these parchments cannot be a complete account of what transpired."

"In three hundred years, why has this woman not transcended her mortality?" Hino asked.

"She is plainly no longer a believer in our path," Colonna said, "and as such a dangerous enemy." He reached into his robes again and produced another rolled script. "A further account of her appears here..."

I am sent to you as a messenger. The only reason I live is to deliver my recollection and the mark as I was told.

We arrived at the designated time; all those who had been sounded out and spoken to, our thoughts and opinions weighed and measured before discreet invitations were issued. Instructions were given to a place dimly remembered, a forest grove once dedicated to the first gods, lost to the archives of all religion.

I make no bones at my disenfranchisement. The dream of the Manual Alchemical and the path of the orders is no longer my dream. I went looking for a new way, expecting to find others of like mind and at first, I discovered exactly that as more and more people appeared in the nexus grove while we lingered.

To be there announced betrayal, so trust between us remained a fragile thing. Who could know the heart of each man or woman? We were Judii, and all that bound us was our presence, until our hosts arrived.

They came through the portals from north, south, east and west, on horseback, wielding staff and sword. From the north a starving man on a pale horse, from the east a physician upon a donkey with the mark of the caduceus. From the south came a bone collector and from the west a warrior marked by her foes.

Before we knew it, they set about us, spilling the old blood of those nearest to them. In response, the magic came. I have never witnessed such power and never will again. Wizards fought to live and to escape, casting thaumaturgies all around in their panic.

The horsemen made short work of us, until a last dozen remained, surrounded in the middle of the grove, far from the gates and survival. At that moment, I cast aside my staff and abandoned all hope, surrendering to their sinister purpose.

Perversely, they spared us, charging us all with a message, but not before ensuring our fate. The physician came to each of us, practising magic I will not speak of, lest its art go further. You can see the evidence of her festering work upon my body; my life is over. Our gifts protect us from the sickness of mortality, infection does not trouble us in the way it ravages humanity, but this... mark is made for us, a plague crafted to destroy the old blood.

A warning we were told to pass on. "Remember the old ways. There are more powerful paths than religion." Then we were ushered through portals, sent back as messengers to you all.

This is a pestilence made by magic. It was a gift to me that I grant to you.

"A warrior marked by her foes," Eleanor said, pointing to the phrase on the parchment. "It cannot be a coincidence."

Cardinal Colonna folded up the parchment. "In four days, every member of the interrogation committee had become sick. Thankfully, we were able to isolate them all within church grounds and when we knew they would not recover, intern them."

"You mean, you buried them alive?"

"Yes. They were walled into a reverie chamber, sixty feet below the Sant' Apollinare," Colonna explained. "No cure could be found to their illness, if we had not acted..."

"Everyone here would be dead," Hino said.

Chapter 14: Traps

The spinning white of magic, a moment between places, where the self fractures into a thousand shards, consciousness strewn across reality, a myriad of dust stretched to span start and finish then recombined.

Awareness re-emerges with purpose, thought and volition. The traveller understands who and what he is and what he is doing. He remembers a life full of love and loss, with feeling and experience that shapes a man, making him.

Piers Gaveston emerged from the portal in the dark of a narrow alleyway. He stumbled out into a cobblestone street and heard the cry of gulls. A harbour town or city perhaps?

It began to rain. He walked down the road towards the port, seeing the coast stretching out to the left and right. He cast an experienced eye over the boats. None of them high-masted ships, suggesting the settlement lay on a river or lake.

He retraced his steps back up the hill, trying to focus on the magical trail that brought him to this place, but too many other souls had been here. One memory of pain dwarfed the rest. Could it be the woman? He wasn't sure, but followed the echo, a hand on the knife at his belt all the while.

The echo took him into the poorer quarters. In another alleyway, he found a man lying in the dirt. He wore the bloodied and soiled robes of an orthodox priest – out of place for this part of town. The man barely breathed. Piers knelt and touched his fevered brow, bulging eyes and shaking hands. There were puncture wounds along the man's arms and legs at regular intervals, some sort of scourge – a barbed whip might have caused them, but there were no tears in the skin where the weapon would have been removed.

"You best be leavin' him. He's past help."

Piers turned. A cart had pulled up and a man leaned down towards him. Piers frowned – how hadn't he heard them? The cart stank and was marked with a cross in red, its contents wrapped in a stained blank sheet. A corpse cart, out to collect the dead. The driver was grey-eyed and long-faced with a hood covering the top of his head. "Folk sent me to pick him up."

"But he's not yet passed."

"I see the signs, 'ee will be shortly, best to get 'im buried in with the paupers as soon as we can."

Piers stepped away. The driver picked up the priest with surprising strength and carried him around to the back, tucking him under the cloths. Small bare feet stuck out from underneath, the skin blueing with decay – a child, no more than six or seven.

“A church man would have relatives and friends,” Piers said. “Seems strange for him to be alone like this.”

The corpse man shrugged. “All sorts end up in the pit ‘o th’ poor. Sometimes folk can’t be found an’ bodies can’t be left. Tha’s the law.” He headed toward his seat behind the horse, plainly believing the conversation over.

Piers looked up and down the street but saw no-one. People wouldn’t want to be near the dead. Superstition and fear kept them away in their houses, praying and confessing the sins that might mark them to be infected like those who had died.

The cart moved away, leaving him alone. He stared after it, wondering where to go next. *A strange town, where no-one knows me...*

“Not wise to gawp.”

He turned to find a young boy at his elbow and felt the point of a knife pressed into his back. His eyes went to his belt; his own knife was missing. Piers muttered a curse under his breath. “I don’t have anything worth stealing, what do you want?”

“Ain’t me what wants you,” the boy replied and nudged him forward. “Get moving.”

“To where?”

“The house over there.”

Piers saw the door ahead marked with a red cross and sighed.

The dim sound of a church bell echoed into the hall from outside. Lady Eleanor glanced up and frowned. “We must leave immediately,” she announced and without waiting swept towards one of the arched exits, Cardinal Columna followed and after a moment’s hesitation, so did Hino.

“Where are we going?” Hino asked.

“When you arrived, Lady Eleanor was about to make a trip to ascertain the validity of our concerns,” Columna explained, over his shoulder. “A hidden city beneath the oceans of the east was

once a meeting place for wizards. It was abandoned after a secret spell was performed in one of the chambers. Lady Eleanor wishes to visit the place and determine if what was done was the same as Avignon.”

They reached a small chamber. A whispered word brought light to the candles on the walls. Lady Eleanor plucked a long staff from its resting place in the corner. She scraped the end against the stonework and began to chant, drawing a door shape in the wall. Hino sensed the spell complete a moment before the stones dissolved to be replaced by the familiar rippling vortex of a portal.

“Go, quickly!” Cardinal Columnna urged.

Hino closed his eyes and stepped through.

“What do we do?” Katya’s voice rose to a hysterical pitch.

Galina looked around the room. There were no other exits, only swirls and patterns of writing, layer upon layer covering walls, ceiling and floor – *everywhere*. She crouched down amongst them, her study of them entirely different now her life depended on it. “These are spells,” she realised aloud. “Protections crafted to contain anything in this room.”

“Including us?”

“Once activated, yes.”

The air in the room seemed even thicker than before, a cloying haze of magic, building into something, she couldn’t tell what. The power gathered and swirled in the centre of the room, like a strange invisible whirlpool, moving slowly, but faster as she watched. “It’s feeding on us,” she said.

“We have to get out!” Katya shouted, she went to the door and hammered on it. “Help! Let us out!”

“No, wait!” Galina grabbed her by the shoulder. “Gurda wanted us trapped here; she’s outside and not likely to release us.”

“Then we—”

“No, we think this through before we do anything. Can’t you sense the power in here already? It’s like...” she swallowed past the lump in her throat. “It’s like just before a big storm, but as if the storm is all here inside...” She blinked rapidly as her eyes filled and ran. “Can’t you see?”

"I can't see anything," Katya said.

"There's magic here," Galina said. She walked slowly to the centre, giddy as she approached. She reached out, trying to touch or grab the strange haze, but it slipped through her hands. She could feel it against her fingers, like she would the breeze. "We need to make a choice. That's why Gurda trapped us."

"Is that how we get out?"

"I don't know!" The swirling currents raised hairs on her skin. "If you use your power, you'll set everything off – the warding spells, all of it." She backed away to the door. "Whatever we do we should be here, that's our only chance."

Katya nodded and came over to stand by her side. "What do we choose?"

"The kind of world we want." Galina drew out the half-finished stave and lay it on the floor. The wood quivered in response to the magic around them. "If we stay here, eventually we'll be consumed by what's building up. If we break the seals of the room, we'll likely trigger it and be consumed anyway." She stared into the spinning torrent. "I don't think Gurda cares if we die. We must find another way."

"What did you mean about a choice?" Katya asked.

"I'm not sure. The restrictions we live with now or something new. A complete change, something we can't understand before it happens," Galina pointed to the door. "Perhaps a return to the early days, maybe that's why the *juje* and his people are here?"

"Can you stop what's happening?"

"I don't know where to begin," Galina said. The distortions whirled faster. She peered at them, trying to get a sense of what they could be. They reminded her of dreams. Faces appeared; people going about their lives in another space and time; some of them stared at her. She gasped. These were visions of the past – rituals, councils, sacrifices, all manner of events over the years. Some were *juje*-like figures, some were huge – twice the height of normal men.

A pattern emerged – a gradual build of magic from this place and others, making it a place of transition. There were glimpses of places underwater, on an island and a pyramid where a man cut the throats of prisoners and threw them into a dark pit.

The answer came to her – this was like a wound or a disease. She remembered how she had guided Katya's power to help Milen, how they hadn't known how to save him, but managed to slow down the spread of the infection.

“Katya I’ve got an—”

And then something stepped out from fragments and into the room, something solid and real.

The boy’s name was Rag – at least that’s what he called himself. He made Piers think of his own daughter, who would be a similar age now. He remembered her small face in her mother’s arms when he’d last seen them. Thirteen years, twelve since his ‘death’ on the road.

At Rag’s prompting he walked across the street and pushed open the marked door. The room inside was pitch black, unnaturally so. “Close it,” rasped a voice.

Piers did as he was bidden. “We could have talked out there,” he said.

“My people are not welcome in the sun,” the low voice replied, plainly male. “We remain in the dark places of the world.”

Clothing rustled in the gloom. Piers clenched his fists and fought down the urge to run. “What do you want?” he asked.

“You followed a woman here.” The tone didn’t change and came from the far end of the space. “You lost her trail when you arrived, but then found the priest.”

“What of it?”

“You didn’t fight when the corpse man came, so you intrigue me.” Cloth rustled again. “Which side are you on?”

Slowly, Piers reached backwards then swiftly grabbed the boy’s wrist and twisted the knife away from him. The child gasped in pain before Piers dragged him forwards and pressed the blade to his throat.

“Please no!” the boy yelled.

“I’m not one for threats,” Piers said. “What do you want?”

Something rushed across the room. Hands grappled his, nails dug into his wrists and savage strength drove him into the wall. He thrashed against the sinewy grasp, but couldn’t break it. *Impossible! No mortal could—*

"Watcher of the old blood, you are in no position to bargain in this place!" Fetid breath filled his nostrils and he sensed a face inches from his own. Lambent red glowed from eyes staring into his. "You are orphaned, bereft of purpose and support. You broke with your flock and found no power in the deep. That makes you weak and ripe for our use!"

Piers shut his eyes and relaxed as he'd been taught, letting the magic flow, but something got in the way, disturbing his connection. He felt sharp teeth on his neck, his eyes flew open and he cried out.

"No father," said the boy.

Abruptly, everything stopped.

"We can use him another way. Learn the Church ways from him without fear of them finding us. He'll be perfect for that."

The hands on his throat relaxed, the figure in darkness stepped back. "You're right, I forget myself."

Without warning, pain exploded on the side of Pier's head, his legs gave way and he fell to the floor as the blows rained down.

Katya stared at the creature and it stared back.

Its presence felt unnatural in the chamber, a violation of some law she'd never consciously understood, but instinctively accepted. Strange obsidian skin, back facing knee joints, a wedge-shaped head and muscular shoulders, both covered in spiky horns. White eyes and teeth – fanglike, clawed hands, three fingers and two thumbs. All recognisable features for what they were, but none like they should be.

It stepped towards her.

Galina screamed a warning, but it was too late. The magic came forth without thought, an instinctive protection, shaping itself as Katya had learned – *in fire*.

The black skin caught light. The creature howled and fell, a clawed hand reached out to her. "Please!" it begged, as the flames took hold. Katya remembered Faim's words at the house

– *innocent!* Once again, the power ran out of her like a wave and she stepped forward to grasp the outstretched fingers.

But it was too late. The creature burned away, turning to ash in her hands.

The room shook, the writing on the floor began to glow and she realised what she'd done. The fire spell had triggered the defensive wards, which meant whatever they were set to defend against...

...had arrived.

At first it looked like the distortion she'd seen through the portals, the same rippling of the air and wall behind, but then the space seemed to tear, revealing a blackness like the skin of the creature. Accompanied by a sense of wrong.

What have I—

The door to the room exploded inwards, knocking them from their feet. Two figures came through, both in long robes covered in symbols and writing strode into the room, light shining from them. A gloved hand gripped Katya's arm. She gazed into a masked face and the eyes of a woman.

"Come with me."

Katya was on her feet and running, Galina in front and the two strangers following. Outside the room she slowed and glanced behind. Their rescuers stood by the broken door arch, one wielding a sword, the other with a long staff planted in the ground in defiance of what lay beyond in the room. As she watched, the walls of the chamber reached out for each other, shrinking the doorway gap until the room was sealed.

The woman turned towards her, staff in hand. Katya flinched. "I'm sorry," she said.

"No apology is needed," the woman replied and took her hand again, walking quickly to the other end of the room. Katya followed as best she could. Already the writing in this chamber was beginning to glow as well. They went past the sphere and back down the passageway to the cave room where they'd first arrived. "What happened to Gurda and *juje*?" she asked.

Suddenly, a cry came from the shadows and a small form threw itself at the woman. Spidery fingers clawed at her robes, teeth snapped, trying to bite and tear. "Hino!" the woman shouted.

In response, her companion swung his sword, catching the figure across the temple. There was a flash, a scream and he disappeared.

"*Juje!*" Katya screamed, but there was no reply.

The woman glanced at her, eyes wide. "Did you know that... creature?"

"He was a friend."

"Then I am the one who must apologise," the other masked person said; a short man, speaking with a strange accent. "When we transported in, there was no-one here. We heard you cry out and found you in the room. What were you doing there?"

"Someone trapped us," Galina said before Katya could answer. "Will you take us with you?"

"We will," the woman said. "Then will come the time for questions." She stared at the cut groove in the stone and spoke a rapid sequence of strange words. The air rippled as the portal activated, she stepped forwards and vanished.

Katya followed quickly.

Galina went to follow her sister, but a hand on her shoulder tugged her back. She turned towards the man. "What's the matter?"

"You are not of the gift."

Galina swallowed and shrugged. "I can't do what Katya can do. Is that a difficulty?"

The man let her go. "It means we go together," she said. "Come on."

They held hands and walked into the wall.

Tuia's arms trembled as the sun rose and he lowered the knife.

Throughout the night, the procession of victims continued, a tortured differentiation of humanity ascending the steps towards their bloodletting and doom. Beneath, inside the temple, the chosen were anointed as soldiers empowered to bring about the world's end.

The tall mantled Mexica had been first. Then came the fur-clad Khamag and their lesser kin. After these, the other allies of Teotl and her council, a mixed collection of warriors from the corners

of the world. Tuia saw the white skin he remembered of Odoric and midnight dark flesh. An alliance of power and change knew no boundary.

In the daylight he rested, as the workers raised the temple higher. At dusk, he ascended and sacrificed them.

The guilt no longer troubled him. Faces blurred and smeared into each other. Only the knife remained constant. He treasured it, licking clean all trace of its victims between sacrifices. In the daytime, he slept with it held in both hands, a reminder to himself and others of his new purpose.

A carver of wood no more. Now a carver of flesh.

As Teotl promised, the magic awoke within him. He learned the ways of the old ones in shaping and directing it. The minions of ancient times came to him when he called, but the eagle remained out of reach.

Now, as his labours ended with another dawn, he felt the ground tremble. Some shouted in panic, but he did not.

He walked down the bloody steps into the growing city. A crowd had gathered in the square. People stepped away from him as he neared, fearing the knife and his dread purpose. They would never feel anything else for him – this was the price of power.

Ahead a group of figures did not step away. Instead, one of them turned as he approached – a gnarled old man in tattered robes with guileless eyes and wisps of white hair over his ears.

“Welcome brother,” he said.

Tuia accepted his hand in a clasp of friendship. He bowed and turned to the next figure, a stocky woman who leaned heavily on her walking stick. She did not offer a hand, so he bowed lower. Behind her stood Teotl and to her he bowed lower still.

“You have done well.”

“I act only as you instructed.”

“No, you do more,” she said. “I expected weakness, a crisis between your gift and the remains of your mortality, but you transcend such considerations and enchant the soldiers of our cause equally without flinching. Now the sign comes to us and we are ready, so we shall begin.”

“What is to happen, great one?”

“Invasion.”

Lightning flashed and thunder roared.

Beneath the charged heavens, the boy known as Master Kumawaka did not sleep.

In the days after his father's death a fever gripped him. He refused to leave Sado Island and was moved from the personal hall of Homma the monk into guest quarters. At night, they locked the door and a servant sat in the corridor.

As Kumawaka's body burned, so too did his soul. The anger shielded him from sleep, seething and bubbling in his veins.

Blood must pay for blood.

This was no child tantrum. His fevered mind struggled to focus. The monks obeyed masters who were unknown to him. The world of the *bakufu* and the Emperor had been his father's. He would find no peace following his father's ghost.

Kumawaka rose from the bed and on the balls of his feet, stole across the room to the door. He leaned close to the paper window and heard the soft snoring of the servant. He drew the broken blade of a knife and pressed it to the paper until it tore. Slowly, he cut out a hole.

A man could not fit through such a space, but a child might.

Head first he slipped through the gap.

At first, anger made his hands shake, but long deep breaths brought calm. The servant lay sleeping on the floor. Kumawaka eased past him down the hall and into the yard.

Outside, the wind and rain soaked his simple shift. He stayed close to the buildings, watching for other servant guards. He crawled under houses and crouched beside walls. Eventually, he found what he sought – the only lamp lit dwelling near to the north wall.

The place where Homma slept.

Kumawaka inched towards the light. Two *ashigaru* guards stood outside the door, both alert with *naginata* spears and swords. A child could not pass such warriors, but a gifted child...

In the shadows under the *engawa*, Kumawaka called forth the magic. Flickering wings caught the storm's light and a moth landed on his hand. A moment later, a second joined it, then a third and a fourth. He sensed more fluttering above and bent them to his will. The moths gathered, swarmed and poured themselves at the guards, who shouted and screamed as they drowned on insect flesh.

Kumawaka sprung from his hiding place. More shouts came from elsewhere but he ignored them, snatched up a sword, flung open the door and charged inside.

“Who dares to disturb—”

The blade bit into flesh. The speaker coughed and slumped against Kumawaka. The boy struggled, but pushed him off. Lightning flashed and he got a glimpse of the man’s face.

It was not Homma.

Kumawaka’s hands shook, his vision blurred and his breath came in gasps. He couldn’t drag his eyes from the monk’s dead face. *Who have I—*

“Saburo! Saburo!”

Kumawaka kicked over the lamp. Oil and flame spilled and spread across the floor. He leapt at the *shōji* window on the far side, crashing through it in a mess of paper and wood.

“Saburo!”

Fire spiralled into the sky as Kumawaka ran into the night.

Timeline of Significance

1326: The Ottoman Turks conquer the city of Burs, fifty miles south of Constantinople and Ottoman warriors cross into Europe to plunder. Orhan, the Ottoman sultan, makes an alliance with a Christian contender for the throne in Constantinople, John Cantacuzenus, and marries his daughter, Theodora.

1328: King Charles IV of France dies. He is succeeded by Philip of Valois, who takes the title Philip VI. This is the end of the Capet dynasty and beginning of the Valois dynasty.

1333: Stability provided by the Kamakura shogun *bakufu* breaks down. Emperor Go-Daigo declares the end of the Hōjō shogunate, and the Hōjō shogun commits suicide. This marks the end of the Kamakura era and the beginning of the Kenmu Restoration.

1334: Conclave of Cardinals. Election of Pope Benedict XII.

1336: India suffers from drought and famine. The Sultan of Delhi does not assist his subjects, and discontent gives rise to rebellion. Some Hindus proclaim independence from Delhi rule. A new Hindu kingdom, dominated by Telugu-speaking aristocrats, arises – Vijāyanagar – named for its capital. In Japan, the Kenmu Restoration collapses. Ashikaga Takauji leads the military class against the Emperor Go-Daigo. They capture the imperial city, Kyoto. Ashikaga Takauji names himself the new shogun.

1338: Philip VI of France intervenes in a dispute in Flanders where Edward III of England owns property. Edward retaliates by declaring he is King of France – by right of birth and family connections. War between England and France ensues.

1339: Bengal declares independence from Delhi. Malik Haji Ilyas emerges victorious and assumes the title of Sultan Shams-ud-din. The mass of Bengal's population converts to Islam. Sufism spreads through Bengal lower classes.

1340: The Tatars are ravaged by the bubonic plague. The disease is passed to Genoese merchants returning from China.

1342: Conclave of Cardinals. Election of Pope Clement VI.

AD 1344 - Invasion

These children are not the enemy, your Eminence. We found them locked in the warded chamber, trapped there as a sacrifice to what lies beyond these rifts.

They are an unusual pair. Twins – identical in most things apart from their gift. One is dangerously powerful, the other, perceptive. Between them they excel in both arts. With no training, the perceptive one, Galina, has constructed a resonating tool. In her own way she too is dangerous, but what makes them both unique to us is the bond they have, the hidden magic of twins that enables them to combine their talents.

It is possible whoever placed them in the warded chamber knew this and attempted to use their skills to repair the worsening damage we have seen. But whilst talented, these sisters are unskilled and inexperienced, lacking anything but the most rudimentary understanding of what gifts they have and what these gifts mean.

Your Eminence, I request your dispensation to train them. I understand the misgivings of others, but we lack options. Your intercession holds weight amongst the European councils. You will be listened to, over and above the refutations of our Avignon brethren.

Time is a matter in all things. The predictions of scholars suggest six seals will open, just as the good book indicates. As you know, the locations of these seals could be anywhere across our lands or the lands of others. To monitor this requires the admission of responsibility from the Holy See, which we know will not be forthcoming.

We know not what order these seals will break and without unity of purpose, cannot act without incurring curiosity and questions over our actions.

The seventh seal has yet to be determined.

If there is a Creator out there in the darkness, then it is through their providence we have been granted these children. They may yet be our salvation.

Eleanor.

Chapter 15: Contentious Council

The light of the transportation spell faded and Hino blinked, adjusting his eyes to the twilight. The circle of Giant Dancers loomed behind him and behind all the other delegations invited to the meeting.

The Grand Conclave of Orders – a gathering of wizards and magical scholars from all over the world, the leaders of every organisation commanded nations, religions and vast territories.

In the first days, before Hino's time, the conclave met frequently, but was only attended by the most powerful of the old blood. Over time, those with lesser talents were accepted as some orders became larger and political power gained more status than skill with magic. Now, the scholars dominated. Their gifts with the making of portals, staves and all manner of other devices had become essential to every wizard. The religious structures that populated countries and continents were designed and administrated by those who could not use magic themselves.

Hino wore the formal mask and robes of an anonymous wizard escort. No staffs or other talismans were permitted. Next to him stood Lady Eleanor, similarly attired and in front of them, their charge.

Cardinal Giovanni Colonna.

The red robed priest strode forward to stand in the second circle. He was not a voice in this meeting, only the Pope's representative would be permitted to speak for their faith.

Hino was more concerned about revealing himself to the other attendants. On the other side, Ashikaga Takauji took his place as the voice of Japan, the position Hino once held. The Kyoto shogun was a powerful rival to the late Emperor Go-Daigo's son in a building civil war, but the Conclave did not recognise such disputes. Not far from him was the Emperor's loyal councillor, someone else Hino did not want to be discovered by.

His own son.

Hino Kunimitsu had become a competent wizard in his own right and now held position in the second circle. Like Colonna he was not permitted to speak. Kunimitsu's eyes roamed the faces of the attendants, making his father's heart swell with pride, but Hino could not reveal himself, if he did, he would break the protocols of the meeting.

There were more important matters to discuss.

"The gathering will come to order," said an old man, walking into the centre of the ring, his voice soft, but carrying to everyone present. His was the mysterious, Vyasa, older than anyone and

rumoured to be eternal, having lived centuries. He was never seen outside of the Conclave. A long white beard ran down to his ankles. He wore loose trousers and strings of beads, the dark skin of his neck and shoulders exposed to the cold English night, but it did not trouble him.

Hushed whispers ceased, all eyes turned inwards as ritual demanded. "The orders come here under the auspice of peace," Vyasa said. "All assembled will respect this, on pain of exile."

The silence indicated assent and Hino noted a thin smile on the lips of the old wizard.

"The Conclave is called to discuss the matter of the seals. The papacy is to answer the continuing rumours of a portal breach beneath the seat of your voice." He turned to the red robed cardinal representing the Pope – Cardinal Bernard De La Tour, only two years in office and junior to Cardinal Colonna; his presence, a clear indication of political preference.

De La Tour stepped forwards. "His Eminence agrees with his predecessor; the heresy of the Temple concluded long ago. Talk of continued tumult in our lands is false."

Hino looked around, thankful his expression could not be seen beneath his mask. Exclamation was not permitted in the Conclave and only the representatives were allowed to speak. Most had hoped Clement VI would abandon the denials of the previous pope, Benedict XII, but it seemed they were wrong.

Hino knew Lady Eleanor would be seething beneath her mask. Few witnesses to the ritual at Avignon remained, but she was one and had evaded several assassination attempts. He knew her account of events and recognised the similarities in what they had seen since.

"Emissaries sent by your order attended a disturbance in the abandoned council city of Isoloha, in the ocean depths," Ashikaga Takauji remarked.

"If they did, there was no sanction," De La Tour replied, his eyes fixed on Colonna in an accusatory stare.

"But you accept the correlation drawn in their report to this assembly?"

"We do not, we challenge it." De La Tour had warmed to his argument now and remained resolute in the face of compromise. "Whatever occurs beneath the waves is unconnected to our past."

"What about the trajectory evidence?" A woman spoke up. She wore furs and was shorter than those around her. Hino remembered her name – Aippaq – a witch from the furthest north.

"Such supposition is not evidence," De La Tour replied, "only supposition."

Aippaq sighed and glared at Vyasa who bowed slightly to her before speaking. "This answer is heard. Without concert, we cannot act."

"The intervention in Isoloha should be welcomed," a man with long straight grey hair said. He was known as Great Shaman and came from the vast plains of the North West. "Without it, we might not be alert to the danger."

"What of the absences at our council?" Aippaq asked. "What of the gathering portents of war, plague, starvation and death? Are we to do nothing about these?"

"Such issues are for each domain," De La Tour said. "I do not seek to tell you how to lead your people, nor does my master ask advice on his own affairs."

"But absences are not an internal issue!"

"Then why should we be involved?" De La Tour asked. "Our purpose is to share knowledge, not to intervene!"

"If what we face is a coming doom, it will affect us all."

"Emissaries sent to these silent kingdoms without invitation will be seen as hostile acts." De La Tour shrugged. "Perhaps they do not wish to attend? There is no agreement amongst us for action, until there is, such talk is ill advised."

Aippaq appeared frustrated, but little could be done to counter De La Tour's answers. Hino glanced around the circle. None of the other voices seemed inclined to comment. If they did, they risked the ire of the papacy – a strong political power amidst the gathering, and no-one else would breach the protocols of the Conclave. Hino gazed at their most obvious adversary – the Hadith of the desert kingdoms, but they were a small delegation and rarely spoke, making no motion to do so now.

"What if representatives from the orders gathered here were to investigate?" Takhauji suggested. "There are many places in this world where our reach is weak."

"We would not countenance an unauthorised presence in our domains," De La Tour warned.

"But we are not speaking of the lands you claim," Takhauji asserted. "You cannot assert dominion over the unknown. Nor can you restrict the rights of any with the gift to use portals that exist in these other places." He raised his voice. "I move that the Conclave requests aid in investigating further disturbances similar to that seen at Isoloha."

"Seconded," Aippaq said immediately.

Vyasa turned to each representative in turn, bowing in response to every gesture. A procession of nods greeted the request. Vyasa reached De La Tour last. The cardinal flinched under his gaze, glancing left and right as if trying to find support, but no-one met his eye. Finally, he shrugged.

“There is no objection,” Vyasa proclaimed. “The move is passed.”

Beneath his mask, Hino smiled. Takhauji could not be trusted and would have his own reasons for proposing such an act, but the agreement would help Colonna and their cause.

“We shall recess,” Vyasa announced and the whispers started once more. Hino kept silent. A small concession had been won. But whoever opposed the Conclave had nothing to fear as yet.

The bells of Stensnes’ church rang out across the quiet ice.

Brynfrid glanced up from where she chopped wood. She’d never set foot in the place, but the time for worship was long past. Otherwise, the bells would only sound as a warning. *Warning from what?* She shaded her eyes and scanned the horizon, seeing nothing.

The chimes ended, then a man screamed and stumbled out of the church; the priest, his cassock torn, his chest bloodied. He collapsed in the snow. After him came a man in a hood and a tattered cloak, his hand outstretched. Brynfrid didn’t recognise him. She shouted and ran towards the building, noting two men ahead of her doing the same. As they got close, the arched doors burst wide and a creature the size of a large wolf leapt out, grabbing one of the men. It had three heads, and bore him to the ground. The other swung a sword at the stranger who dodged aside and pressed his palm to his assailant’s chest. A second scream echoed into the sky and the man collapsed.

Brynfrid reached the fight and spat out words of power just as her grandfather had taught her. The wolf-like creature vanished, but its prey remained, bleeding bright red into the white snow. “Who are you?” Brynfrid rasped at the strange man, brandishing her axe and getting a good look at the wrinkled face under his hood. The man smiled in return.

“To this place, I am death,” he replied.

A growling came from inside. Brynfrid snuck a quick glimpse, taking her eyes from the man for a moment and saw shapes moving in the shadows. “I do not fear death,” she said, but took a step

back. She could feel the power this man wielded, it outstripped her own. She remembered where she had left her staff, back in the house. "We are not your enemies."

"I agree," the stranger said. "This would be so much easier if you were."

He advanced towards her.

Chapter 16: The Provenance of Sons

With all matters discussed and concluded, the gathering of the gifted broke up.

Hino Kunimitsu watched them go. He maintained an impassive expression – right hand on staff, left by his side – but assessed each in turn. The plethora of humanity’s magicians, a sight to marvel and something he had never seen before. Skin, eyes, hair, height, breadth and more; a range of colours, some of which he had not believed possible. Masks covered many, but he caught glimpses of faces and noted the whispered conversations after the forum. It was plain there were numerous concerns with what had been said and agreed.

Ashikaga Takauji and his retinue remained apart. A solid group who refused speech, referring people to their shogun, who stared ahead, ignoring attempts to engage him. Their unity reflected Takauji’s reputation. He demanded respect and obedience from those he trusted, rewarding them in equal measure.

He was also Kunimitsu’s political opponent.

Eleven years ago, Emperor Go-Daigo had rewarded Takauji’s soldiers for their part in the Genkō War. Takauji had betrayed the Hōjō clan shogunate and fought for the Emperor. He accepted his gifts with courtesy and hidden purpose. Three years later, he captured Kyoto for himself and raised his flag for the northern pretender, Kōmyō. Three years after that, Go-Daigo had died peacefully.

Like his father before him, Kunimitsu remained loyal to the southern court and Go-Daigo’s son, Go-Murakami. Takauji supported Kōmyō in name, but most acknowledged Takauji as the real lord of the north.

Portals flared as wizards, attendants and officials departed. Kunimitsu stayed where he was, watching Takauji. Eventually, even Vyasa, the eternal mediator, gathered himself to leave.

Kunimitsu glanced at his own companions. Two gifted bushi stood either side of him, their masks carefully drawn to hide their identities. Behind them sat Toki, the court scribe, who continued to embellish his scripture of the august meeting. Four to Takauji’s eight.

Kunimitsu knew the truce of the Conclave would be maintained so long as Vyasa was present. After he left, the matter became unclear. Honour suggested no violence would occur, but if there were no witnesses and no remains, a death might be explained as a portal accident. Asking the old man to remain was an imposition that would betray weakness and division amongst the kingdom’s representatives. *Perhaps I should have left already*, he thought. *But then I would have wasted this opportunity.*

Vyasa inclined his head to them both, moved towards one of the stone arches and, with a flash, disappeared.

“Master Kumawaka.”

Kunimitsu gazed at Takauji, careful to betray no reaction, but inclined his head in respect. “*Chinjufu-shōgun*, no-one has called me that since I was a child.”

“Nevertheless, your legend precedes you – the boy and his vengeance upon the traitor monks.” Takauji said. “It is a shame we have not had a moment to talk like this before.”

“A matter I regret also.”

“I am sure.”

A faint breeze stirred the grassland around them. Beneath his robes, Kunimitsu shivered, but kept himself outwardly calm. “The Emperor has many enemies,” he said.

Takauji nodded. “Indeed. Those we must be vigilant against. All this talk of a coming doom is a matter for *gaijin*. My proposal asserts the Emperor’s righteous concern, but if these rebels exist, then we must expect them to already dwell in our lands and it is those we must seek out.”

“I concur, *Chinjufu-shōgun*.”

“The righteous Cardinal already resents what has been agreed,” Takauji went on, “but he cannot risk being uninvolved. He will send emissaries to us. We shall be ready for them.”

Kunimitsu nodded. “What of us?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“We stand in a unique position,” Kunimitsu explained. “We are under the truce of this conclave and outside the Emperor’s lands. Many of the oaths that bind us both within our own domain do not apply.”

Takauji frowned as he considered the words, but then he smiled broadly. “I had thought your great moment already passed when you took your justice at Sadogashima. Now I see there is more to you than the silent blade.”

Kunimitsu bowed. “You honour me.”

“What do you propose?”

“Send away your attendants and I shall send away mine. Then we might speak apart from our burdens and rank, at least for a short while.”

Takauji nodded. "Yes, for a short while. Very well it will be as you suggest."

"Thank you, *chinjufu-shōgun*."

The town of Sredets lay to the south of Vidin. A strange place on the intersection of the different principalities, full of merchants still coming to terms with their new freedom under the rule of Tsar Ivan Alexander. It was smaller than Vidin, but fast becoming an important trade centre.

For Piers Gaveston, life in Sredets was the same as Vidin, where he'd been acquired. After the altercation with Rag and his strange father he had remained their captive. He didn't know how long it had been. The manor house they lived in now, accommodated many people 'collected' by the pair.

I deserve this fate.

Piers considered running away many times, but never attempted it. Self-pity and shame kept him where he was. What good could he do otherwise? He accepted confinement. Others who'd played the dangerous games of court had been shut up in towers and monasteries, or executed in grisly rituals. To be reduced to a monotonous existence as the slave of another paled by comparison. Those born to the dirt, scratched out lives with their hands and teeth, with no hope of betterment in their mortal years. At least fate had given him a chance and memory of privilege. He didn't warrant another.

I failed all those I tried to help.

He drank wine and the memories blurred. Some days, he was the one slaying the heathens and opening de Molay's portal, or murdering Aymer de Valence and Jacques Renarre.

There was a fog about his mind, one that he could not shake off. It numbed him and made him feel remote from himself. Perhaps this was the reverie that others spoke of during his *caduceus* training? He was sure it wasn't. God had abandoned him, there was no God, no Gods, no enlightenment and transition to a higher self. There was only this dark existence.

And blood.

His imprisonment wasn't without benefit. By day, the dusty rooms were all but abandoned. The mark of plague kept away visitors and he was free to roam the halls as he wished, unless called to

tutor his student. The empty spaces became a familiar refuge for his mind. The shapes and contours of the walls a reassurance of existence. The one thing he could not do was leave the grounds.

Lessons with the boy – now a young man – were a challenge. Rag grew up slowly, after two decades he was still mistaken for a child at times. Were it not for regular, showy demonstrations of his power, Piers might have believed him completely ungifted. He had no aptitude for letters or runes and soon became impatient, sullen and distracted. But twenty years of continual study gradually refined his gift. The magic did not come quickly to him, but he made slow progress.

Piers knew the price of failure, of becoming no longer useful to the boy and his father. Each night he was reminded of it.

Rag's ghoulish companions went about their own business, rarely sharing anything with him. Over the years, faces changed as people lost their usefulness. More always appeared; vagabonds acquired from the streets or children taken from homes. They burned the furnishings to keep warm and squabbled amongst themselves, but once they arrived no-one left.

The father saw to that.

In the daylight hours, he slept somewhere beneath the house. At night, he would frequent the windowless chambers under the ground floor and summon the house guests to him one by one. Piers would be last and would descend into a pitch-black room. The conversation would always be the same.

"How is my son?"

"Learning, as always."

Piers remembered each meeting. Clawed hands would grip his, teeth would brush against his wrist then bite down. They were sharp, plainly grown or filed that way. He could always feel his blood being drawn out and drank and steadied himself against the dizziness that followed. Afterwards, the wipe of a long, wet tongue would staunch the wound and when he returned to the light, he found no trace of injury.

Afterwards, he would stumble back to the upper floors and sleep in the room he had been given, knowing he would not be disturbed. Each morning someone would be missing. Some days, Piers' found himself praying he would be the one to vanish. At least that would bring about an end.

No-one spoke of those who had disappeared. Instead, the other guests huddled closer around their fires and Piers went back to teaching the boy.

Only today he couldn't find him.

He walked from his room as usual and through the ransacked halls towards the west wing. It was bitterly cold, but he hardly felt that. A group of people squatted around a makeshift fire in hall corner as they always did. They ignored him, apart from one man who caught his eye. He was painfully thin and dark skinned, like a Moor. Piers flinched from that stare and felt the man's eyes bore into his back as he hurried away to find Rag.

The school room had once been a family chapel. The wooden chairs had disappeared, broken up as firewood. The stone sides under the windows were scrawled on with charcoal sticks, where Rag practised the symbols Piers tried to show him, but otherwise the room was empty.

The lessons had become a brightness in Piers' life. He knew his teaching the boy was forbidden and the Church would execute him for it, but then they had so many reasons to order his death and he had few left to counter them. When the time came, he could not see himself resisting. For now, talking and playing with magic in small ways was a pleasure. He took pains to withhold anything that might be dangerous, training Rag in parlour tricks that could amuse and entertain, but not much else.

Where are you boy? Piers wondered.

A scratching noise at the door made him look up. A short figure stood staring into the room, its face human-like, but not human. Two tiny eyes above a snout nose and a mouth full of canine teeth. Thin arms and legs stuck out of ragged clothes tied at the waste by a length of stained rope.

Piers had seen such a creature before, but only in a book, as a child, while being instructed in Avignon. A *gobelin* – one of the world's ancient monsters, summoned by the earliest wizards to bring mischief to their enemies. It was possible this was a remnant of that past; a lonely survivor, drawn to the house by the smell of magic or brought here by someone with the old blood.

But it wasn't likely.

Piers bit his lip. *What have I done?* The Church and other orders forbade a summoning like this. No place existed for gobelins amongst the heavens of the creator god. They were unpredictable and cruel. A wizard who called one would be punished. He raised his hand towards the creature and wracked his clouded mind for a spell to drive it away.

But then Rag appeared behind it smiling. "Do you like my new friend?" he said and laughed.

Piers lowered his hands and let the magic ebb away. "I did not teach you this," he said, half trying to convince himself.

Rag shrugged. "No, but we spoke of the eagle and the lion. I tried those and nothing happened. Then I did something different and he appeared." He laughed again. "What shall we call him?"

Piers kept his eyes on the goblin. "He already has a name. I told you before, everything has a name."

"Yes, but he can't talk and tell us," Rag replied, evidently pleased with himself. "He's good at hiding and stealing things. I thought we might send him into the city tonight."

"Your father should be told."

Rag gave him a defiant smile. "There's a lot I don't tell father about," he said. "You need to decide whether you're going to tell him."

He walked away and the goblin followed, leaving Piers by the window.

When the last of his attendants had left, Takauji gestured to one of the great stones on its side. "Come, let us sit."

Kunimitsu approached him and dropped to his knees on the ground. It was a gesture designed to convey respect, accepting they were not equals. Takauji seemed to appreciate it and seated himself on the fallen rock as a warrior might, in an open stance, ready to rise at any moment. His gaze took in Kunimitsu's attire and he frowned.

"I note you do not wear a weapon. What became of your family *tachi*?"

"It was lost to me on Sado Island," Kunimitsu replied. "The monks never returned it."

"A final dishonour to you and your father."

"Indeed."

"We are a pair you and I," Takauji said. "Each of us has made decisions of our own interest which some may see as disloyal."

Kunimitsu shrugged. "My concern is with what you said. How troublemakers prevent peace in our land. The portents of doom are talked about everywhere. While we remain divided, we are ripe to those who would exploit us."

"You are full-blood are you not? A wielder of the powers?"

"Yes I am."

"My mother was like you. The gift did not manifest in me. My way is earned through sweat and work, but I know of the paths – the ways your people gain sustenance from the devotion of others. I know how your legend feeds you."

Kunimitsu flinched. "The story is not of my doing."

Takauji leaned forward. "No indeed, but you profit from it. You sup from the teat so that you might live like these *gaijin* cardinals and kings." He laughed, a bitter sound. "You will outlast us all, *Master Kumawaka!*"

A red flush crept across Kunimitsu's face. "I did not ask for this conversation so that you might insult me."

"No? Then why did you ask for it?"

"Give up your claims. Renounce your northern pretence and return to the Emperor's grace, he will reward you."

"I offer you the same. Abandon the son of the traitor and accept out legitimate ascension."

"I cannot."

"Then you have my answer as well."

Kunimitsu sighed. "Surely you see how we are manipulated? Hundreds will die in the name of each court if we do not prevent it. Others profit from our conflict, not us."

"Perhaps your magic grants you a second sight, but I will not trust it. My tail has turned enough. I placed my faith in your master's predecessor and he treated me with contempt. I will not give such a pledge again." Takauji stood up. "Go find these silent wizards you speak of who stir up trouble and suck the bones of our kingdom, just as you did when your father was condemned. They are the legacy of your gift, not mine!"

Kunimitsu swallowed a bitter retort. "This conversation is over then?"

Takauji strode to one of the stone arches. By some unseen artifice, the magical sheen of a portal appeared in the air before him. "We never spoke," he said. "We never met."

Chapter 17: The Abyss

A vast flat landscape under a cloudless sky; the air stirred by a restless unnatural breeze, bringing up dust to coat the clothes and mouths of travellers.

And travellers there were – seven figures, bent under the weight of their burdens, following an ancient track into the featureless expanse. To the eagle, a journey without an obvious goal, unless to die and be forgotten.

In the centre of the column, Galina stumbled and cursed. This land was not meant for habitation. The strap of her pack rubbed her shoulder as she walked. Dust caked her face and got in her eyes. She drew up the hood of her cloak and kept her mouth covered with cloth, yet still her throat complained with each breath and step. It would be a while until they stopped, but she was already wishing away the time.

Ahead, she saw the broad back of her companion. Ibrox moved along as if nothing troubled him. Galina had never met a man like him. Tall, muscular, and with darker skin than she'd ever seen, his white-teethed smile was infectious and a welcome comfort at their brief stops.

Next in line would be Katya and in front of her, Lady Eleanor, placed in charge of their mission. She followed their bearded guide, Elbo Smogg.

At the back came Hino, former *dainagon* to the Emperor of Japan and Magno, a Genoese soldier. Physically they were as different as possible for two men to be, but the cultured Japanese counsellor and the Mediterranean military man had become fast friends in the last two weeks, a bond of mutual respect.

Over the years since Galina's rescue, Hino had earned her trust. He was a wise soul and honourable to a fault. At first, she'd found his quiet ways intimidating, believing that he secretly judged her progress under Lady Eleanor's patronage, but she'd come to realise he was as nervous as she, coming to live in an unfamiliar land full of strange customs and rituals. When he visited her, she welcomed the company of a kindred soul.

Magno she did not know and had only met on this journey. Genoa was a port city a few days from Rome. The captain was a half-blood, like her, and incapable of much magic, but with a mind for devices and a sailor's dexterous fingers. He had light brown hair and eyes and walked oddly, with a rolling gait, as if he were permanently aboard ship. There was a sadness to him at times. Galina wasn't sure why.

No portals would short cut this journey, so they all learned to rely on each other, something Galina still found uncomfortable. On cold nights, with no fire for fear of being seen on the wide open plain, the only warmth would be from other sleepers. She lay awake then, conscious of the people pressed against her, remembering the village teachings about touch as a child. She knew differently now, but that didn't change the instinct and didn't help her rest.

Ahead, someone whistled and she glanced up. Through the dust she saw three figures standing together. Had time passed so quickly? Ibrox moved to join them and she followed.

"We're here," said Smogg. His unkempt beard jutted out from beneath his hood. He wore the same church cloak as all of them, but underneath was a stained tabard and mismatched boots. To Galina, he was the strangest of them all and most aloof. She couldn't tell where he came from and he never spoke of it, preferring to tell stories of his journeys around their evening fire. These surroundings suited his dishevelled appearance, rendering them all equally dirty and dishevelled. "Forty yards further on would be the boundary the last time I was here, but I judge less now, perhaps fifteen steps or so, by the ground."

Smogg tapped his staff into the mud and Galina glanced down. Interlaced fissures ran everywhere underfoot, widening in the direction Smogg indicated.

"Do we go now?" Katya asked.

"We'll wait for sundown," Eleanor said. "Let's make camp here. It'll lighten our burdens for the descent and mean we have something to come back to."

"Be better to get off this plain, highness," Magno said as he joined them, his eyes scanning the horizon. "We're easy to spot."

Smogg grunted. "We've been followed for two days. If they want us now, they'd be here. They'll hold off till we're done and likely want what we learn."

Magno shrugged and bowed. "As you say," he replied.

They fell to, preparing a place to while away the remaining hours and rest, should they return. At Eleanor's instruction, a full camp was to be laid out. No sense in taking things where they headed, only what was essential. Galina spread her bedroll as she'd done every night on the journey, only this time her hands wouldn't stop trembling.

Twenty years in a monastery in the centre of Rome had changed many things in her life. The monks had been patient with her, they needed to be; she and Katya were the only living souls to have looked into a rift.

After the rescue, Eleanor and Hino had taken them to a small cloister. They'd been given separate rooms and been kept from each other for many days. The questions from strangers were constant, courteous but painstaking. At night, Galina sat by the wall of her room, knowing her sister was the other side doing the same, desperate to touch and feel the closeness they'd always known. She sensed the anger in Katya and feared it would explode.

But Eleanor had returned and summoned them both to a meeting hall where she announced they would be trained.

At first, Galina resisted the idea. She still clung to the faith of her far absent people and the word of the elders. Katya had been taken away again, to learn different lessons. The tenets of the stone singers remained strange to those she was raised with. She remembered Faim's words. To him, they were the enemy. She sat and listened to the teachers, but said nothing. Eventually Lady Eleanor met with her about it. "Why will you not accept instruction?" she had asked.

"You cannot change who I am," Galina replied.

Eleanor smiled at that. "Do my instructors have keys to enter your head?"

"No."

"Then learn from them and believe as you wish," she urged. "You will find many who are helped by the Church keep their own counsel."

From then on, the classes became easier to digest. Once they confirmed her lack of ability with spells, they brought her objects, liquids and powders. Gradually, she began to understand her talent and found peers like her, who could see the potential of things. She learned the word *alchemy* and discovered there were many different disciplines. Some alchemists were skilled in making portals, some brewed potions and others made devices. "It is the alchemy that advances our understanding of magic," Eleanor told her. "Without it, we would remain creatures of instinct alone, unable to refine or improve."

But whilst the lessons improved her understanding, they didn't help with controlling her own gift. It defied prediction, she could see the power in items, but had little control over what she made from them or how they might go together. Given a pile of resonant objects, other practitioners could craft tools to design and purpose, but she could not and she was slower than them, taking hours and days to work through the tasks she was set.

"Patience," Eleanor had said. "Your blood grants you a life far beyond that of mortals. Understanding of your magic can come quickly or slowly. The greatest of us are still learning what we can do. Give it time."

Only now, there was no more time and they were here, in this strange land. She had been brought along because she had seen the other side.

And here, she might have the chance to do so again.

The sun hugged the hilltops in the west. As the others pitched tents to be used on their return, Galina went back over what she'd experienced before. She remembered the white eyes of the creature before it burned and the ashes in her hand. Ever since when she'd washed and scrubbed her palms they never managed to feel clean.

She thought about her village again and dreamed about her father dying four years ago. She'd had visions of his end prior to that. He'd lived a long and happy life and she knew he was at peace when he passed.

"What can we expect?" Eleanor asked Smogg.

The little man shrugged. "As you know, the first rift in Avignon sucked up everything around it. The warding runes contain the breach within the room. We cannot access the chamber anymore, but must guess it remains the same. The second rift in the Tarkian temple was similarly contained. With this one... well, there's nothing here and we couldn't prepare."

"If it continues to rage, surely, all of this island would have been consumed," Hino said. "If we are as close as you say, we would sense it."

Smogg shrugged. "This place was once fertile farmland. When I was last here, I saw the rift consume earth, rock and dirt, it turned and twisted like a whirlpool, eating everything."

"There's not much we can do to prevent it," Ibrox said.

"We all knew that when we agreed to come," Eleanor replied, but Galina caught a sidelong glance aimed at her and blushed.

"I'm not... I mean, I don't..."

Eleanor cut her off with a wave of her hand. "Let's get moving."

They stood and arranged themselves. As Galina fumbled with her cloak, Katya took her hand and squeezed it – a small gesture, but one that lightened her worry. She tried to smile in response, but her sister slipped away to a place beside Eleanor.

They walked as a group in the failing light. Magno gave out steel lantern boxes, lighting the candles inside. Galina held hers as high as she could, keeping her eyes on the cracks in the earth. They widened gradually, until the ground fell away in front of her and she stopped.

On the edge of a pit.

Shadows swathed the sheer cliffs below, but the depths glimmered with an eerie blue light. She recognised it, remembering the rift in the ruined city ritual chamber again.

"Must be four hundred feet or more to the bottom," Smogg said.

Magno pointed. "There's a path down, cut into the rock."

Smogg grunted. "Wasn't there last time, someone's been here before us, and recently, otherwise it'd already be gone."

"We'll use it," Eleanor decided. "Single file, we go slowly and carefully. Keep ropes handy in case we need them."

They arranged themselves as before, Smogg in front, probing the rocks with his staff as Eleanor held her lantern over them both. "As Magno said, this has been carved out," he said. "It must have taken an incredible amount of power, or people."

Ibrox nodded. "No rogue wizard is capable of this," he said. "Whoever came here has many friends, or slaves."

"A member of the council perhaps?" Magno suggested.

"We worry about that another day," Eleanor said. "At present, we mind the here and now."

Slowly, they made the descent. Galina kept her eyes on the rock side. The stone was pitted and scarred, the layers of mud and clay baked hard, as if subject to heat and dryness. No plants grew here, no grass or moss that she might have seen on a natural cliff. The blue glow got brighter as they went further down, flickering shadows along the hewn wall. A hand touched hers and she turned. Ibrox smiled and passed her a rope. Behind him, Magno secured the end to the top of the face with a stake. Galina tied herself on and hurried down the track. "Hino?" she called. The Japanese man turned and accepted the line, doing the same and passing it on.

When they were all attached, they continued.

At halfway, Galina risked a peek over the edge. Flickers of blue in the gloom, a strange lambent glow, like nothing she'd ever seen. It moved like thick soup or turning mud under a plough in the field, seething amidst the darkness. She began to feel warm, despite the shrinking sunlight from above. The familiarly prickling sensation along her arms confirmed the presence of magic. She wondered why they weren't already dead.

"There's a door down here!" Smogg called back.

The rope went slack as the group hastened to join him. After a steep slope, Galina found herself on a wide ledge in front of the entrance Smogg had mentioned. Two doors, half circles, cut into the rock face and carved with an unfamiliar symbol. "What does it mean?" she whispered.

"It means someone knew what would happen here after all," Eleanor muttered. She stared upwards and Galina followed her gaze. The sky had darkened and the glimmer of torches on the ridge was unmistakable. "We go through or we go down," she said. "Thoughts?"

"Down," Hino replied. "That's why we came."

Eleanor nodded. "Then no sense in waiting."

They moved on.

...We came upon the settlement late in the day, although time does not matter out here so much. The sun remained high throughout our time, banishing sleep, though any rest would have been difficult in this place.

Vestribyggð looked as if it were awaiting its people. Dinner remains on tables, livestock left grazing in pens and fields, but not a soul in a bed or about a house. The streets empty, all folk gone as if erased from the world.

We explored further, sailing upstream to the Stensnes' seat. Here we learned the cause for silence. The great church lay in ruins, broken in the long past. Fresh gravestones we found in the yard, though the soil hard and untended.

As you know, this land named green by Eiríkr hinn rauð is no garden as he claimed, yet the cold here at Vestribyggð could not be kept from the breast. We burned wood and oil, but still the chill held us. The silence stilled tongues and made us weak with caution. We sensed eyes out there in the quiet. Perhaps it was the Thule folk? But those attuned to such things thought not and spoke of Brynfrid Vigdís' tale all those years before, claiming the rise of an old god in the ice.

We remained for a week and more, making an inventory of what was left. I reminded all those whispering heresy of their duties to our church and state.

All items we could take aboard we took, to assuage the debts of tithe and tax.

I would caution any seeking to return to Vestribyggð. A doom besets that place. Anyone wanting our Lord's grace in the afterlife should avoid those becalmed ruins...

Ivar Bårdssön – Letters to the Bishop of Bergen (AD 1344).

Chapter 18: The Third Seal

As they neared the bottom, the rock wall became smoother and the ledge narrowed. Fifty feet from the ground, Katya found herself edging along on her toes. Ahead, Elbo Smogg asked them to stop, unhooked his tether and began mumbling unfamiliar words.

“No!” Galina shouted. “Don’t cast any magic here!”

Smogg stopped immediately and peered up at her. “You might be right,” he admitted gruffly. “My thanks, young lady.”

He struggled onwards, eventually, reaching the bottom without incident and turned to help Lady Eleanor down. Katya followed, wondering what Smogg had been about to cast.

During the journey, she'd marvelled at the ease with which the different wizards, Eleanor, Smogg, Ibrox and Hino, handled their magic. Her own power remained a mystery to her, a flood gate which she continually fought to control. Her lessons with the priests had not gone well, even after she'd overcome her distrust of them. They explained techniques by which she could access her gift and taught her the ways in which other gifted students had profited from them. She had some success, but none of the methods worked consistently.

The lists of spells were interesting and she'd noted how certain expressions were mentioned but not explained. Very few creatures could be summoned, according to the books and there was no mention of *juje* or anything like him in those scripts, but when she read the expanded histories, there were references to other folk who were strangely inhuman, but no explanations of where they came from or how to call them, only a caution that they were not to be trusted.

The authoritative tone of the writing was occasionally difficult to reconcile with the conciliatory words of her occasional mentor, Rani Padmini. They'd been introduced to one another by Hino and quickly come to recognise the wilful nature they shared. Rani did not accept the same strictures as the Roman instructors, but advised Katya to learn all she could. In the short time they spent together, Rani would talk of the power as if it were a living thing in itself. There was something special about her too, a weight to her presence which drew the eye. When Katya asked Hino about this, he smiled and explained how Rani had begun a change that only the most powerful of wizards ever experienced – a process that would end in her transcendence to become an ‘eternal’.

“She will live forever then?”

“I do not know.”

At night, Katya wondered about that. She remembered the villagers and her family. At times, she could still sense them, but the connection was weak now and grew weaker with each passing day. She thought about returning to the village and suggested this to Hino, but he shook his head.

“Your old life is gone. You must find a new purpose in what we do. In time, you will discover a place that enriches you just as your home once did. Perhaps it will come from here, or a land somewhere else. You should not be restricted by what you were.”

She liked his words; they fired her imagination, but seemed at odds with the books and the quiet instructors. Occasionally, she caught frowns of disapproval and saw them exchange looks that indicated their opinion. To them she remained a heretic, a Bogomil of the heathen past. It did not matter that they shared her belief in a heaven and a creator. She did not believe their way and perhaps, she never would.

Her foot slipped on the rock, making her curse and focus on the here and now. It was difficult to breathe, the air tasted cloying and thick. The pulsing blue light that came from the earth invoked a matching throbbing sensation in her head. Behind her, the others managed the last few steps and spread out to examine their surroundings. There were wide fissures and seething azure liquid ran inside the cracks.

“What is that?” Katya asked, pointing at it.

Smogg walked cautiously towards a large tear and knelt. “It’s everywhere,” he said, “as if everything beneath us is full of it.”

Galina stumbled and fell to her knees. Katya went to her immediately. Her sister’s eyes were unfocused and staring wildly. “Can’t you see them?” she said, her voice cracking. “They’re all around us.”

“I see nothing,” Hino replied, laying a hand on her shoulder. “What do you see?”

“Fragments, like before,” Galina said. She shook off his hand, her eyes roaming the space. “Visions of pasts and futures, people who can’t exist, mustn’t exist!” She wiped drool from her mouth and tears from her eyes.

Cries from above distracted them all. Katya watched the tether line tumble from the rock wall. Then heard clattering echoes as the rest of their camp items were thrown down towards them. “They’ve found us,” she said. “We can’t go back.”

“They must be terrified,” Ibrox said. “Such a change to their lands in only a few days. They must blame us.”

"We must do something about this!" Magno urged, gesturing at the ground.

"What can we do?" Smogg asked, continuing to explore. "The girl is the most sensitive amongst us and warned me about using magic. The wardings in place when the other seals broke took years to construct. Here we have nothing and anything we start could trigger a further event."

"Understanding comes before solutions," Eleanor said. She knelt beside Galina. "We cannot sense what you can, so you must guide us and help us to understand."

Galina nodded, but her eyes were wild and wide.

Katya turned away, suppressing the flicker of jealousy. Smogg had almost reached the centre of the space and was poking things with his staff. "There's footprints," he said, pointing at the rock. "They start here and head towards the walls."

"What kind of footprints?"

"Many kinds," Smogg replied. "I see paw prints, claw marks, human feet, hooves, all sorts... I don't understand." He stared up at the walls again. "Where did they all go?"

"If this hole expanded as you say, they may be old," Katya said.

Smogg snorted and stood up. "I know my business. These are fresh tracks, made three days ago at most."

"The only place they could have gone would be that door," Ibrox said.

As he spoke, the ground underneath them shook. Smogg stumbled and fell over. Katya ran to the ledge. "We need to go back up!" she urged. "We can't stay here!"

"Indeed," Eleanor said. "Magno?"

The Genoese soldier nodded and retrieved the rope from where it lay. He wrapped it around his wrist, removed his boots and swarmed up the stone, finding invisible handholds. He reached narrow path, running up and along, making the climb to the door in seconds. He re-secured the rope by hammering a stake into the wall, tested it and called down. "Up quickly!" he urged.

Katya grabbed her sister, wound the line around her waist and pushed her to the thin lip of rock they'd come down. "Galina, you must climb," she whispered.

Galina's eyes refocused and she nodded. With Magno anchoring the other end she began to make her way up.

Hino moved to the edge and nimbly made his way passed her. A second tremor shook the walls and he slipped, but didn't fall and soon joined Magno at the door ledge, lending a hand. Together, they hauled Galina the last few feet to join them.

"Ibrox, you next," Eleanor ordered. "Hino, take Galina to the door and try to get it open."

With a grunt of effort, Ibrox started up the wall, his heavy frame making the ascent more difficult. Katya glanced back at the centre of the hole. The rock where Smogg had been standing crumbled and slipped away, disappearing into the widening fissures. "Hurry!" she cried.

Smogg nudged her elbow. "Is there really nothing we can do?"

"In the other place, my magic triggered the seal," Katya said, "if you tried a spell now..."

Smogg nodded and pushed past her to the thin ledge. After two steps, he made a grab for a hand hold, but slipped back and nearly fell. "If we stay here much longer—"

"We don't think about that," Eleanor said. "You are next."

"But you should—"

"You will go."

Ibrox reached the others and Smogg started his ascent. Together, Magno and Ibrox hauled him up then dropped the line back down. Another tremor rocked them all and more of the ground fell away. Eleanor handed the rope to Katya. "Now you."

Katya bit her lip and didn't argue. The line went taut and she grasped it, letting herself be dragged up the rock face. From above, she saw Eleanor's plight. The floor of the hole was rapidly turning blue as the unstable stones were absorbed by the restless mass. Soon, she would be forced away from the wall and any chance of being rescued.

We can't lose her.

Katya was some distance up by now, the lip of rock had widened. "Eleanor!" she cried and let go of the rope, scrabbling for handholds and balance. Beside her the line went slack, then tight again. She didn't look down, but concentrated on her own circumstance, shuffling along the narrow ledge as it wound upwards towards the door way and the rest of her companions.

Another tremor – she froze – then another. Her hands began to cramp. The climb down had been easier with the security of people and rope, now it required complete focus. Her heart thumped in her chest as she tried to control her movements. Her foot slipped and she gasped, recovered and then glanced down.

The stone had disappeared entirely, engulfed by seething blue. A few feet above it, Lady Eleanor dangled on the line, climbing as best she could, but relying on Ibrox and Magno pulling her up.

The churning mass captured Katya's gaze. She saw shapes within it, her mind making patterns perhaps? She thought there were people reaching out and felt eyes staring back, hungry eyes, eager to consume what she was, what they all were. This wasn't just about magic, whatever existed down there wanted everything, substance and soul. She was terrified, frozen.

"Katya!"

Her name called out from far away, but then a hand on her wrist. She blinked and looked around. Lady Eleanor was out of sight. Magno had climbed down with a rope around his waist and grabbed her. With impossible strength, he dragged her from the wall and into the crook of his arm. "Hold on to me!" he said urgently and seized the line, coiling it around his hand. "Pull us in!"

They started to move. Katya clung to Magno and he got his feet under him so he could walk the rock. When they got to the ledge, other hands reached out and helped her to safety while he managed the last part alone, collapsing on the stone plateau.

"Thank you," Katya said.

"Thank everyone," said Magno, "when there's more time."

Galina and Hino were by the half-circle doors. Galina stood nearest. Katya followed the others towards them. She couldn't tell what the panels were made of, they looked smooth – unlike any wooden door she'd ever seen – and had no handle. As they got closer, Galina raised her hand and touched her palm to the symbol cut into the centre and the entrance opened.

"Caution my friends," Eleanor warned.

Galina didn't seem to hear, she stepped straight into the new passageway, Hino a step behind her.

"No, wait!"

Smogg was nearest to them both. Hearing Eleanor's call, he ran after them and stood in the entranceway just as another tremor started a cascade of rocks down on them all. Katya rushed towards him, her hands covering her head. She heard someone cry out, the doors were beginning to shut. "Smogg!" she cried.

The strange little man saw the danger and put his hands to the two half-circles, but he couldn't hold them back. He tried to wedge them with his staff, but couldn't brace it. "Hurry!" he yelled.

Abandoning caution, Katya ran at the narrowing space. As she approached, Smogg moved inside. The gap shrank as she reached it and she turned sideways, trying to fit through. It wasn't wide enough. She felt the two stones touch her arm and knew the danger. She stepped back.

"Galina!"

The doors slammed shut.

At night, Sredets was still a busy place. Wide streets and long lines of new merchant houses lined each side of the Vladaya River. By law, trade ceased at sundown, but few people respected this and there were many exceptions. The alehouses and whores kept their own hours, along with the cutpurses and murderers. The former might be helpful, the latter would be a hindrance at best.

On this night, Piers Gaveston stole out of the house, across the grounds and through the gates, heading into the centre of town.

He wasn't sure where he was going, but the business with the boy had awoken something. His previous drunken indolence and stupor meant no-one watched or guarded him.

He made his way quickly into the busier central district and selected a tavern at random. The common room was full and the low light belayed any questions of his dishevelled appearance. With a few small coins, he'd scrounged from the discarded belongings of other house guests, he purchased a watered mug of the local brew and found a seat in a corner to gather his thoughts.

Rag's defiance and successful summoning of the goblin had broken Piers' chains. As he'd walked away, the compulsion and numbness faded. He believed Rag to be the daytime eyes and ears of his father. He'd become paranoid about a curse of retribution, trapped into the role of a slave, his knowledge of magic gradually sucked out just as the blood was drawn from his veins every night in the darkness. Even now, the fear remained, bubbling in his gut, promising a torturous revenge.

Piers glanced down at his twitching hands clasped around the chipped clay mug. He'd never felt as he did now, not even in the days when he'd been a prisoner of Warwick, or the night after Blacklow Hill. Somehow, he knew the taken blood meant he shared a bond with the father and the father was awake, calling for him in the house, he could sense it.

He wanted to get up and run, but he knew if he did, he would end up enslaved once more.

"All alone?"

A man sat down. Piers recognised him immediately as the Moor he'd seen near the fire that morning. The man's thin hands rested gently on the table as he regarded his new companion, the same stare from before, wide-eyed and powerful.

"You were at the house."

The man nodded and gave him a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Indeed, I was, and fortunate to find you when I did."

Piers fingers dug into the mug and it cracked, the contents spilling onto his hands. He cursed and wiped his hands on his shirt. "You were hunting me then?"

The man shrugged. "Not exactly, but near enough."

"Are you here to kill me?"

"Not this time." The man leaned forward. "The sanctorum taught you to let go of your mortal life, embrace the freedom your longevity brings. You abandoned your family and everything you once knew. With no community, many of our kind lose their direction. The Church tries to counter that by giving you a focus and a structure toward transcendence." He lowered his voice. "The only problem for you in that is you've seen the truth at the heart of things."

"There is no God."

"Exactly. When you learned that you ran and became a prisoner to a lesser Wight. You are lucky I found you when I did."

"Seems strange hearing all this from a Muslim," Piers said.

"You judge my faith by the colour of my skin?" The man leaned back. "My name is Faim, I was born next to the Euphrates river, but I have not been back there in more than a century. By birth I am Assyrian, so yes you are partially right, but I lived in the western kingdoms for as long as I roamed Parthia and Assyria. Islam has no meaning to me, just as Christ has no meaning to you."

Piers frowned. "But you're of the old blood."

"Indeed, I have the gift, just as you do," Faim said. "Do you know much of the Muslims and the Hadith? The practice of magic is strictly forbidden and there is a fine line between soldier and sinner. The *malak* have no free will and exist only to carry the word of God. If they assert themselves, they quickly become outcast *sahr*. They find no good in this work. In their world, magic reduces freedom, for the benefit of all humankind." He laughed, a bitter laugh with no humour and wiped spittle from

his mouth when he was done. He waved his arms, indicating the patrons of the tavern. "Regard these people. Amongst them we are Gods, our kind worshipped by them for centuries. The religious orders created a framework to enable this worship, selling a promise of afterlife based on the dreams of the ascended. In turn these mortals work hard, obey the law and the commandments believing they will be rewarded in heaven. You are one of three survivors of Avignon. You saw the reward, for those that died, didn't you?"

Piers flinched under the man's scrutiny. "The Temple was misguided, perhaps their actions were misdirected," he said. "Absence of proof in one instance doesn't not undermine all possibility."

"But that isn't what you believe," Faim said. "Otherwise, you would be in Rome, taking your punishment and aiding your brothers and sisters who extol the doctrine."

"What do you want from me?" Piers asked. "If you were part of helping me leave the house, you have my thanks, but so far I find nothing but torture for my soul in the words you spout."

"I want you to be free and make your own choices," Faim said. "But in this instance..." he glanced around once more and leaned in again. "I need your help."

"With what?"

"Returning to the house and freeing the child you call Rag."

Piers frowned. "I've only just left, why would I go back?"

"Because you know what he is and you know what will happen now." Thin fingers seized his arm, drawing it across the table, their grip surprisingly strong. "The wounds are not visible on the skin, but I sense them. The creature has fed from you and if you leave, he will go back to feeding from the boy."

Piers felt the prickles on his conscience. "What are you suggesting?"

"We go to the house and burn it. We destroy everything, making it less than a memory, a shadow, to be forgotten." Faim let go of his hand. "I do not request without offering something in return."

"What would that be?"

"You know what it is to be alone. You understand the power available to those with faith and you wish you were able to believe as they do. Without faith, you are not what you were, easily exhausted by the magic. The half-breeds blinded you. There is an older source you can tap, a bottomless well of possibility. I will show you how to find it."

Piers stared into Faim's sunken eyes for a long time then nodded. The alternative was an aimless existence. "I'll help you," he said, "but when we're done, we talk and you pay up."

"Agreed."

Chapter 19: Tunnels

“We’re trapped.”

Galina reached out to the stone wall and leaned against it, steadying herself. The surreal sensations she’d experienced so close to the bottom of the hole were fading, replaced by an urgent need to be reunited with her sister, who remained stuck on the other side of the door.

“I am sure they will be all right,” Hino said, his soft Japanese voice reassuring in the darkness. “The Lady Eleanor will think of a way to find us.” He spoke arcane words and light welled from his hands. “We should decide whether to remain here or explore.”

Elbo Smogg grunted and hustled past them both. “You can guess my preference,” he said, heading into the unknown.

“Wait! We must stay together,” Galina urged.

Smogg stopped. “Your touch opened the door. We don’t know why. There is no symbol this side, but there is strong magic in this place. Perhaps it closed to protect us? We need to go further and ensure we are safe, your sister would want you to be safe. You cannot do anything to help by staying here.” He pointed down the passageway. “The others will know where we’ve gone. If we come to a place where we may lose them, we’ll leave marks so they will follow.”

Galina turned to Hino, who nodded. “I too am curious,” he said. “I can see no means of opening the doors from here. We might force it open, but I think this to be unwise and believe you will also.”

Galina could still sense the unchecked vortex beyond the rock passage. Any expression of magic, including Hino’s light spell drew its attention. She looked at Smogg. “Very well, but if we find nothing, we should come back.”

“If we encounter the makers of this tunnel, we will ask them how this entrance works,” he replied. “Then we will be able to open the door.”

Smogg resumed walking. Galina followed with Hino behind, his light enveloping them both. The bearded explorer ranged ahead, just beyond its reach, content to labour in the dark. Galina wondered how far she could trust him. Smogg was a bumbling mass of contradictions, kept on a careful leash by Lady Eleanor, but without her there...

A cold breeze distracted her. She glanced to the left, seeing only darkness. “Hino?”

The Japanese man was at her shoulder. He extended a glowing hand and the gloom retreated. “An intersection,” he said and raised his voice. “Smogg?”

Galina turned back to the main passageway, but Smogg was nowhere to be found. She reached out with her senses, trying to harness the fleeting power of her gift, but it revealed nothing. "He's gone," she said.

Hino gestured and the light coalesced into a ball to float away down the passage. "We must follow him," he said. His hand took hers. "We cannot be separated."

They moved on. Galina glancing back. "They won't know which way we've gone."

"We cannot abandon Smogg," Hino said, tugging at her hand. "Come. We will look and then go back."

They walked on.

Katya pressed her hand to the symbol. Some power within it wriggled but remain out of reach. The doors did not move. She turned to Lady Eleanor. "It won't open."

"We should try the path," Magno said.

Ibrox scowled. "The people up there will kill us or worse. They blame us for this."

The ground shook again. The lambent blue glow began to creep up the rock wall towards them. "We should attempt magic," Lady Eleanor said.

"What spell would aid us?" Ibrox asked. "No creature could rescue us from this place and this rock is warded against any physical battering we might invoke."

"There must be something we can do!" Magno urged. "We can't give up!"

"And we will not," Lady Eleanor placed her hands against the stone, exploring it carefully. Eventually, she found a section that satisfied her, next to the door. "The risk of doing this without knowing our destination is considerable." She turned to Katya. "You must do exactly as I do, repeat the words and gestures exactly as I perform them, understand?"

Katya nodded.

"Ibrox already knows this spell. He and I will assist Magno, but you need to help yourself if we are all to succeed," Eleanor nodded towards the wall. "When I invoke the magic, I will be able to pass through stone, but only a particular type. I will jump forwards in the hope that there is a gap on the other side."

"But that's madness," Katya said. "If you guess wrong and it's solid—"

"We die," Eleanor replied, her expression grim. "We have no other option. There are other dangers. If there is a vein of ore or something else in the rock, we cannot move through it. Similarly, if the material under our feet is the same, we will be unable to stand on it unless we act quickly to end the spell. Therefore, we make a leap and do not walk through."

"Very well."

"End the spell at exactly the right moment to give yourself the best possible chance, understand?"

"I think so."

"Good. Then we will begin."

Eleanor fell silent, staring intently in front of her and murmuring. Katya started to panic as she realised she wasn't catching the intonations. Like all magic, the phrases would not stay in her mind, but slipped away each time. She glanced at Ibrox. He leaned towards her. "Understand what she does and make it your own, rather than copying her, or me. The gift comes from you, not from repetition."

Katya calmed and remembered her lessons at the sanctorum, and with Faim, a lifetime ago. She watched Eleanor's hands and the expression on her face. After a moment, her fingers sank into the wall. She nodded at Katya, her lips still murmuring words, then leaped into the stone.

And disappeared.

Katya stepped forward to the same spot and focused on the same portion of rock. She recalled Galina talking about resonance – how magic lingered, perhaps if she attempted the spell in precisely that place...

The ground shook again. "Hurry," Magno breathed. She gazed up at him. He'd seemed so assured and capable on the climb when he'd helped her, but now his courage wilted. She understood, he had no magic and needed their aid. His plight was clear, he'd always avoided these moments of powerlessness, but they defined him, made him real.

She turned to the stone and extended her hands, the words she spoke were a nonsensical string of syllables, based on what she could remember, but when the magic awakened, they became a frame for its use; a guide to her will and intention.

She touched rock, felt it, but then didn't feel it. Burying the instinctive surprise, she concentrated, gathered herself and leapt.

Into darkness.

Less than an hour after they'd met, Piers found himself on the streets of Sredets once more, following Faim back towards the house.

They walked in silence. Only the click of the Assyrian's staff against the cobblestones of the wide street accompanied their steps. Little conversation had passed between them since the agreement was made and none at all after they left the tavern. Piers had started to ask questions but Faim had touched a finger to his lips. It made sense. Folk who cared to look stared at them both. An emaciated easterner and a man in clothes he'd worn for more than a decade, were an odd pairing. Only when they reached deserted streets, did Faim speak again.

"As you know, the creature we seek lives in darkness beneath the house," he said. "Each of the disappeared guests is fed on like you, but also changed to become part of the brood. Over time, some are permitted to leave and begin their own broods in other places. Some cities can support more than one, but rarely does this occur."

"Why didn't this happen to me?" Piers asked.

"Because of your gift," Faim explained. "Like the boy, you were too valuable to be turned. Once this creature was a half-breed; a *Nephilim* in the old tongue. He was taught a ritual that allowed him to access the power of his weakened talent and enhance it with the blood of those like you and I." He stopped for a moment and gestured. "That is why he cannot bear the sun, a flaw brought about by the magic."

Piers frowned. "Are you saying the father is a wizard or *sihr*, like us?"

Faim shrugged. "The creature is capable of the same things, perhaps more capable. I mentioned before, there are other sources of power than faith? Here you see some of them."

"Which ones?"

"Fear and blood."

They walked on, eventually reaching the marked district. The buildings on either side of the street bore the red cross of the plague and were abandoned. Piers was surprised to see so many doors broken and windows smashed. Faim read his expression and smiled. "The world turns my

friend. People starve, sicken and die. Perhaps it is a portent of things to come? The world will outlast us, or we will outlast the world.”

They reached the house grounds. The gates were ajar, just as Piers had left them. Faim slipped through and he followed. “Be on your guard,” the Assyrian said. “Whilst our prey might not venture into the twilight, he may send others. Their light sensitivity is proportional. They will be weak, but enough to trouble us.”

Piers nodded and looked around. A thin mist hung over the unkempt grass. Nature had reclaimed this place long ago, creating an unchecked wilderness. He’d hardly given it a second thought when he’d left, but now...

Now the father was watching. Piers sensed his eyes all around them.

“They know we’re here,” he said.

Faim chuckled. “Then we best be prepared.”

He planted his staff into a gap between two flagstones and began to chant. Piers felt the pull of his spell immediately; energy being drawn from every available source, including the beat of his heart and the breath from his lungs. The world around him grew cold and then he sensed they were not alone.

Three figures appeared, insubstantial, like the ghosts and spirits he’d heard of in dark tales – a man, a woman and a child. Piers bit his lip. He knew of this magic, the rote was from a secret grimoire, forbidden to the sanctioned wizards of the Church. “You have raised the dead,” he said, appalled.

Faim nodded. “The old dead of this house. We will need them.”

A howling scream from the house silenced any further discussion. Through the mist, Piers could see figures running towards them, sprinting as fast as they could, he counted a dozen at least, their hunger like a wave. “What do we do?”

“Stand and fight,” Faim said. He let go of the staff, leaving it standing, vertical in the air, and drew a curve in the air with his hand. The rippling shape of a bow appeared. He pulled back its string and loosed an arrow of magical power into the darkness. One of the figures dropped at its touch. Faim loosed another arrow with the same result. “Only magic will release them,” he said.

Piers nodded. He was no stranger to war, recalling his days as King Edward’s lieutenant in Ireland. He stared at his right palm and traced a line from it with his left finger, finishing level with

his head. A shimmering sword appeared. A second incantation hardened his ragged clothes to armour.

Gaveston...

He glanced around, momentarily distracted. The sword wavered, the spell almost failing before it saw use, but he remembered himself and held on. The word came from the house and spoke only in his head – the voice of the father, connected to him by blood and magic.

A crazed man appeared out of the dark and sprang forwards. Piers swung his new sword downwards, slicing through flesh and bone. The man gave a gargled gasp and collapsed on the stone, but another took his place then two more, their nails ripping at him, finding holes in his garments, tearing into his skin. He struggled and fought back, stabbing one, but stumbled with the effort and fell on his back. The air went from his lungs. They were on him, teeth against his throat, he screamed.

There was a flash of light and he was alone.

A hand appeared – Faim's. Piers took it and stood up. "What did you do?"

"A banishment spell, one of your church's better inventions," Faim said. His bow had disappeared and he reclaimed his staff, which still stood, frozen in mid-air. "We must make haste, lest our prey turn loose more of his brood."

The click of wood on stone resumed as Faim strode towards the house. Around him, walked the three silent figures he had summoned.

Piers stumbled after them, his breath a steaming gasp in the cold air. "The people here, they don't fight like men," he said.

"Were you expecting soldiers?" Faim chuckled. "There is no room left for humanity in these beasts, they are hungry and struggle to survive. Expect no quarter from them, prepare for claws and teeth. They will tear at skin and flesh to reach the prize inside your veins."

They reached the entrance. The door remained ajar, the hallway beyond dark and forbidding. Faim gestured to apparitions. The child spirit nodded and walked through the door, triggering more hungry screams. A further command and the others followed. Then Faim touched Piers on the shoulder and pointed to a window some distance to their left. "We'll leave the reception to take care of themselves," he said. "Come on."

Nervously, Piers went after him.

The stained glass had long since been broken. Faim made short work of clearing out the slivers that remained and clambered into the room beyond. Piers followed, making sure he kept a grip on his conjured sword.

They were back in the corridor leading to the old chapel. Shouts and running footsteps echoed in the distance. Faim stared at Piers expectantly.

"There is a cellar door in the kitchens. This way."

They walked quickly away from the entrance and turned right before reaching the chapel. A figure appeared at the end of the passage way. Faim didn't slow, but spoke a word and gestured with his hand. An incandescent burst of power flew through the air to immolate a woman as she ran towards them. She screamed as the magical energies burned her to ash.

Through the kitchens they went, reminding Piers of the abandoned inn outside Picardy where Pembroke had died. At the far end was a small staircase. He stopped on the first step and stared down into the darkness.

"Do you see something?" Faim asked.

"No I..." Piers swallowed. "I'm just remembering how many times I've been down here."

A reassuring hand squeezed his shoulder. "This will be the last time."

"I hope so."

He started downwards. The gloom seemed to swallow them both up, only the glow of his conjured sword kept it at bay. "We need a plan," Piers said.

"We have one," Faim said. He moved in front, putting his back to the small door at the bottom of the stairs. "When we enter the room, locate the boy and get him to safety. Leave the rest to me."

"What're you going to do?"

"Correct my mistake."

The dislocated sensation faded and Katya found herself in darkness. She felt cold stone under her feet and heard the harsh breathing of others around her. That meant the spell had worked, she'd passed through the rock to the other side.

Then, an explosion of light and the touch of a hand on her arm revealed her friends and made her smile instinctively. "We made it?"

"Yes, we made it," Ibrox said, but didn't return the smile. His hands glowed, illuminating them all. "Now we must find the others."

"They can't have gone far," Magno said, his voice trembling. He knelt with a lantern and produced flint and steel. A spark and some patience rewarded his efforts and once it was lit, Ibrox let go of his spell. They turned in the direction of the doorway.

And found themselves facing another wall of rock.

"There must be a way around," Katya said. "We need to find it."

"That or a way out," Ibrox said.

"We can't leave my sister here."

"We won't," Lady Eleanor said. "We'll find her and return to the portal."

They walked down the passageway in the opposite direction, Magno led, lantern in one hand and curved sword in the other. The tunnel opened out into a cavern. Magno's light reflecting off a vast field of crystal all over the ground and ceiling. Katya gasped, she'd had never seen anything like it. "What is this place?"

"We are a long way into the earth," Ibrox said. "Very few eyes will have seen sights such as these." He turned all around gazing up. "There is magic in these stones, an old magic, older than anything I have known."

"Lost and waiting for us," Eleanor said. "Could this help with the matter above?"

Ibrox frowned. "How?"

"To rebuild the seal; the first two are contained. We cannot prepare wards as we did in Isoloha and Avignon, but we can use this power against it."

Ibrox nodded slowly. "I don't know if such a thing is possible, but it has merit. We must inform the cardinal."

"Indeed," Magno said. "But that means finding a way out of here."

Chapter 20: Lairs

As the day drew to a close, Hino Kunimitsu reined in his horse near the end of the hilltop path and caught sight of his destination.

The Kokubun-ji temple in Iga Province.

The fading sun flickered through the trees as he slipped from his saddle and led his mount through the temple gardens. An old man tended rows of plants with a rake and eyed him as he walked by.

"What are you seeking?" he asked.

Kunimitsu stopped and turned to him. "Your pardon, I am—"

"I know who you are, that wasn't the question I asked."

Kunimitsu stared. The man wore the robes of a monk, but didn't look familiar and carried himself like as if he were much younger. Kunimitsu bowed. "Your pardon again," he said.

The old man grunted and pointed up the hill. "You may enter the house," he said. "Perhaps after some time in contemplation, you will be able to answer questions more clearly."

Kunimitsu bowed again and resumed his walk. He soon reached the building and tethered his horse to the gate before climbing the steps and entering the open hall. He found no mat on the wooden boards and so chose a spot near the centre and dropped to his knees, to think as the old man suggested.

Why am I here?

Takuaji had been clear that he would not give up his pretend northern Emperor. Kunimitsu did not believe he was the source of division in Japan, but so long as he remained, the wound could not be closed.

After returning to give his report to Go-Murakami and responding faithfully and fully to all questions, Kunimitsu had left Yoshino and journeyed south. Once he was sure no-one pursued him, he turned back and made for Iga. The difficult roads and crossing of the Hattori river made the journey arduous, but he had high hopes for what he would find.

"Do you have an answer for me now?"

Kunimitsu glanced around. The old man stood on the steps. He stood up and faced him. "Yes, I am here seeking a legend."

The old man smiled. "You have a legend of your own, why do you need another one?"

"The story of my past is different from the truth."

"All legends are different from the truth," The old man's smile disappeared and his expression darkened. "Speak plainly, do not waste my time."

"I require knowledge," Kuminitzu said. He swallowed past the lump in his throat. "I must defeat an enemy who my legend could defeat but I cannot."

"You are here to learn then?"

"Yes."

"Then why are the words difficult?"

"Because... your ways are... dishonourable."

The old man nodded. "Where is your family sword?" he asked.

"I do not have one," Kunimitsu replied. "My father died and it was never returned."

"A house such as yours with no sword. Your honour is absent until it is found." The old man walked up the last of the steps and held out the rake. "I, also, have no sword, only this. You might say it is my sword, but unbound by the same rules."

Kunimitsu looked at the rake. All along its length he saw elaborate writing in a language he could not read. "You are the man I seek then?"

"I am a man and I will teach you things."

"To defeat my enemy?"

"In time, but first, to understand there are many forms of honour."

The underground lit up by moss and crystal; the half-light of dusk deep below the earth, where no human had lived, or would live.

Galina and Hino stared at this ancient world and the ancient world stared back.

The strangers were thin and tall, with long hair, angular faces, almond-shaped eyes and strange pointed ears. The rocklight cast shadows on them, lighting them from below, making them severe and judgemental.

Ten people, dressed in loose-fitting robes. They brandished bows and long hunting knives. Their leader wore a circlet of dark leaves, his open hand keeping the arrows at bay. Behind them, Galina saw a vast city on a midnight lake, curved towers and houses surrounded by an obsidian wall.

"Your kind is known to us," the leader said.

"Yet you are not familiar to us," Hino said, bowing his head. "We do not wish to intrude."

"Your world intrudes," the leader replied. "In the eldest times, your people drove us into this doom."

"We did not do this."

"No, and that is why you live."

Hino bowed again. "My people honour the giving of names. I am Hino Suketomo, once *dainagon* of the late Emperor Go-Daigo of Japan."

"Hino," The leader said, tasting the sound as he spoke it. "You will come with us."

A flicker of movement drew Galina's attention, a horse walking across open ground, stark white in colour with a horn between its ears. On its back, a woman, her hair long and raven dark across its back. She regarded Galina and Hino with a solemn expression, but did not speak.

The leader and his followers began to walk back towards the city. Galina glanced at Hino who nodded. They followed, side by side, the archers all around them. No further words were needed. They were prisoners.

The path wound through a field of moss covered rocks. Amongst them, small figures worked, crawling over stones, collecting things into shoulder-slung baskets. "What are they doing?" Galina asked.

But no-one answered.

They walked on, the track twisting and turning. Ahead, the obsidian walls glimmered. As they passed through open gates, Galina reached out to touch the smooth glass, impossibly thick and strong. Above, she saw more strange figures staring down with unfamiliar eyes.

Hino's hand touched her shoulder. She gazed at him and he gave her an encouraging smile. She tried to return it but couldn't, too many people were watching.

Instead, she stared forward at their destination: a vast dome-shaped building like nothing she'd ever seen. A spire rose out of its centre, as tall as the great houses of Rome and climbing away towards the cavern roof. The elegant curves and sweeps hid all sign of construction. Even the doors slid away in front of them with no hint of hinge or bracket. She noted the same symbol on them as she had seen in the tunnel.

Once inside the dome, they were taken to a circular hall. The chamber was mostly empty, but a few grey-robed figures stared at them from raked benches around a stone floor. The leader of their captors indicated two chairs in the middle and walked to a place on the lowest tier of seats. The other guards departed.

Galina sat down under the expectant gaze of the people above. She eyed each strange angular face, trying to get an idea of them, a clue as to what they wanted, but they gave nothing away. She turned to Hino, but he too seemed elsewhere, his eyes on the ground.

Footsteps echoed towards them and the barefooted woman who'd followed them, entered. The seated audience got to their feet. Hino did likewise and nudged her. Galina copied him. The woman walked passed them to another place on the benches and sat. When she did, so did everyone else.

After that, the silence and stares resumed.

Eventually, Galina could bear it no more and stood up and faced the woman. "I am Galina. We came here through a door with the same symbol as these doors. My friends are still out there, can you help us rescue them?"

The woman smiled – an expression of sadness rather than joy. "That entrance has never opened for us. Its makers ensured we would not return to the world that way."

"Who made it then?" Galina asked.

"You did."

Hino stood. "Honourable lady, I have gifted you my name. We are guests in your hall. We know not who we address."

"Your kind never valued our names before," the woman said. "Why do you value them now?"

"Forgive me lady, but I believe much of this conversation is in the past and occurred long ago," Hino remarked.

"The memories of our people are long even if yours are not. Now we must judge your return to decide whether we gift you with the knowledge you lack."

"Are you blaming us for the crimes of others?" Galina asked. "We've never been here before."

"That remains to be seen," the man who had brought them said. "Your people are known for all manner of trickeries."

A ripple of assent ran around the room and Galina began to recognise the mood. They weren't considered guests by these people, they were enemies.

Dangerous enemies.

"You will learn little without questions," Hino said. "Please ask. Else we will all remain ignorant."

The man leaned forward. "How did you get here?"

Hino shrugged. "We opened a door and it led to this place."

"Are there more of you?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Three of us passed through the door. Four more are needing rescue. Beyond them, many others await word." Hino explained.

"My sister is trapped out there," Galina added. "We need to get back and help her."

"You ask us for our aid then?" the woman said. "What do you offer in return?"

"I..." Galina swallowed and glanced around. All eyes were on her now, including Hino's. "I don't know what I can do for you."

"You are the door opener are you not?" The woman smiled again.

"I am."

"Then would you open more doors?"

"I don't know how," Galina admitted. A slow flush spread across her face. "I touched the symbol and they opened." She turned to Hino. "The others couldn't get it to work, only me."

"Perhaps we should test your ability once more," The woman stood up and walked to the centre of the floor, beckoning Galina to her. She did as she was bidden and noticed another shape carved into the rock.

"Will you show us what you did?" the woman asked.

Galina knelt and placed her palm against the stone. A tingling sensation ran along her arm and awoke, bathing the room in a soft blue glow. She glanced up at the woman.

“Now will you help us?”

The woman nodded. “Yes, we will.”

Something shifted in the air and the ground underneath Katya’s feet shook. “Are we not safe, even here?” she asked.

“It is not the same thing,” Ibrox said and pointed. “Look.”

The field of crystal they’d spotted had begun to move, rising and undulating strangely. A clustered hill of boulders moved vertically upwards then rearranged themselves. Katya saw two lights appear amongst them and realised immediately what they were.

“They’re eyes...” she murmured, then louder to warn the others. “The crystal fields aren’t crystals and stones! They’re alive!”

Magno scowled and stepped in front of Katya brandishing his sword, but Eleanor laid a gentle hand on his arm. “We must find out what they are before we make them hate us.”

On cue, a lizard-like head turned towards them. It floated forwards as the creature’s long neck extended, its eyes blinking as it stared at Magno’s lantern, stopping a few feet away from them.

“What is it?” Katya asked.

“*Draco*,” Magno replied tersely. She could see beads of sweat on his brow. “A demon of the ancient world.”

“Such creatures no longer exist,” Ibrox said. “Their bones litter the long sand.”

“This one exists,” Eleanor said, “and it does not seem so old.”

A keening cry drew Katya’s attention. A second creature emerged, similar to the first, but a little bigger. It waddled over on four powerful legs and she saw small furred wings on its scaled back.

“What woke them?” she wondered out loud.

"We may never learn the answer," Eleanor replied. Cautiously she reached a hand out to the first creature. It moved towards her and let her stroke its head. "Hard, like glass or rock, a skin as strong as steel." Ahe smiled at Magno. "You might have broken your sword."

Magno scowled in response, but lowered the weapon. "Our path leads us away from here if we want to find the others."

"True, but we are safe for now and can spare a moment."

Katya held out her hand to the first dragon, it turned to her, but then flinched, snorted and stepped backwards. She reached for it, but it cried out and retreated again.

"Strange," Lady Eleanor said. "Perhaps they sense nerves or something else." She touched Katya's shoulder. "Magno is right, we must keep moving, else we will not find your sister, come."

Reluctantly, Katya backed away from the creature, but it continued to watch her. Beyond, she saw more movement from several directions. She resumed walking, following Magno along the path they had been on before. The Genoese soldier still held his sword in one hand and the lantern in another and cursed in Italian as he prowled down the track.

They reached a sloped face of rock on the far side, slick with dark moss. "What do we do?" Katya asked.

"We climb," Ibrox said and pulled out the rope from before. He threw it up into the shadows. The hooked metal end clattered onto the stone and he drew it back slowly, making sure it held. Then, holding the line in one hand, he began walking up the slope. Eleanor followed and Katya after her with Magno last.

"They're following us," he said.

"So long as they remain curious and not hostile, we can permit that," Eleanor replied.

The incline flattened out twenty or thirty feet from the ground and a small path took them to a cave. As she got to the entrance, Katya glanced back. The land below seethed with young dragons, all walking towards the slope they had climbed. Those that reached it couldn't climb the moss and tumbled into their brethren causing all manner of confusion, but with their powerful legs, it was plain they would make it eventually.

"We need to hurry," Katya said.

Magno nodded and moved passed her into the cave. "Yes, we do."

Shouts from below disturbed Tuia from his work.

He lowered his bloody knife and motioned for the mantled guard to find out what transpired inside the pyramid. The man bowed and disappeared back down the steps.

Tuia sat cross-legged on the blood-slick platform and waited.

He had wielded the knife every night for twenty years. He had tasted the last life of each victim and become a weapon forged for purpose; the executioner of humanity who brought power to the chosen warriors of his mistress.

In that time, the city had grown. The people made war in the name of their deities, roving the land and capturing the weak and the strong for sacrifice. Those who would not bow down became empty-eyed stonebreakers and stumbling flesh for the staircase. These days, most bowed before the gods.

The pyramid had become tall and when Teotl was happy with it, she had ordered the slaves to dig down into the earth. The ground under their buildings was boggy and unstable, but still she pressed them to work and overcome the challenge. Now, the structure rested over a great pit, deeper than the height of their building. What Teotl sought in the earth, Tuia did not know.

Perhaps today he would find out.

He stood up and elbowed his way past the queueing slaves towards one of the lower entrances and pushed aside the door; running along the narrow walkway and down a thin ladder to the wide stone platform above the pit.

Far below he saw the suppliant warriors, their heads bloodied from anointment. They backed away from the centre of the excavation and stood around it in a circle.

Tuia climbed down, his hands finding hidden holds on the smooth stone. He felt young and strong, stronger perhaps than he'd ever felt. Only the sun weakened him. He avoided it whenever he could, sleeping fitfully in a dark cave and dreaming of the next night's blood.

He reached the supplicants and forced them aside, gazing into the space they had left. It lay immediately under the sacrifice platform on the top of the pyramid and blood still dripped from his last victim, down onto a large circular symbol carved into the rock.

As he stared, the earth groaned and the rock split in half, falling away into the depths of the world below.

From beneath it came a gout of flame, drawing shouts and screams from the gathered warriors, but Tuia did not react. He remained still.

A huge scaled head pressed itself against the new fissure. An eye as big as a house gazed at the people above, it blinked, once, twice, thrice, then fell away into the void, to return a moment later, fixing its gaze on Tuia.

He did not move, his heart lurched in his chest, but he ignored it and did not flinch from the inexorable stare. The eye blinked and disappeared once more.

Tuia turned to the terrified warriors.

“The time for sacrifices has passed. Get the slaves down here and get them digging! Now!”

Faim opened the door into absolute darkness.

Immediately, Piers sensed several figures watching them. He didn’t move for a minute, hoping his eyes would adjust, but they didn’t. The gloom remained impenetrable. Even the conjured sword he carried only illuminated his hand and face.

“Welcome Gaveston,” a voice purred. He recognised it – *the father*. “We’ve been expecting you and your friend.”

Piers inched forward, trying to use any of his senses to get an impression of the room, but just like the times before, only father’s voice gave him any idea. It seemed far away, but he knew in an instance it might whisper in his ear. *Enemy territory*, he thought. *Ground on which we cannot hope to—*

“Hello, John.”

“Faim, why are you here?” An abrupt change of tone, Piers thought he heard a trace of hesitation and... *fear*?

“You’ve broken the edict we placed upon you, John. You know the punishment for transgression.”

“You forget where you are, Faim.”

"I forget nothing!" Illumination bloomed in Faim's hands. For a moment, incandescence struggled against the unnatural gloom, but then banished it, revealing the room, massive with figures standing along each of the walls. Piers counted a hundred or more.

At the end sat a man in a chair, flinching away from the light. His bald head seemed too large for his body, his long fingernails were black, his eyes rheumy and surrounded by scars.

"Your power is borrowed, John. You were given the gift of eternity and a place in our new society provided you performed your task correctly."

The seated creature gestured with a clawed hand. "Have I not done as you asked?"

"You have done that and more," Faim replied. "Where is the boy?"

John shrank into his chair. "You would begrudge a father his own son?"

"The boy is *not* your son."

"I'm the only family he has ever known. I've raised him and protected him."

Faim stepped forward, drawing hisses from the figures all around him, but no-one approached the light. "We can fence over this for as long as you like, John. The boy is not yours and what you do breaks our agreement."

"You understand why I will not reveal him then?" A hacking sound came from the bulbous, hairless head, something approximating a laugh. "If you cannot find him, I can negotiate."

Faim smiled. "Name your terms then."

"I give you the boy, you leave everything else as it is."

"Including your petty kingdom?" Faim looked around. "These people are the sum of your achievements here I take it? Perhaps you should have remained in Bohemia as we suggested."

A woman screamed a challenge and lunged forward from the wall. Faim's left hand snapped out towards her and caught her by the throat as she reached for him. Long dirty nails flailed uselessly, grasping.

"I have no stomach for being another's lackey," John said.

Faim spoke a word and the light in his hands intensified. The woman cried out again then she began to burn. Her clothes caught fire, then her flesh blackened and charred, dissolving into ash.

Faim lowered his hand.

"You have no choice in this. You were given immortality and asked to create a family in the darkness, awaiting the world's change. Drinking the old blood is forbidden to you and forbidden to your followers."

"You mean to kill me then?"

"I do."

The room erupted. The people along the walls flung themselves forward, charging mindlessly. Piers grimaced and hacked, left and right into the shadows. This was the worst of warfare, the kind where you fought to live, knowing the press of bodies around you were all enemies who desired your end.

He felt fingernails and teeth on his shoulder. He turned and stabbed a wide-eyed man with straggled hair and a mouth full of fangs. Hands grabbed his ankle and he swept the conjured blade down in response, slicing them from the wrists of their owner.

The blade was an advantage. The people he fought evaporated at the touch of his sword. Being made of magic, it could not be snagged or notched, but the spell required constant work. Without the faith he once had, the effort drained him the longer he had to maintain it.

Fingers dug into his back, raking down his spine. He screamed, and lashed out at a rabid child then twisted and thrust his sword into the gut of a woman intent on eating his face.

There are too many!

The world went dark. The press of bodies overwhelmed him. Something hit him on the head and disrupted his spell. The sword disappeared from his hands and he dropped to the ground, covering his face as best he could.

They were all over him, fanged teeth seeking the weaknesses in his magically-hardened clothes. Killing was easy when it was the only way to survive. He remembered Ireland, a skirmish outside Malahide castle, being dragged from a horse amidst a rioting mob. He drew himself inwards like he had done that day, clenched his fists and fought to stand up.

A mouth clamped onto his neck. He felt pain at the bite and twisted, grabbing at the head fastened to him, tearing it loose and throwing the man over his shoulder into other enemies.

He traced a symbol in the air and spoke the words he'd been taught. Red flames erupted from the floor. Screams echoed all around as figures dissolved into ash. Others ran to the doorway and out to the stairs. He turned to follow them.

"No, wait!"

Piers looked around. Faim stood in front of the chair, his hand bloodied to the elbow. The lifeless form of the creature he had called John lay slumped in his seat, a hole in his chest where his heart would have been. "Let them go, we have what we wanted."

"Do we?" Piers asked. "Where's the boy?"

"Over here," said a voice. Rag sat in the corner of the room his head in his hands. Piers saw bite marks all along his naked arms. "I'm ready to leave," he said.

"Then let's go," Faim replied. "Quickly."

Chapter 21: The Act of the Oppressor

Blue light stole around the chamber and Hino eyed each of the people in attendance. As one they focused on Galina as she knelt with her palm pressed to the symbol in the centre of the floor. *They do not care about me*, he thought, *but they will not let her leave.*

His gaze went to the woman who stood beside Galina. "My name is Laurelatha," she said to the girl and gestured around her. "My people are the *aelfe* or *huldra* to some. I am the voice of this council. The warrior who brought you to me is Sethanas. I will introduce to the others gathered here when you wish."

Galina frowned and pointed at the glowing symbol. "What does this mean?"

"You have woken something that slept, awaiting you," Laurelatha replied. "Beyond that, I truly do not know."

"Do you trust us now?"

"Trust is an acceptance of equals. We accept you Galina. We believe in your action because we must and it is part of a purpose."

Hino stepped up to Galina's side and took her hand, helping her to her feet. "We ask for aid to help and find our friends," he said. "One of them came this way and disappeared."

Laurelatha's expression stiffened. "We will not do this," she said.

"Our mission is urgent, the world—"

"Wakes up and changes, returning those banished to their rightful place," Laurelatha said. "All people fear change, but change comes and must be faced."

"We need to leave here," Hino pressed.

"The girl stays with us," Sethanas announced from his place on the steps.

Galina bit her lip. "I'm a prisoner?"

Laurelatha bowed and smiled sadly. "Try to understand. This world is not as it should be. We have lived beneath for so long our memories are preserved only in the oldest writing. We must keep you. There is much to awaken."

"What about Hino?"

"He may leave when he wishes."

They turned towards him. Hino inclined his head and bowed. "I cannot leave whilst you hold my companion against her will. Amongst my people, when paths incur conflict and cannot be resolved, a contest resolves them."

A murmur of whispers ran around the hall. "What do you suggest?" Sethanas asked.

"A duel of arms with no restriction," Hino replied. "Name your champion."

"Wizards are always tricksters in such trials," Sethanas said. "We have the advantage. Why should we permit such an opportunity?"

"With respect, you misunderstand your own position," Hino said. "We came to this place as explorers, we are expected to return. Our company will send word and when others learn of your city, they will come here to free us from your gaol."

Laurelatha held up her hand. "We do not seek conflict."

"Then you must release us both," Hino said.

"Our ancients foretold a time in which a wanderer would come amongst us and break the wards that contain us, but then, all imprisoned people require hope, do they not?" Laurelatha smiled sadly. "If deliverance came to you in the twilight of your life, would you not seize it?"

"You talk of the girl as if she were a prize," Hino said. "She is not. She is a girl."

Sethanas stood up and walked towards Hino, stopping two feet from him. "I accept your terms," he said.

Hino deliberately looked at Laurelatha who did not meet his gaze. He glanced back at Sethanas whose expression had darkened at the slight. "If you agree, we should move to a suitable place."

Sethanas nodded. "I will make the preparations," he said and strode from the room.

Galina's hand clutched Hino's elbow. "They said you can go. You don't need to do this for me."

Hino smiled at her. "I am not leaving you in the place. We do not know enough to trust these people and they certainly do not trust us. My life is little consequence in this, but yours... appears valuable to them. Whatever happens, learn everything you can and think carefully about the decisions you make."

"You could die..."

"All of us die eventually. My people already think me dead. My son believes this as did my Emperor. What life remains to me, I pledged to our cause. This is a worthy service."

Galina frowned. "I wish I could be that sure," she said.

Hino nodded. "I also wish that."

The new passageway grew dark and the cries of the dragons faded away. Magno's lantern went out. He tried to relight it without success, so Ibrox conjured new light in his hands. Lady Eleanor did the same. Katya considered making the attempt, but decided against it, particularly when she saw the look on Magno's face. His need to rely on others in these dark tunnels wore heavily on his shoulders.

They came to a wider space, almost like an alcove, next to the path. In the distance, Katya thought she could hear running water.

"We will stop here," Eleanor said. "It was nearly sunset when we started and must be far into the night by now."

Magno sat down and unshouldered his bag. "There's no sense of time here," he said. "Could be noon and it would still be the same."

Ibrox chuckled. "In my country, there are mines where people dig for diamonds. In the darkest places, people learn ways to tell day and night in the dark. There are rhythms in the body which respond to the sun and take many years to fade away."

"I wonder who built this place?" Katya said. "It cannot be natural for such a network of tunnels and passages to be here."

"No indeed," Eleanor said. "Someone created the ward your sister defeated." She perched on a small rock and released her light, leaving Ibrox's spell to illuminate their little circle. "Many creatures exist in this world, some known only by legend and song. I never believed I would live to see a dragon in my life time."

"Nor I," Magno said, his tense lips finally breaking into a smile. "Sailors talk of dragons at the edge of the world, none ever spoken of them beneath the earth."

Ibrox shuffled forwards. "Lady, when you touched the skin of the beast, you spoke of it as stone?"

Eleanor nodded. "Yes, like smooth marble, but strangely alive, warm like a living thing."

"I would be concerned if we had to fight such creatures," Ibrox said. "We do not know their weakness, we must be cautious." He glanced around. "I will watch first."

Eleanor looked at Katya. "Wake me next," she said. "I will try to teach you the light spell."

Katya sighed. "I might not be able to control myself," she said.

Eleanor smiled. "Nevertheless, we make the attempt."

"I want to be helpful," Katya said. "So far I don't appear to be much use."

"You will find your place and time," Eleanor said. "When it comes, you will be invaluable, do not worry."

Katya nodded. She turned to Magno. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"How does your gift work? You cannot cast spells and such – like my sister, but what can you do?"

Magno smiled, but there was a tightness in the expression, betraying his feelings. "What makes me useful you mean? You noticed something of it earlier perhaps? Balance and agility for the most part, although I can sense the magic in things a little, like many mixed-blood folk, though not like your sister, she's different."

"In what way?"

"She sees things," he said, "like down there in the hole, when she was babbling. I couldn't see what she meant."

"Of any of us, you would be most attuned," Ibrox said.

"Perhaps," Magno replied and frowned. "There's something there, a potency or latent power, but I didn't sense anything when it erupted."

"I wonder if it will reach us..." Katya mused.

"We are some distance from the seal," Eleanor said, "but I share your concerns."

Katya turned to her. "We're trapped here, aren't we?"

Eleanor smiled. "We are four keen minds and remain whole in body and spirit. Do not give up on us yet."

Accompanied by two guards, Laurelatha led Galina from the chamber into a corridor. At the end, there were another set of doors with a symbol spread across them. "No-one has been beyond this entrance since the first days of my people in this place," Laurelatha said. "Will you open them?"

Galina stepped forward but hesitated then stepped back. "Will you answer my questions if I do?"

Laurelatha nodded. "To the best of my ability, yes."

Galina held her eye for a moment then turned to the doors. She placed both hands on the symbol. Once more she felt the tingle and glimpsed the flash of blue and they swung back at her touch; she walked inside.

She entered a long hall with tall stone columns in two rows. Around each, a coiling mass of crystal and etched writing, the first she had seen in the caverns. The crystals glowed gently, brightening as she approached and illuminating the etchings. She recognised them immediately; they were the same as those in the ritual chamber of Isoloha, the city she'd been rescued from by Hino and Lady Eleanor.

At that moment, her stomach grumbled. "No doubt I could spend forever in here learning," she said. "But without sleep and food I will not last long."

Laurelatha bowed. "My apologies, a meal will be brought. Your requirements are unknown to us, but we cannot be too dissimilar."

"No indeed," Galina said. "But you also promised to answer my questions."

"Yes, I did, perhaps I can remain here as you eat?"

"I would like that."

Laurelatha bowed again and went to the door. A few minutes later, a man entered carrying a bowl of dark leaves and two stone cups. He knelt and placed them on the floor then left. Laurelatha seated herself and beckoned Galina to join her, which she did, making herself comfortable on the stone.

"These are maple," Laurelatha said. "The deep maple is a tree that grows in the darkest caverns and is harvested by my people." She lifted a leaf into her mouth and chewed slowly. "It has a bitter flavour, but it will sustain you."

Galina picked up a leaf and copied the action. The sharp taste wasn't pleasant, but she was hungry enough that it didn't matter. She took one of the stone cups and sipped its contents. Cool and clean water diluted the leaf's tang.

They ate in silence for a while. In between mouthfuls of leaves and sips of water, Galina studied Laurelatha, noting the differences between them. Pointed ears peeking out from beneath her long black hair, the angular lines of her face and the strange shape of her eyes were all evidence of her different ancestry. Galina thought about Ibrox's dark skin and Hino's slanted features. Both were unusual, but when she spoke with them they responded in familiar ways and found common ground. With this woman, though...

"We are not alike," Laurelatha remarked as if reading her thoughts. "To my people you are the scion of a dangerous enemy, one who defeated, mastered and imprisoned us, but these are stories of long ago, before those left alive in these halls was born."

"I can't use magic," Galina said.

"You opened the door. That required magic and means you are of the blood."

"But how can I be blamed for the actions of those I know nothing about?"

"How can anyone judge?" Laurelatha replied. "Only by what we experience. We know the maple leaf may be eaten, but perhaps one day I will sicken and die because I eat one that is not the same. I drink water as others drank water. I know your kind is the enemy because my elders experienced it."

"It's not the same," Galina said. "People are different."

"People are *not* different," Laurelatha replied. "All things that live respond according to their nature. When that nature is understood, we form judgements."

"Where did your ancestors live, before they came here?"

Laurelatha smiled and her eyes grew distant. "On the surface amidst the trees and the birds, we sing songs of the sun and the moon; we remember the stars."

"This place is not the world above," Galina said. "Yet, your ancestors survived and you live here. You changed."

"The twilight is no true life; we grow less with each generation," Laurelatha said, her smile fading. "We are resourceful and your kind devised this cage to sustain us. Others were not so fortunate."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think we are the only creatures banished from the surface of the world?"

Galina thought about the *juje* and what he'd said to her years before. *Many! But not here. Away. Gone.* "There are more creatures? Living with your people?"

Laurelatha shrugged. "The tunnels are vast, who knows where they go? Only those wizards who came here in the earliest times would remember all the different prisons they made."

Galina nodded. "This is why you hate us then?"

"It is one reason." Laurelatha stood up and walked over to the nearest of the columns. "Your kind made this place and wrote upon this stone then sealed the doors with the ward you touched. I cannot read these words, can you?"

"No."

Laurelatha traced her fingers over the writing. "Eventually my people will learn their meaning, perhaps they tell a different story to the one we hear all our lives, but I sense there is not enough time left." She faced Galina again. "The people who wrote this, devised a way for the door to open. It is possible you learned that way, or it is instinctive to you?"

"I told you before, I don't know how I did it," Galina said. "I touch the symbols and they respond."

"Have any not awoken?"

"Only one, a door in a chamber long ago, it wouldn't let me out."

"Then perhaps you were supposed to stay there," Laurelatha mused. "Either way, you are a key. The world changes around us and your power affects it. That makes you important."

"I'm not important," Galina said. "I can't change anything."

"You say you cannot use magic like your peers," Laurelatha said. "Do you not see? This is your gift. To my people you are significant. You may be our salvation."

Galina frowned. "You said your imprisoning was one reason to hate us. What other reasons are there?"

If it were possible, Laurelatha's expression became more cautious. "There is magic used to summon and compel. The wizards cast these spells to bring us here. Your friend Hino is capable of such magic, which is why we must be on our guard."

Again, Galina was reminded of the night she met the *juje* and what he'd said about her sister after she'd caught him lurking around the fire. "If you are summoned, you must obey the wizard?"

"So the old stories say."

"You can't just walk away?"

"No." Laurelatha sighed. "Two things are prized amongst my kind: life and free will. Wizards threaten both of these rights."

Galina frowned. "But is your answer to deprive me of freedom and Hino of his life?"

"Your friend made his own choice. I see the contradiction in your fate, but better this than our end. Perhaps you understand how heavily this decision weighs upon us."

Galina chewed her lip. Moments before her mind had teemed with questions, but now there was nothing to be said. "I think I will sleep now."

"As you wish, blankets will be brought to you." Laurelatha bowed and walked towards the doors.

"I am to stay here then?" Galina asked.

"There is no better place," Laurelatha replied and slipped out of the door.

Kunimitsu sat in the dark.

After some rudimentary questions, the old man had left him and told him to remain in the hall until he returned. Kunimitsu accepted this restriction, but explored what he could, examining the room to exhaust his curiosity.

The place was scrupulously clean, but there were few clues to the identity of his host. He did find nicks and cracks in the wood of the walls and floor around waist and head height. Evidence of weapon practice, perhaps?

His mind wandered over the stories that had brought him here. Legends of shadowy *Obake* demons, summoned to murder men, women and children in their sleep. Iga was a place of old Japanese myth and tradition, its people hardy and close knit, unlikely to listen to the whispered words of dissent that concerned the Conclave. If strangers promised reward and stirred

trouble they would do so in the towns and cities where they could hide amongst the foreign traders. Here, an outsider would be known.

Yet, I too am an outsider to these people, he thought.

He walked to the steps and stared out into the night. His horse nickered a greeting. He yearned to go to it to retrieve his staff, to unpack blankets and food, but the old man's instructions had been clear. Beyond the gate, a mist gripped the woodland, shrouding everything, as if it were being devoured by another world. In some ways, it was. This was the land of the *Oni*, according to superstition. Kunimitsu knew this wasn't the whole truth of the matter, but the blood of his gift burned as he sensed magic amidst the fog. A presence stared back, vast and powerful, curious and tempting.

"You were wise to obey my instruction."

Kunimitsu started in surprise. The old man had returned without a sound. He was dressed in grey garments that blended with the mist. "The wards are set and the lords of this valley appeased. You are allowed to remain and may unpack your things."

"Thank you," Kunimitsu said. "Where am I to stay?"

"Here of course," the old man said. "You may roam further in the daytime as you wish, but at night, only when permitted."

"I understand. Are you to teach me?"

The old man shrugged. "At first, yes. After that, others will come; demons who will offer instruction in exchange for payment. You may accept or refuse. If you refuse, there will also be payment. If you do not pay, you bring dishonour to your presence and the wards will fail. What happens then..."

"Of course. You need not elaborate."

The old man grunted. "I have spoken for you, remember that. Any punishment you bear will also come to me."

"Why would you do such a—"

"My reasons are my own, you have no right to ask of them."

"Very well."

"One more thing," the old man said. "Worthy people survive on what they forage for themselves. Eat and drink nothing you are given, lest it curse you."

Kunimitsu bowed. "My thanks for all you have done," he said.

The old man stared at him for a moment. Then returned the gesture. "I met your father once. Others sacrificed a great deal to help him. Be worthy of that. Be worthy of them." He gestured out into the darkness. "See to your horse."

Kunimitsu turned away to do just that.

Chapter 22: Freedom of Choice

“This way.”

A gloomy wet tunnel on the outskirts of Sredets, a wide expanse of foul water leading out of the city, moving slowly in the dark. The smell reminded Piers Gaveston of the well outside Picardy, the battlefields of Ireland, or the aftermath of the ritual in Avignon. The rot and rubbish of humanity was a world forgotten to those who could afford it. Only the desperate would follow them here.

It had been a long walk from the abandoned house, but they needed to get out immediately. The sewers were the best way to leave unseen. Rag led the way as if he knew where he was going, the glow of his lantern casting huge shadows all around the tunnel roof. Piers came after him and Faim brought up the rear, leaning heavily on his staff, plainly exhausted by his efforts to free the boy, but he kept the pace and followed without complaint.

The path narrowed, forcing Piers closer to the edge. He'd heard stories of people dying having fallen in such filth. He stopped breathing through his nose so he wouldn't retch, but he could still taste the stench in the air. He focused on the light in front and kept moving, each step taking them further from danger, unless more danger lay ahead.

Rag halted. Piers caught up to him, Faim a few steps behind. The lantern illuminated a spiral staircase set into the brick wall. “That'll take you up and out of the town,” Rag said. “I'm not coming with you.”

“Wait a minute,” Piers said. “The reason we did this was for you.”

“And I'm grateful, but I'll not trade one prison for another.”

Piers opened his mouth to answer, but he felt Faim's hand on his shoulder. “The boy is right. Freedom is the right to choose, not to live as slave to a different master. He must make his own way.”

“After everything we've—”

“You are also free my friend, another reason for what we did. You know you will not be followed.”

Piers sighed. “What will you do?” he asked Rag.

The boy smiled. “Practice what I learned from you. There's a whole world to explore. I plan to see all that I can.”

Piers realised they weren't alone. Eyes glittered in the gloom behind Faim and in front further down the tunnel. "Friends of yours?" he asked Faim.

"Friends of mine," Rag said, "in case you didn't agree to let me go."

Faim laughed, but the effort turned into a tired cough. "You do not know me, child. My purpose was never to control you." His gaze strayed into the darkness. "I am pleased with the path you have taken already."

Rag scowled. "I don't need your approval."

"No indeed, you don't." Faim's staff tapped a rhythm as he moved to the stairs. "Nevertheless, you have it," he said and walked up the steps.

Cautiously, Piers followed.

Galina slept. As her body rested, she left it behind, wandering the vast hall, exploring its pillars and walls.

She reached beyond the stone. The writing was enchanted and resisted her, but she slipped between the flaws in the wards. Outside the chamber, outside the building, outside the city, through stone and flying down darkened passageways, until she found a glimmer of ghostly light.

Ibrox sat awake, guarding the others as they slept. She stole past him then froze as he glanced around, his gift disturbed by her passing. There was a shadow about him and his magic, something she didn't understand. But he didn't do anything else and soon, turned away, leaving her free to reach her destination.

Katya.

Galina stared down at her sleeping sister. They'd never been this far apart physically before and she'd never journeyed such a distance from her own body, but finding her twin was an instinct she could never switch off, nor would she want to.

Since childhood they'd shared thoughts, finishing each other's sentences like other twins, but for Galina there was something more, something she'd always been able to do, but withheld for many years, allowing Katya her privacy.

She made her way into her sister's mind, gently probing so as not to wake her. She swam amidst a chaotic whirl of fitful sleep. Turbulent emotions always ruled Katya, held in check only by force of will and redirection. Anger would fuel her work or sadness or some other passion, depending on her mood. Now she was gripped by fear and worry at their separation. Galina sailed these storms until they became quiet and calm then set about her task.

She called up memories; all that she had seen since they parted, sharing them as gifts to a mind the twin of her own. They were different in many ways, but the same in others, enabling the old blood to empower their connection.

When she was done, she stole away, evading Ibrox's gaze, to return to her body. She returned to gaze at the pillars. She looked down at the twisted crystal creepers peering into them. Something moved in their depths, something alive.

She felt things around her, three minds, prowling the cages of sleep, trapped in the crystal, whilst she roamed free. She watched them, peered into their delusions. Some were dreams of aspiration: invented lives, loves and ambition carved from the memories of their time awake. They had transcended mortality, becoming masters of their fate; powerful beyond measure to the worshippers they attracted and so in accepting reverence they become drunk on adulation. Faith cast an image of them, told a story of their past that wove truth with embellishment. Later, the truth disappeared leaving only legend and myth; upon this they built dreams, making castles from the lies and ignorance of their followers.

These were the wizards who constructed the chamber and the prison for Laurelatha's people. They never left, but lived in the hall until their lives ended. They found a means of preservation in the magic and the memory of their charges. The stories of the old ones invoked fear and fear preserved them within the crystal.

They became aware of her and stared out of their translucent tomb. At first, she feared what they might do, but they could not touch her unless she joined them. They commanded her to do so, but she refused. After that they threatened, promising retribution, but still she held back, recognising the purpose behind their words. They wanted her – to feast upon her memories and knowledge.

She stared at them, ignoring their demands until they began to beg. Eventually they offered to show her what she wanted. She waited a little longer and then moved towards them, accepting their offer and joining with them for a time.

The world turned backwards...

Her name was Ether and she asked to remain. With her were Tepeu and Enlil, two male wizards chosen to share her fate.

The spells woven into the door wards would mean years of work for anyone attempting to gain entry. A breach of the outer door might give them access to the reservations and the beings contained within them, but it would trigger alerts throughout the network.

Each of the three had reasons to accept isolation. For Ether, the task suited her purpose. Her mortal life would end soon and the role of guardian would permit her time to transcend. The node chamber gave her time and space without interference. She could explore the nature of her gift; the old blood of the first strangers who brought life and knowledge to this world.

Tepeu and Enlil would not disturb her. In the first times were all close. The last vestiges of mortality and the responsibilities of guardianship gave them common cause. Day and night had no meaning below ground, so they shared learning and lore in the timeless twilight, but then, they retreated to their own research, each etching their life's work into different sections of the walls.

When Tepeu died, she held his hand and pressed it to the crystal as he passed. She found Enlil's body wrapped around the pillar a few days later.

Being alone had been harder, it was one thing to be solitary, another to know you would never touch another living being. The creatures in the reservations were prevented from entering the chamber. All that remained were the preserved souls of her two companions.

From the node chamber, she would summon creatures to perform tasks as she wished. Sometimes she did that just to see a different face.

In those last days, she questioned the purpose. She recalled the words as she'd been taught.

The world lies at the centre of all things, bound together by a coincidence of magic. In all existence, there is no place like it. Over time these bonds loosen. Our work maintains them and preserves it. Without our effort, the seams break and the world shatters.

Our power is fuelled by the people who accept us. Faith, fear, love, loyalty, these are the ways we are tied to one another. Those without gift, give of what they are, these gifts empower us. Those who cannot or will not give must be contained. Only through fear can they be forced to assist our grand design.

Imprisonment and subjugation were necessary shackles. Without them, the world would fly apart. To maintain the land, magical seals were constructed deep below ground. These were empowered by all who pledged to the Earth's keeping.

The guardians were the apex of that pledge. The most feared and worshipped sent into exile to ensure the magic would hold. Each would survive into eternity as they passed into the crystal and eventually, another would come to replace them.

Now Ether sensed this other. *Have you come to rescue us?* she asked, but the other did not reply. She was strange – lore blind, but instinctive and powerful. She did not speak to any of them, but examined their memories. *Perhaps she is here to judge?* Ether hoped after all this time she would be found worthy. She stayed silent, leaving the threats and begging to Tepeu and Enlil, waiting until she was called.

But the other withdrew and hope faded.

Small red flames lit up a circle around three sleeping figures and Katya, who sat awake concentrating. Eleanor had been unable to teach her the light spell, but they'd worked out a way she could help. Katya took the third shift, after Rani and now, an impossible fire burned out of the rock, illuminating the group.

For others, the magic might have been strenuous to cast, but for Katya it was an effort to keep in check. Her mind raced with fantasies of the whole cavern ablaze, the red flames consuming everything in its way. Without her sister's reassuring presence, she doubted her restraint and fought to stay focused, staring at the conjuring, looking for any hint it might slip from her control.

She'd woken fresh from a dream of being in the tunnels and meeting strange people. It felt real, but was jumbled somehow, a mix of perspectives overlaid with her own memories. She struggled to reconcile what she saw with what had happened and questioned both versions of events, like the nightmares she'd had as a child. Back then she'd woken from falling in physical pain, to find it was her own gift making real what she believed. She would find herself in mid-air above the bed or in a heap on the floor. Those dreams scared her even now. The thought made the flames flare. She cursed under her breath.

The sound of quiet laughter from one of the sleepers distracted her. She looked around to see Magno awake and gazing at her. "This is difficult," she warned. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Indeed," he replied and sat up. "Maybe nerves and over thinking are hindering you."

"You've seen this in others then?" she asked.

Magno shook his head. "No, truth be told I've never met anyone like you or your sister. What she sees is beyond anything I can sense. Perhaps the *sibylline* would understand her, but I doubt it."

"And me?"

"You? You're plainly full-blood gifted and more than capable of doing anything, but none of the rotes and spell frames work for you." He shrugged. "Strange in many ways, since the most powerful wizards usually become so by joining the Church or some other order and cultivating their worshippers, but you... there's nothing of that."

"I don't know what I am," Katya mumbled. She searched inwardly. Faintly, she could still feel the people of her village and remembered the lessons of the elders. The flames wavered, so she turned her thoughts away from those unanswerable questions. "Do you think the dragons will come for us?"

"Hard to say," Magno replied. "The slope kept them back for now, but if they're smart, they'll find a way up."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Everything's dangerous. The question is whether they'll be dangerous to us." He picked up his scabbarded sword and drew the weapon, examining the blade in the flickering red light. "Likely, this place holds other strange things. We've yet to meet them, could be those encounters that end our quest."

"You think we're doomed then?"

Magno smiled at her, but the expression held no humour. "Not doomed while we breathe, but a way out would settle my heart."

"We need to find my sister first," Katya said.

His expression tightened into a grimace. "Indeed, I wish for that as well, though these tunnels are vast..."

The fire flared again and Katya cursed her lack of self-control. "We'll find her," she said.

Magno held up a hand. "Do not mistake me; I will do all I can for this end. If we are to escape, you and your sister are those I would see saved first. It is plain there is something to your gift that will aid us, though I know not what."

Katya sighed. "I'm being selfish, but her not being here is like losing my arm."

"Then we must seek her out," Magno said. He reached out and touched her hand. Katya gasped in surprise and snatched her hand away. The flames around them wavered. In response, he looked hurt and turned away, staring into the dark and waving her quiet when she started to speak. Katya frowned, but then heard something scrape against rock. Could it be the dragons, or—

"Ho the camp!" said a familiar voice. "Do I find friends?"

Magno stood. "You do indeed, Master Smogg, we wondered where you'd got to."

The little bearded explorer appeared on the edge of the firelight, his eyes glittering in the gloom. "You found your way in then," he said and smiled. "Well done."

"Where's my sister?" Katya asked.

"With Hino," Smogg replied. "We were separated, but I managed to track them. We should be able to pick them up on the way to where we're going."

"And where is that?"

"To a portal I found," Smogg said, his smile widening into a broad grin. "And, to our chance to leave."

Chapter 23: Pathway

The grey pre-dawn stole across the hilltops some miles from Sredets. The sun was still a good hour from rising and mist clung to the fields and woodland, but it was already light enough to see.

In the shadow of an oak tree, Piers sat against a log, staring at the town in the distance, watching a line of merchant carts on the north road. In front of him, the remains of a campfire glowed and smoked, the last of the wood now brittle ash. He'd stared into the dying flames asking himself the same question ever since they'd arrived.

What do I do now?

Faim lay behind an old fallen tree, his staff still clutched in his hands. His breath rattled in his chest and his painfully thin frame shivered as he slept. Piers wasn't sure what to make of him. Whilst they'd been allies against the blood drinker he'd called John, it was clear Faim had some prior relationship with the creature. Now as he stared at the sleeping Assyrian, Piers wondered what other secrets he kept. *But then I have secrets too*, he thought and sighed.

He walked from the little camp to another tree some distance away, undid his drawers and pissed in the dirt. Pursuit was unlikely now and every bone in his body ached with effort. He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and rest, but bite marks and scratches he'd acquired needed treating; a little boiled water and a wet rag would do the trick, but had to be done before he rested. The old blood might protect him from common infections, but there was no way of knowing what curse John's brood carried.

He cleaned up and walked back to the pile of ash. Faim was awake and sat on the tree he'd been sleeping against, and now leaned on his staff. He glanced up at Piers and gave him a tired smile. "My thanks for your assistance in all we have done," he said.

"I don't understand everything that happened," Piers said. "But I'm grateful to you for ensuring my freedom."

"My purpose is to grant that for anyone of the blood," Faim said. "Both you and the boy need to find your own paths."

"Let's hope *he* does."

"Indeed."

Piers hesitated for a moment, but then decided to speak his mind. "I heard what you said to John. What was he?"

"A half-blood," Faim said. "A true wizard's blood with the right ritual unlocked his gift. The side effects are severe, but worth it to some."

Piers frowned. "Such a corruption cannot be right."

"What is right?" Faim asked. "Who is to judge? Who lies behind the doorway to heaven? You know far better than I."

Piers flinched and stared at the ashes. "No-one," he muttered.

"Indeed."

Piers scratched his chin in the thought then raised his head again. "What is your purpose in all this? You say you seek to free wizards, but John was not one of us."

Faim smiled. "I want to free anyone. When John used powers against you and the boy, he lost my favour."

"Such freedom will not sit well with the Church."

"It may, it may not. At times, my methods are welcomed, but not always."

"Where will you go now?"

"Somewhere to rest and recover, then to liberate the minds of others who would remain trapped otherwise." Faim stood up, but still leaned heavily on his staff. "There is an old portal in a pagan circle near here, I will go there and return to a safer place."

"But you're not going to tell me where, are you?"

"No." Faim shuffled a few steps toward him and clasped his shoulder. "This is where we part. You need time also, so you can find your own path, but do not take too long. Change is in the air."

"I need to work out what I believe in," Piers said.

Faim nodded. "Yes, you do. It will help you accept the answers to your questions. You think you lack purpose, but really you stand at a crossroads in life. You must choose which you will take up."

Piers glanced at Sredets in the distance. "I'll not go back there," he said.

"Then the road is your next friend," Faim said. "May she be good to you as she has been to me."

And with that he turned and walked away.

The scraping sound of a metal bolt being drawn back made Hino glance up. The door to his small chamber opened and Sethanas stood in the arch. "It is time," he said.

Hino nodded and rose. He hadn't slept. The featureless room offered no comfort and the sullen cautious stares of his escorts suggested they would be waiting should he try to escape. He remembered the monks of Sado Island. Confinement there had included torture and interrogation, but at least he understood their motives and character. Here, the faces were alien and impossible to read.

Both his staff and his family sword had been confiscated by the guards. They provided no food, so he fasted in darkness and turned his mind to the forthcoming trial. How would Sethanas interpret his challenge? It was plain that these strange people feared wizards and had little stomach for letting Galina leave after she awoke magic in their cavernous kingdom.

Outside, he found a gathering of soldiers who fell into step around him as before. Sethanas led the way, his walk a rolling flow of movement. In his role as *dainagon*, Hino had witnessed the training of warrior monks and *shinobi* who sought to move with relaxed precision, but the efforts paled in comparison to the unconscious ease of Sethanas and his cohort. A swish of Sethana's cloak revealed Hino's curved *tachi* blade strapped to his belt. Hino smiled.

They walked further into the city, passing more of its strange arched buildings. Here and there, Hino spotted more warding symbols. The strange *aelfe* people stepped aside as they passed, watching them with sullen stares. There were more of the horses with horns that he'd seen before and groves of dark leafed trees, all illuminated by the glowing moss that ran in veins along each building and over the cut stone of the road.

The entire place fascinated Hino. He wanted to ask a hundred questions, but knew he would get no answers as they might give him an advantage. Sethanas' escorts stared straight ahead, ignoring him completely as he walked in their midst. One of them carried his staff, but stayed some distance away, lest he should try to take it back. The pace was brisk but not taxing and the activity warmed him for what was to come.

On the outskirts of the city they ascended a set of steps leading to a promontory thirty or forty-feet from the streets. Ahead, lay a narrow span of stone and below a vast chasm that dropped away into the centre of the world. On the other side, was a ledge and a large cave entrance.

"We have arrived," Sethanas announced.

Following some prior instruction, three of the escorts walked across the span, taking up positions in front of the cave mouth.

"You are next," Sethanas said.

Hino nodded, guessing the intended game. A duel on the narrow stone would favour the more dextrous competitor, perhaps balancing his gift of magic. He pointed at the three soldiers ahead.

"Why are they there?"

"To prevent your escape," Sethanas replied.

"You have my word I will partake in your challenge," Hino said. "Is this not enough?"

"No."

The insult was short and blunt. Hino shrugged, undid the clasp of his travelling cloak and dropped it to the stone. He bowed to Sethanas, turned and stepped onto the span.

She awoke in the node chamber.

For a moment, she was confused. The room was both incredibly familiar and new at the same time, as if she'd lived here for years, but also as if it were the first time she'd awoken in this place.

I am Galina.

She sat up as the memories and thoughts of another person settled into the back of her mind. The three souls she'd encountered remained in the crystal, but not for want of trying to break free. The two men had fought her, attempting to possess her, but they'd been there too long and become weak by being forgotten.

The woman had waited quietly, then shown her memories of her mortal life. It was these recollections Galina struggled to reconcile with her own.

She stood and went to the door. It opened at her touch. Two guards loitered outside in the half-light – a man and a woman *aelfe*. Their expressions were cautious. She stepped forward and they glanced at each other. The man nodded and ran off, the woman stayed in front of her.

"You are to remain," she said.

"I want Hino," Galina announced and took another step. The woman backed away.

“The voice decides what is to be done.”

Galina stared at her. “You cannot compel me to stay,” she said. “If you hurt me, your voice will be angry.”

The *aelfe* woman hesitated and didn’t reply. Galina looked around. The streets and buildings were familiar to her now, as if she’d helped with their construction. She saw no-one else around, but felt drawn to a particular road. She began heading in that direction. The guard fell into step behind her. “You should stay in the hall,” she said.

Galina ignored her and kept going. She sensed Hino somewhere ahead in a different part of the city. She made her way towards him, walking quickly. The memories she’d obtained from Ether meant she knew the quickest route and selected streets accordingly.

“Stop!”

She turned. Laurelatha was running down the road, flanked by a group of soldiers. She waited until they got close and let them surround her.

“Will you try to prevent me finding Hino?” she asked.

“You should return to your chamber until the matter is concluded,” Laurelatha replied.

Galina shook her head. “I need Hino. You will take me to him.”

“Apologies but that will not—”

“If you do not, I swear no more doors will be opened in this place.” Galina clasped her hands together and lowered her tone. “I have heard your plight. I have learned more in the chamber and I believe I can help you, but you must let me speak with Hino.”

Laurelatha’s expression became pained. “I have said, it is difficult to trust your kind when so much blood has been shed.”

“But you are trusting me,” Galina replied. “You already chose your path. To treat me as you were treated makes a lie of your intention and means you are as bad as those who caged you.”

Galina waited for a response, but Laurelatha stared at her and said nothing.

Eventually, Galina turned away and stepped up to one of the male guards she’d seen outside the node chamber. She gazed up into his strange eyes. “Out of my way,” she said.

Silently, he moved aside.

"We must hurry!" Smogg urged. "The portal will disappear soon!"

They ran through moss-lit tunnels, along a cliff and down further toward the centre of the world. Katya followed Ibrox, with Magno a reassuring presence behind her. Her cloak caught her ankle and she stumbled, but righted herself on the edge of a long drop, watching stones and dust disappear into the void below.

"Quickly!"

She ran on, focusing on Ibrox ahead. Time had no meaning here. Tunnel, passage, intersection, lake, pathway; each time they descended, taking them further away from the way they'd come. Only Smogg's memory of the route could bring them out now. She turned a corner and almost ran into Ibrox who'd stopped and crouched behind a rock. He pulled her down next to him and raised a finger to his lips. She nodded.

"Three guards," he whispered. "Eleanor and Smogg are concealed ahead."

Katya peeked out from their hiding place and noticed the silhouette of a man facing away from them in the entrance at the other end. The dream of before came back to her, the two were connected. "Who are they?" she asked.

"An intriguing question," Ibrox said. "Perhaps we will learn the answer."

"Where is the portal?"

"Over there."

Flickering shadows betrayed the presence of something on the far left of the cave. It looked like the light playing off water. To get to it, they would have to climb over rocks and gravel, alerting the watchers.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"We wait," Ibrox said.

Hino reached the centre of the stone span, stopped and turned around.

Sethanas stood on the promontory with his soldiers around him. He made no move towards the thin bridge.

Hino frowned. He peered down. The sides of the chasm converged in the distance below. He wondered how far he would fall if he slipped? Probably long enough to consider the impact awaiting him at the end. *If there is a bottom*, he thought.

A keening scream echoed out from the depths. There was movement, huge wings riding an updraft towards him. Instinctively he named what he saw.

Nihon no ryū.

Dragons. Creatures from the oldest stories he remembered being told as a child. The great *Ryūjin*, father of the first Emperor Jimmu and *Yamata no Orochi* the eight-headed serpent. The creature he saw was neither of these, nor a *Nāga* of the Buddhists, but he recognised it for being kin of those ancient legends.

A shout went up from Sethanas' followers. The captain ventured onto the span, making his way to the centre. When he was three steps from Hino he stopped. "A straight contest between a wizard and a mortal would never be fair," he said.

Hino frowned. "You leave a matter like this to chance?"

Sethanas shrugged. "Chance and skill. I know my worth. Honour is satisfied. The survivor will be the victor."

The dragon screamed again, landing on the far side rock face, it began to climb up, using its claws to gouge out grip. Then it leapt into the air once more, beat its wings once, twice, and returned to stone, climbing again. *It doesn't have enough room to fly freely*, Hino realised. *Such a creature was never made to live underground.*

The scrape of metal on leather alerted him. He ducked under Sethanas' sword swing, barely keeping his balance on the thin bridge. "We are still to fight then?"

Sethanas nodded. "I gain nothing if I do not defeat you."

Hino backed away a few steps and turned around. The three guards remained alert. One held a bow with an arrow notched on the string. They would interfere if he gave them reason. He glanced back at Sethanas. "Where is the girl?" he demanded.

"Safe for now. The voice is with her."

"How will you deliver her?" Hino asked.

Sethanas shrugged and stepped forwards. "If you win, she will be yours to claim and I will be dead, so she will mean nothing to me."

The *tachi* flashed out again, a straight thrust, forcing Hino back or sideways. He chose the latter and lost his footing, a leg left dangling in the void for a moment before he regained his balance. "Your possession of my sword makes this contest uneven," he remarked.

Sethanas smiled. "The ancients tell us a wizard is never without a weapon."

Hino retreated another two steps and muttered the words he'd been taught. Immediately, the air tightened and the stone stretch between him and Sethanas discoloured. A dark ooze dripped from the rock, spreading rapidly all around it, reaching towards them both. "Let the girl go free and this will end," Hino urged.

Sethanas' smile was gone. He knelt in front of the slime, touching it carefully with the tip of his sword. The weapon stuck and he could not remove it. He cursed and drew a knife, flinging it at Hino who ducked and heard it clatter against the cliff.

"I will not yield!" Sethanas snarled, gathered himself and leapt, over the dripping slime and straight at Hino.

He could not dodge. Sethanas' weight bore him backwards. Pain lanced through him as his knee twisted and he fell back. He flailed, grabbing for something and managed to hook his arm around the stone as his legs slid away, leaving him hanging.

Sethanas knelt on the bridge, breathing hard. He stood up and pulled out another knife. "You have a choice," he said. "Die by the blade or the fall."

Hino closed his eyes and chose.

Creepers sprouted from the underside of the span, grabbing his arms and legs. He relaxed into their embrace, flowing and moving with them until he could grab the rock again, the other side of the slime. He let go of the spell, the plant shrivelled and he clambered up, to stand in front of the trapped *tachi*. He grasped the hilt as the ooze retreated. The weapon was his once more.

Sethanas scowled and turned to the guards on the far side. One threw him a straight blade. He caught it with an easy flowing motion and faced Hino, his eyes glittered with cold intent.

Hino remembered the first day he'd been allowed to hold his family sword, the sense of pride he'd felt had been palpable. When the *tachi* had been placed in his hands, he'd hardly dared breathe. They'd let him keep the weapon all night, whilst his father and grandfather had told him the tale of its making and the legend of its use. Theirs was a young family, not steeped in the old ways

like the Minamoto or the Fujiwara, but a code of quiet wisdom and loyalty bound each generation to the Emperor's service as they took pains to preserve their heritage and the gift of magic.

In later years, they'd trained him with wooden weapons, then blunt sword and lesser blades, all to make him worthy of the artefact. The day he'd fled Japan he'd remembered his son, left alone without the weapon or the knowledge of his father's fate. It was a dishonour he still wished to rectify.

But while he lived, the *tachi* remained his.

Sethanas lunged forwards, handling his sword with polished ease. Hino stepped back and checked himself from sidestepping into nothing. He held his curved blade above his head, timing his opponent's moves and waiting for his chance.

A second lunge and an over extension. The *tachi* came down like a hammer on the thicker blade, its razor edge notching the straight steel. Sethanas retreated, swung again. Hino parried to his right and let the magic flow. The sword responded like an old friend and began to shine with power. He stepped towards Sethanas, slapped away his notched weapon and aimed a cut at the strange man's throat, stopping inches from his flesh.

"It is over," Hino said.

There was a scream from the far end of the cave. He glanced around.

A huge clawed hand grabbed the first of the guards, dragging him from the ledge and into oblivion. Katya's heart lurched as she saw the beast that it belonged to emerge; plainly an elder to the dragons they'd seen in the cavern. This one, fully grown and deadly.

The two figures sprang to engage, a fight for survival as they scampered away from the creature. As one retreated towards them, Magno stepped out and smoothly stabbed him through the chest from behind. He gestured to Ibrox, who also stood and ran forward. Katya followed.

Smogg appeared and pushed her to the left, "The portal!" he urged.

She shook her head. "Not without my sister!"

He scowled and turned away. Lady Eleanor moved passed them both to Magno's side, Ibrox was already there. Katya joined them to see what was going on.

The dragon was too big to fit into the cave or to stand on the ledge. It scrabbled awkwardly against the cliff face, trying to maintain its position whilst the last guard loosed arrow after arrow at it. Six shafts lay buried in its side.

Beyond the fighting, there was a narrow stone bridge. On the bridge, Hino stood with a glowing sword in his hands, facing another soldier whose own weapon tumbled into the chasm below.

On seeing Hino, Katya couldn't help but run forwards, oblivious to the danger. The dragon's head snapped around and its eyes met hers.

She saw anger and fear in those eyes, the beast knew what it faced and could sense its young in the chambers beyond. It wanted them, as any mother would. Katya and the others were in the way, the rock face was in the way. The dragon would tear them all down to reach her kin.

Another arrow caught the creature along the jaw and it turned away. Ibrox knelt over the dead soldier and shouted strange words. The corpse stiffened and unnatural light sprang from its eyes. It stood up, its movements jerky and awkward then made for the dragon, charging straight at it. The impact dislodged it from the ledge and sent the soldier tumbling into the abyss below.

For a moment, the dragon too seemed like it would fall, but then its wings came to its rescue, it caught an updraft and righted itself, screaming at Katya and her companions as they charged forwards.

"Hino!"

The shout came from across the bridge. Katya recognised the voice and her heart missed another beat.

"Galina!"

She reached the promontory in time to witness the dragon regain its balance in mid-air and watch the soldier drop to his doom.

"Please! Do not go to them!" Laurelatha begged. "You will abandon us to oblivion!"

Galina ignored her and shouldered her way through the ring of *aelfe* soldiers. None of them made a move to stop her. She stepped to the edge and out onto the span. "Hino, release him," she called.

The Japanese *dainagon* turned towards her. "Honour must be satisfied," he said.

"It is," Galina replied. "You won. I have the right to choose."

Hino bowed and lowered his sword, allowing Sethanas to get to his feet. He eyed the dragon hovering above them. It stared down, drew back, inhaled, and spewed fire, immolating the *aelfe* who screamed as he burned to ash.

Hino ran towards Galina, reached the promontory and grabbed her wrist. "We must hasten!"

"I'm not coming with you," Galina said.

His face tightened, the schooled expression of his upbringing cracked into shock and surprise. "But..."

"You gave me the chance to choose," Galina said. "I have. I know what my gift is for now. I need to stay with these people."

Hino let go and glanced back at the dragon. "Will you doom me as well?" he asked.

"No," Galina said. "You can still make it." She snatched his staff from the *aelfe* beside her and handed it to him. Hino took it and nodded. He sheathed his sword, turned and made his way back onto the span.

Katya saw Hino turn and run towards them. "They won't make it!" she cried.

"They will," Eleanor said and signalled to Magno who ran forwards. Ibrox and Smogg followed him to the ledge. Ibrox pointed his staff at the creature and released a ball of energy from its tip that streaked upwards. The dragon twisted and dropped, dodging the magic, but also losing altitude, giving Hino precious time.

But Galina wasn't moving.

Katya screamed, but her sister remained where she was. None of the people around her moved or stood in the way, but she still didn't move.

Then Hino slipped.

Magno had reached the middle, past the scorched rock where the soldier had burned. He leapt forward and caught Hino's hand as he fell, dragging him back onto the bridge with impossible strength.

The dragon screamed and soared upwards, shattering the span as it powered into the air above them. Magno shouted as he jumped from the stone, flinging himself at the wall. Somehow, he twisted in mid-air. Got his hands and feet in the right position and grabbed the rock as he smashed into it. He cried out in pain, but held on.

Katya looked for Hino, but couldn't find him. "Where is..."

"I saw him fall," Smogg said. "He's gone."

"As must we be," Eleanor announced. "There is nothing more for us here."

"But my sister—"

"I will not lose anyone else."

"I can't leave her!" Katya cried. She moved for the shattered bridge, but Ibrox grabbed her arm just as the dragon lunged at them all. Claws snapped at where she would have been and fire followed, scorching the ledge.

"Move!" shouted Ibrox, pushing her back into the cave. She fought him, but he was too strong and wrestled her towards the portal. As she passed through, she caught sight of Magno behind them all, covered in his own blood.

*Five skandas have formed this transient shape
Whose four elements return now to true being;
I hold my neck against the naked blade—
The cutting is like a gust of wind.*

Chapter 24: Plight

"I couldn't save him. I had to let go."

The story told, Magno fell silent.

Katya stared at the wooden table in front of her. The empty chairs stared back like scars; Hino, Smogg and Galina. None of them had returned. She remembered the burning house and the huddled woman. She'd withdrawn into herself that time, become senseless to the outside, perceiving the world as if through fog or a dark tunnel. She felt dislocated again, like she was watching herself, and powerless to do anything but the most basic things.

A tapping sound brought her back and made her raise her head. Lady Eleanor's fingers drummed against the table. She glared at each of them, but didn't speak. It wasn't her place to. She looked at Cardinal Giovanni Colonna last, waiting for his response.

"There is much in this tale that is hard to accept," Colonna said at last. "If what you found is a city beneath the island protected by seals of magic, how many places may exist elsewhere?"

"Everything we have told you is the truth," Katya said.

Colonna nodded. "I understand child, but you must let an old man absorb these revelations and give him time to ponder for meaning." He glanced at Rani. "Could such history be hidden from us?"

"We need to go back, find my sister and save her," Katya said.

"If she wishes to be saved?" Colonna's smile was full of sympathy, making her seethe. "As you say, Hino went back, but she did not come with him."

"She wouldn't abandon me."

"Indeed, I think much of our hope rests upon this conclusion."

They all fell silent for a time. Katya's eyes went back to the wooden table. Galina would sense something in its texture, its whorls and grooves, but to her it was just wood, cut, scrubbed, painted and polished. In her mind she saw it ablaze, her friends leaping for the windows as the fire spread after them, higher and higher reaching out, reaching—

"You cannot go back," Colonna announced. "The portal is closed to us. The way you came here was lost soon after you arrived and the route to the island no longer works. A ship might be commissioned, but the journey would take weeks and even then—"

"I'm not leaving her." Katya felt the wood give a little under her fingers as they dug into it. "Find a ship."

Colonna glanced at Eleanor who met his gaze, nodded once and rose from her seat. "I must attend to something," she said. "I will return shortly."

After she had gone. Colonna spoke again. "We will not go back now. I think our business is concluded for the night, you should all get some rest."

"I won't rest," Katya growled. "I can't I'm—"

"You will rest," the cardinal's voice was quiet but firm and helped her remember herself. "We are your friends. We *will* aid you."

"I'm sorry, I just—"

"I understand."

One by one they left the table, leaving for their prepared rooms. Katya didn't move, but rode the whirl of emotion, seeking calm. When only Rani remained, she raised her head again. "How do you control it?" she asked.

Rani smiled. "Age helps. Experience tempers what you are, although I cannot claim to have had your power when I was young."

"I want to burn everything to find her."

"I lost everything. My husband sacrificed himself for me. I too wanted to burn the world, but settled for burning my own physical form. As it was consumed, so I was set free."

"Are you suggesting I do the same?"

Rani shook her head. "Your time has not yet come. Your sister still lives."

The woodlands around the Iwashimizu Hachiman-gū temple were thick and lush with few trodden paths. The man who was once called Hino Kunimitsu avoided these anyway and set about his work by living alone in the deepest brush and avoiding prying eyes.

It had been days since he'd visited Iga and faced the nine trials of the *Oni*. To a mortal, one such pact would be more than a soul could bear, but a gifted wizard might endure more and the demons were intoxicated by the opportunity. They had come to him each hour, bonding with his magic and granting him the shadow lore of their kind.

But each demanded a different price.

Overnight, his hair became silver and scars decorated his face. He gave up the little finger of his left hand, the little toe of his right foot as well. He'd given blood, bile, seed and saliva, but these paled to the last sacrifice.

You must give up your name.

He was Kumawaka now, the name given to him first as a child, the price for his abilities, to become the creature spoken of in stories. The demon bargains would hold until he could restore the honour of his house. *When I find the family sword.* He knew it would never happen.

He could not return to his life. Counsellors, nobles and attendants of Emperor Go-Murakami's court would worry at his absence, his family would worry more.

But I cannot go back.

Kumawaka came to the woodland near the temple in the dead of night and began his work. He cast the *Oni* seed into the dirt, cut his wrist and whispered words over it. A tree ripped its way out of the ground in moments, its leaves a strange tint of blue. He stepped forward and its trunk opened. He could stand inside without effort and the strange tree shared its strength with him.

All through the day he remained there, watching and waiting. Servants from the temple came and went. If they noticed the new tree, they gave no sign. Inside, he carried out his preparations, changing clothes and mixing liquids as he'd been taught. He became a part of the tree, feeling how it drew from the earth, the sun and the rain, using the natural alchemical processes of its own body to sustain itself. If other matters had not been pressing he might have stayed there for weeks, learning all he could.

It grew dark and he emerged, dressed now in shadow grey, the same colour the old man from Iga had worn. The shoes and gloves were soft and supple; the shirt and breeches, light and close-fitting. Over them he wore belts, pouches and a carry sack. An assortment of knives adorned two cross-bandoilers, his wrists and the side of his boots. Across his back was a short black stave, a wizard tool he'd traded for his ornate staff. His other weapons were concealed.

Kumawaka moved through the woodland slowly at first and then with increasing speed as he became confident in how quiet he could be. When he reached the walls of the temple complex, he dropped to a crouch and waited.

Gradually, the sounds from within came to him. The *ashigaru* soldier taking a piss over the battlement twenty yards away, the horses whimpering to one another in the stable on the other side of the wall and the low murmur of conversation around a warming fire in the courtyard.

Kumawaka touched the wall with his fingertips. The rough planks held an echo of their former life as a tree. He called to this memory with the magic and his acquired knowledge of forests, pushing his fingers into its mass. The sensation was strange, as his body became intangible and occupied the same space as the wood.

Two gifts used...

Moments later he was through and on the other side. He could see figures loitering around three wagons across the courtyard, clustered around a small fire. He recognised the red sashes and flags of the Ashikaga shogunate. The attendance of Takauji's soldiers and travelling entourage confirmed the presence of their master in the temple.

Nearby, he saw an open cart, its haul covered by dark canvas. Strangely, a horse remained yoked to the front. It raised its head, eyes gleaming in the dark as it stared straight at him. For a moment, he held his breath, but the beast made no sound and looked away.

Kumawaka kept low, moving along the wall in the shadow of the battlement. He'd been here before, as an eight-year-old child accompanying his father on a visit to Osaka. The private shrines were in the main building. On normal days, the temple priests and servants would retire at sundown, gathering only for the evening prayer. But the shogun's presence meant a change to protocol. The entrance was guarded by two samurai and more would be at each door.

To attempt entry by such a route would invite discovery.

Kumawaka pulled his cowl over his face and tucked his hands into his sleeves then whispered the words the fourth *Oni* had taught him. He moved out of the shadows and crossed the courtyard, heading straight for the guarded doors, repeating the same words over and over. When he neared the two watchers, his whisper became barely audible.

"You hear something?"

"No."

Kumawaka slipped through the open door and kept walking. He continued whispering the words, passing two other guards, until he reached an intersection. He turned to the left and found himself by a staircase. He crouched beneath it and let the chant end.

He was tired, as if he'd been running for a mile or more. It took several minutes to calm his breathing and steady his thumping heart.

He moved from the staircase back into the passageway. Time was of the essence now, so he walked quickly, almost at a run, reaching another door and slipping through into a wide lantern-lit hall.

I remember this place.

Twenty-five years ago, he had been brought into this room and told to sit on a bench while his father went to an adjoining chamber. Now he found himself in here alone again for very different reasons.

Which one will he be in?

Kumawaka reached into a pouch and pulled forth a pinch of dust. He threw it into the air and watched where it went – towards a closed door on his left. *That one.*

He turned and walked in the direction the dust indicated.

"I can't let you do that."

Kumawaka froze. *I've failed*, he thought. The voice was a man's, the words, roughly spoken in English, a language he'd learned at his father's insistence. He turned around and found himself staring at the old shrunken face of a white man. He wore a hooded cloak and carried a long staff with a thin curved blade on one end – a scythe – the tool a farmer might use for threshing crops.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Obidiyah and you'll not be disturbing the lord, my friend," the man said.

A twitch of Kumawaka's wrist brought a knife into his hand and in one fluid motion it spun across the room towards Obidiyah to lodge in his shoulder. He gasped and staggered. Kumawaka charged forwards, another knife flashed through the air and another after that, catching ribs and thigh. A fourth blade in Kumawaka's hand punched into Obidiyah's chest, right where the heart should be. The man coughed, stumbled and fell backwards. His scythe clattering to the floor. Kumawaka was already turning away, towards Takauji's prayer shrine.

A second, identical Obidiyah figure stood in front of the door, scythe in hand and a wide rictus grin on his face. "We are alike, you and I," he said. "Both gifted, both finding power in the stories others tell of us. To those whispering in the dark, I am the harvester of souls, who steals the breath of the strong and the weak alike. I come for them as they sleep, work and pray. Young or old, I do

not discriminate. To them, I am the last light and face before oblivion. In that moment, I feast and they die.”

Kumawaka glanced over his shoulder. The body was gone and his knives lay discarded on the floor. “If death is what you want, why do you protect Lord Ashikaga?” he asked.

Obidiyah stepped forwards, gripping his weapon with both hands, the blade of the staff gleaming in the lantern light. “Because, like you, I swore oaths for my power,” he said. “The shogun will not be harmed, but you... are another matter.”

The scythe blade flashed as it moved in a horizontal arc. Kumawaka leapt backwards to avoid it, but Obidiyah kept coming towards him, reversing the weapon impossibly fast and swinging it again and again. Kumawaka wondered why no soldiers or priests came to investigate the noise, but learned the answer when he reached the far wall and tried a door handle.

Locked.

“You are mine,” Obidiyah said. “There is no escape!”

Kumawaka ducked under another swing. He could sense the magic of the blade and the man. Obidiyah emanated power, more tangible than anything he’d felt in his years being schooled by his father and other gifted tutors. “What are you?” he gasped.

“The product of myth, belief and story made flesh,” Obidiyah said. “What you might have been, if you’d lived.”

The sixth talisman of the *Oni* was in Kumawaka’s hand. He cast it upon the floor. There was a flash of light and fire and Obidiyah stepped back. Kumawaka spoke the word he’d been taught and everything swirled away into a dark empty void.

The last of the rocks fell away into darkness.

On his knees, Tuia peered into the void below the pyramid. No amount of torchlight would illuminate the space, any they sent into the gloom disappeared with no sound of reaching bottom.

He couldn’t see the monster from before, but he knew it was waiting and appraising his efforts. The warriors who he’d pressed into service murmured to each other *Quetzalcoatl* – the feathered

dragon god. As the hours of labour wore on, more and more of them disappeared, no doubt believing themselves cursed or worse.

Tuia knew different. If the creature was a god, he would be setting it free, if not, his mistress would covet its power.

Something stirred in the dark, a lambent red glow seething up from below. Tuia stood and backed away from the hole. The remaining people with him needed no prompting to do the same. One man screamed and ran from the blood-stained chamber. Part of Tuia wanted to follow him, but another part yearned for the sight of what he had liberated in all its glory.

A noise of surging wind came from the depths then a huge claw reached out and clutched at the crumbling flagstones where Tuia had been crouched moments before. A scaly head emerged, bigger than the rafts loaded with stone. Red eyes speared him to the wall. He gripped the knife in his hands and tried to hold that gaze, to muster his magic, but this mind would not be mastered by him. He sensed the fury and relief of a prisoner kept in slumber and chains, far from dreams of open sky and mountain tops. Countless time spent in numb darkness, now at last, free.

The head rose into the chamber, its mouth opened, sucking in air then gaped and exhaled. Flames immolated the walls, splashing downwards.

Tuia ran, the heat scorching the hair from his arms and scouring his skin. People cried and fled in front of him. He reached the entrance and the cool night outside the temple, slowed and looked back.

Fire soared into the black sky. Stones cracked and tumbled from the highest tiers of the pyramid, crushing those unfortunate enough to be beneath. A fragment struck Tuia on the shoulder, numbing his arm and knocking him flat. There he remained, to witness the redemption of his subterranean prisoner.

A massive hole appeared in the side of the building. Powerful scaled claws grasped the fractured walls and the creature emerged, its keen of triumph drowning out the panic of the fleeing crowds. Its wings unfurled to their full extent and it leaped into the air, climbing toward the stars, until it disappeared amongst them.

All the while, Tuia lay on the ground, watching in awe.

AD 1345

Night time along the river outside Auberoche. The land seethed and undulated. Hundreds of men marching through the shallow water; the English army under the command of the Earl of Derby had come to relieve the besieged town.

Piers Gaveston marched with them, his unkempt appearance, rusted armour and sword concealed in the darkness. He kept his head down and matched their pace. His boots were wet through, but it felt good to be in a familiar place, amidst Plantagenet and Gascon soldiers on their way to fight the French.

They began moving uphill. Ahead, Piers could see rank upon rank of men struggling up the incline in the twilight, carrying packs and polearms. It wasn't hard to stay hidden. There were no torches and few conversations. Occasionally, the people around him whispered to each other, avoiding the angry glare of their sergeant.

About halfway up the slope, the men ahead of him stopped. Word got around and gradually people unslung their packs and sprawled in the dewy grass. Piers sat with them, but kept his eyes on the ground and his thoughts to himself.

Fifteen hundred men mustered to fight a French army of several thousand; a simmering war that had been building for years, ever since the time before his exile and execution in England. It had been decades since he was a part of the military councils and royal courts, but Piers still remembered the arrogance and the fervour of eager nobles, keen to gain the favour of kings. *They will be talking together now*, he thought. *Planning their surprise attack and claiming God is on their side.*

He could hear people around him murmuring their own prayers and smiled bitterly to himself. *Your angels fight amongst you and bicker over who has rights to this land.* He remembered the stories in the *Summa Magiolaie*, how the first wizard kings had commanded vast armies and brought ruin to the world. He thought they were fairy tales when he first read them, but now...

"Ain't seen you before." An old man was speaking to him. Broken teeth shaped the words with a thick Cornish accent. He was thin, with a loose-fitting helm, filthy tabard and pack that looked larger than him. "When'd you join up?"

"Gascony," Piers replied.

"Then you'll be thankin' us, returning your lands to the rightful king."

"Farmers sow the same crops, no matter the colour of the pennant," Piers said.

"Sounds like you ain't too keen to fight," the old man said and turned away.

It began to rain, big heavy droplets pattering on armour, drawing groans from those around Piers. This wouldn't be the usual battle of archers against cavalry. If reinforcements didn't arrive, it would be a surprise attack in the darkness, a chaotic massacre where friend and foe would blur together in a struggle to survive.

Piers glanced at the old man again, and felt the sense of belonging evaporate. *You're right. What am I doing here?*

He stared out into the mist. Shadows and shapes looked like soldiers in the half-light. He remembered battlefields in Ireland and England and their bloody aftermath. Always, lives lost and little change to show for it. He was a man out of time, this war, no longer his business or part of his life.

He waited another hour, until exhausted soldiers began to fall asleep where they lay. Then he got up, murmuring the words he'd been taught. Wisps of magic that would help him disappear from their minds, to help him fade away, back into his life of aimlessness and nothing.

Except it wasn't nothing anymore; seeing purpose in others, sharing it if only for a moment, helped. Piers remembered that awful void he'd seen inside the arch made by the Templars. *In their arrogant search, they found no God and were cursed for building Migdal Bavel.*

For forty years and more he'd believed the absence of God on that day meant no god existed. He'd seen the Church as a self-serving parasite, milking the faith of mortals to serve the gifted in their quest for power, but the crude loyalty expressed by the old man was touching. He missed the sense of comradeship he'd felt for a while amongst those ramshackle soldiers, united by words and a cause. There was a power to being a part of that; a different kind of power to that expressed by people who set themselves apart.

After a time, he stopped walking and found a small copse where he hunkered down to rest. The hard tack biscuit he'd been given the previous morning was unappetising, but took his mind from the chill.

The night hours waned and the sun rose. Piers gathered wood and used slivers of magic to light a fire. He ventured a little way, discovered a brook and filled his helm, returning to boil water with herbs.

He saw Auberoche in the distance, a stone tower of the castle peaking over hilltops. Outside it, the dark stain of the French camp oozed smoke into the morning air. The battle would be traditional after all, but no less bloody.

Piers stared at both for a long while. He had no reason to remain, but he had nowhere else to go either, so he waited a while to ponder the devotion of mortals with their short lives. What did a day matter to a man who was dead inside?

He sat down and turned away from the sight, but remained for the inevitable. The first shouts and screams started at mid-afternoon. After that, the distant sound of horses and clashes of steel confirmed the fate of his companions.

It grew dark and he lay down to sleep, but the noise continued. He couldn't see what happened, but his imagination painted a gruesome picture.

The morning after was quiet. He rose and walked towards Auberoche, diverting toward the rubbish and refuse of battle. He strode amongst the corpses and scavengers with his head low, ignoring stares, threats or hails. Eventually, he found what he sought – the old man, lying face down in a pool of his own blood and shit. That uneven mouth would speak no more Cornish words.

Piers dragged him from the carnage to an undisturbed spot. With his helm, sword and hands he dug a shallow grave, his heart warming to the honest labour. When he judged it deep enough, he placed the old man within and buried him. Above the head he affixed a spear and a broken sword, bound with twine in the shape of a cross. Then he knelt and gazed at his work.

A hand touched his shoulder. "Friend of yours?"

Piers didn't look around, but shook his head. "I hardly knew him," he said.

"Then why—"

"Because the dead deserve a memorial for what they did, whether it was right or wrong. He gave his life as did all of them. As do all those who die in battle for causes they barely understand. They are slaves to kings, queens, princes and priests, told lies to serve those who think they know better. I cannot do them all. This unknown man is for all of them who'll never be found and never be known."

The hand disappeared. The stranger grunted and moved away, leaving Piers alone.

After a while, he got up again and started walking.

AD 1348

The noise from the kitchens awoke Gurda. It took a moment or two for her to identify where she was, but then she remembered.

The underground kitchens of the Palais des Papes.

She sat up. Gradually the details came back. The wine cellar of Clement VI newly constructed residence – the *palais neuf* – an extension to the older buildings of Benedict XII which were built on the Rock of Doms. The new chambers were complete and every care had been taken to blend the architecture with the old, but the differences were noticeable, particularly where artisans could not contain their exuberance.

The shadowy alcove she huddled in, surrounded by barrels and bottles held very little of that exuberance. Built for function rather than form, it would not be toured or seen by the persons whose wines and ales it stored.

Which suited Gurda perfectly.

She stood up slowly, brushing the dust from her thin cassock and giving her legs a chance to rediscover their strength. Her walking stick lay propped against the wall. The feel of it in her hand reassured and restored her.

She peered out from her hiding place. Candlelight revealed three figures dragging out a selection of caskets, their throaty French conversation indecipherable to her at first, but gradually as her strength and magic returned, so too did her understanding.

“...there is no point in arguin’, vittles for forty-three, we were told.”

“Aye, no arguin’.”

“Then bend your back and still your tongue.”

Gurda slipped around the wooden shelves, staying to the shadows, out of sight of the three men. A whispered word brought forth the magic and kept her hidden as she slipped from the room into the tunnel beyond. At the far end was a closed door. She opened it.

Into the main kitchen.

“Who’re you?”

Gurda opened her mouth to reply, but a wave of heat stole the words from her lips. A red-faced woman glared at her as more folk bustled around tables, stone sides and several stoked ovens. One or two stopped to stare.

Gurda coughed and acclimatised. "Sent from Gascony with the cardinal," she said.

"An' you're here to help no doubt?" the woman scowled. She was old, bent almost double as she leaned over a stone table. "We've plenty of special folks from all the red guests; one more'll make no difference. I suppose you're to taste the soup an' check my work for belladonna and hemlock?"

"No, just asked to help."

The woman's scowl became a frown. "In that case, what are you good for?"

"Washer work mostly," Gurda said and held out her calloused hands.

"Strange to send someone extra for that," the woman said. She pointed to the far end of the kitchen where Gurda could see a small knot of people attacking the fresh baked loaves. "Help them," the woman said. "Work fast and steal nothing, else you'll feel my wrath, cardinal's bitch or not."

Gurda nodded and hurried quickly toward the group, taking her place at the far end. She'd planned to be awake earlier, before the breakfast service began, but somehow, she'd overslept – the frailties of her continued mortality. She picked up a round loaf of bread and a knife and cut two pieces from it. When the woman looked away, Gurda whispered another phrase, pocked the bread slices and slipped away from the table, through another door at the far end. No-one saw her leave. The magic took care of that.

A thin winding stairwell took her up to another floor and past a thin stain-glassed window. The fragmented light of the early morning sun illuminated the turn of the steps and the figure coming down the other way. Gurda bowed her head and let the manservant pass without catching his eye, then carried on.

Alone on the next landing, Gurda paused to catch her breath, leaning heavily on her stick. She drew back her sleeve and unwound the stained bandage from her wrist. Weeping sores and scabs began to itch in the open air. She pinched one and let the pus ooze onto her fingers then walked on down the corridor and to the next staircase.

Three floors above, she found the bedchamber she was looking for. A soldier stood outside the door. As he turned towards her she spoke a word and made a hooking gesture with her walking stick. His eyes lost focus and he fell senseless to the ground. Gurda winced at the noise. The blatant use of magic might have drawn attention to those sensitive to it somewhere else, but in Avignon, close to the contained rift, such perceptions were truncated. She could feel the distortions of the tear affecting her own gift, calling to her from its prison deep below the oldest part of the palace.

She'd made some attempt to investigate it the previous night, but the number of wizard guards discouraged any thought of gaining access to the warded room in which it was contained.

Matters at hand.

She stepped over the soldier and opened the door.

The room remained dark, the drapes drawn and the air dusty. A figure lay sleeping in the large bed, grey hair spread across the pillow. A quill, ink and parchment discarded at a writing desk.

Gurda approached the bed and the small table beside it. From within her robe she drew out two hunks of bread she'd taken from the pile in the kitchen and placed them next to an empty wine goblet. She wiped the pus from her fingers across them both and whispered more words of magic. The sweat from her hands would help it spread and take root.

The sleeping man stirred, mumbled something in his sleep and turned over. Gurda shrank back and held her breath, but he made no further sign. She could see his old face in the half-light – a proud Roman nose softened by Italianate cheekbones and worry lines. It wasn't someone she had known, but it was the face of an enemy.

Cardinal Giovanni Colonna.

She moved quietly to the door, opened it and hurried away.

A fiery pre-dawn greeted Piers Gaveston as he walked the last half mile to Fontevraud.

He watched the sun as it climbed into the Loire valley, painting the fields in rich hues of orange and red. The old legend came to mind – *and in the morning, it will be foul weather, for the sky is red and louring.*

What warning do you bring? Piers thought. *How can my fate become worse?*

He made his way through quiet streets and buildings towards the abbey. After leaving Faim, he'd elected to try to find the only other gifted person he knew who wouldn't kill or capture him on sight.

Eleanor of Aquitaine.

He walked around the low walls until he was sure no-one was watching then climbed over, jumping down onto tilled earth and rows of sowed crop. A side door stood ajar and he hastened

towards it. A hunched woman appeared in front of him, carrying a basket and mumbling; he elbowed her aside and went in, moving quickly along a narrow passage, his magically attuned senses seeking out anything that might lead to his quarry – a portal, a doorway, anything that would—

“Gaveston.”

He recognised the voice immediately and turned back. The woman he’d passed raised her head, drew back her hood and stood up straight.

Eleanor.

“How did you know it was me?” Piers asked.

“I always know where you are. I came here as soon as I sensed you,” Eleanor replied. “What do you want?”

“To find you, I assumed since this was the place you lived in your last days...”

“A place I return to occasionally when needed,” Eleanor crossed the distance between them and laid a hand on his shoulder. “They told me you died.”

“The same was said of you.”

Eleanor smiled sadly and stared at him. “Did you let it all pass though, like I never could?”

“I was executed on the road. No choice.”

“And you held our secret, all this time?”

“I did, I still do.”

“So why are you here?”

“I have... nothing else.”

Eleanor sighed. “I followed your path from afar. Truly, that night in Avignon blighted your soul. It made you doubt all things, just as it would anyone. Only you and I remain who saw through that door into the nothing beyond.”

“I can’t live with it.” Piers sank to his knees. “I can’t carry the burden any longer, knowing what we are, that all faith and all is a lie... I can’t...” The words wouldn’t come out. Instead he buried his face in her habit and let the grief have its way, his body convulsing with each utterance. “I want to believe in something...”

Eleanor held him there, her hand moving to the back of his head, gently stroking his filthy matted hair. “Not all hope is lost,” she said softly.

Timeline of Significance

1348: Cardinal Giovanni Colonna dies in Avignon. The Black Death reaches France, Denmark, Norway and England, striking at populations weakened by nearly two generations of malnutrition. Around one-third of the people in affected areas are to die.

1349: Plague reaches the city of Basel. The Jewish communities are cast out.

1350: Belief in witchcraft is revitalised. Convinced that the end of the world is at hand, some engage in frenzied bacchanals and orgies. Those called flagellants believe that the plague is the judgment of God on sinful mankind. Walking across the countryside, men and women flog one another. They preach that anyone doing this for thirty-three days will be cleansed of all sin – one day for every year that Christ lived. The Church is on guard against creative, heretical theology and Pope Clement VI condemns the movement. In Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs build causeways with canals.

1351: The towns of Florence and Milan go to war as Milan tries to extend its power south-east into Tuscany. Plague reaches Russia.

1352: Rebellion by Chinese against Mongol rule erupts near the city of Guangzhou.

1355: The Scots ally with the French and declare war on the English.

To be continued in *The War of Orders*. Book 2 of the Death of Gods Trilogy.

Critical Element: Investigation into Writing Structures and World Development Techniques in Chaos Reborn and Elite Dangerous

In chapter one, I give an introduction to the aspects of writing for a fiction that incorporates multiple texts and outputs.

In chapter two, I outline a set of theoretical principals that explain the referential and generic nature of literary production, establishing how new texts are inspired by older works.

In chapter three, I explain my own journey developing the material for the Chaos Reborn project, working from early influences to doing the necessary research and finally providing an analytical examination of the guide text I devised to support the creation of other work.

In chapter four, I outline the design intentions of *Dreams of Chaos*, the principle creative work.

In chapter five, I discuss and explain the solidification of the macrotext into *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016) – an illustrated referential guidebook to the world of Chaos Reborn.

In chapter six, I discuss the relationship of Chaos Reborn texts and the continual development of content associated with this fiction.

In chapter seven, I draw together the established writing processes attempted in both Chaos Reborn and Elite Dangerous and look forward to the future projects defined in these fictions and by this method of working.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In our contemporary society, there are many massive fiction texts that fascinate large audiences. When examined, these texts can be seen to be made up of a multitude of different individual works that are delivered to their audiences through multiple platforms of engagement. For example, the same characters might feature in games, novels, comics, films and other connected works, all linked together through their visual representation and narrative.

Transmedia Storytelling – a phrase coined by Henry Jenkins in his book, *Convergence Culture* (2005) describes the way in which narratives can be linked across mediums and by doing so, these narratives tap into the linked experience we already make of our lives. The multiplicity of outputs delivered by a multiplicity of platforms concretises as well as connects. Through a mix of address, we perceive greater depth and a great experience.

Other theorists build on Jenkins' concept to provide a clear definition that I have made use of.

Transmedia storytelling involves unfolding narratives across multiple media platforms, with each text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.

(Pietschmann, Völkel, Ohler, 2014: 2259).

To be a transmedia narrative, the story must switch between the output forms in some way and each new expression must have some advancement, it cannot be worthless.

Henry Jenkins' additional work in 2011 clarifies his initial definition of the term transmedia storytelling and identifies the same need for a relationship between components of a transmedia story. In his blog, he applies the term 'additive comprehension' to transmedia storytelling:

...additive comprehension, a term borrowed from game designer Neil Young, to refer to the degree that each new text adds to our understanding of the story as a whole.

(Jenkins, 2011).

The term 'additive comprehension' has been an important priority in all the elements I have looked to create in both of the projects I have worked on. I have scrutinised each new piece of writing carefully to ensure there is additional knowledge of characters, locations, or circumstances imparted within my work and that this new knowledge fits together with existing knowledge in other texts.

This project explores a methodology of developing connected texts that share the same fiction premise and are set in the same fictional reality. It attempts to illustrate, with a practical example, the considerations a writer must make when working in a fiction that is designed inherently to be collaborative across multiple mediums. It is about the research and development that an author might undertake to understand locations, characters or societies that are part of the process of this

development. What makes such work more interesting to theorists now is the multiplicity of methods in which we might explore these environments in ways that step beyond, alongside, above and below the immediate direction of one story.

This thesis outlines a set of writing structures and world development techniques that have been researched and utilised in the Chaos Reborn project. The primary output text of this project is the computer game, *Chaos Reborn*, published in 2015 by Snapshot Games.

The included creative work in this submission is *Dreams of Chaos* (2016). This is the first of three planned books that connect the strange fantasy dystopia of Chaos Reborn to our world's historical events of the 14th century. This is a practical example of a fiction text written to perform a specific narrative function within the wider fictional world.

The critical element of this thesis describes the development of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and the necessary supporting text that was written as research documentation to create a defined fantasy world. This supporting text assists in the creation of additional stories produced in multiple platforms that are set in the same continuity. This supporting text was created to ensure continuity between other texts produced in the same fiction and the methodology was developed from similar support texts written for the science fiction project, *Elite Dangerous* (2014).

The relationship of these two genres when devising this kind of material is explained by Gwyneth Jones:

...one thing science fiction and fantasy certainly have in common is the imaginary world, a world that must be furnished with landscape, climate, cosmology, flora and fauna, human or otherwise self-aware population, culture and dialogue.

(Jones, 1999: 11).

My work crossing these two genres and individual fictions has enabled me to test different theoretical principles that have been devised in one genre (science fiction) and apply them to the other (fantasy).

The critical element of this project will also explain and discuss the devised symbiotic relationship between the texts of the Chaos Reborn project.

It is important to stress the breadth of this work. This creative submission is only a part of the total writing carried out for this fiction project. Additional world guide material appears in *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016), which is included as Appendix B.

Chapter 2: Critical Theory That Informs My Practice

Within and without a specific fiction world, there are commonalities which readers use as reference points to imagine the new contexts, characters, and locations. This is the referential or cultural code, identified by Roland Barthes as a set of familiar ideas shared between those participating in the text (Barthes, 1991: 205-206). Barthes says in his critical study of Balzac's novel *Sarrasine* (1830), that:

The cultural codes, from which the Sarrasinean text has drawn so many references, will also be extinguished (or at least will migrate to other texts; there is no lack of hosts): one might say that it is the major voice of minor science that is departing in this fashion. In fact, these citations are extracted from a body of knowledge, from an anonymous Book whose best model is doubtless the School Manual.

(Barthes, 1991: 205).

For me, Barthes' concept of the 'body of knowledge' and 'an anonymous Book' reveal a basis of identifying shared experience between the writer and the reader. The writer may assume that 1) the reader has experiences and that 2) experiences they (the writer) has had are ones that the reader has also had or 3) the writer's experiences are similar to the reader's experiences. For example, setting a story in a common location, like a dentist's waiting room, a lift, etc. relates to the reader because the reader has 1) waited for something 2) has been in a similar location or 3) has read or watched a story where one of these locations features.

When shaping a text, the shared experience allows the writer to relate the story to the reader through some assumptions of shared knowledge.

The referential qualities of any text cannot be perfectly measured or duplicated; they are always different for each writer who develops them and different again for each reader who interprets them. Equally, the experiences shared between reader and writer will be different in each meeting, as each reader's conscious or unconscious prior knowledge, will be different. This is an unquantifiable and imperfect connection as the writer cannot know precisely how the reader will connect with their story. However, within this imperfection, remains a commonality, which serves both parties in establishing an interest and connection between them through the text.

In *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled Television and Contemporary Criticism* (2005), Robert Allen cites Steve Neale who calls this 'systems of orientation, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject' (Neale, 1980: 20 cited in Allen, 2005: 144). While the general sharing of experience can become more specific and focused when considering genre tropes, story structure expectations, archetypes of character, setting, background, technology, magic or any other

prominent aspect that defines a group of stories, it needs to become even more specific when that group of stories is considered to be part of the same fiction.

For any story, the familiar is not enough. To be meaningful, a story must offer something beyond the defined frames and tropes of its peers either from its recombination or drawing from outside of its referential peers and predecessors. With increasingly diverse, but isolated, bodies of written texts to draw from, the repurposing and difference can come from what some consider the eclectic margins when compared to the familiar and established genre works. The writer must bring their own individuality to bear upon the narrative and it is this continual creative remixing of tropes, reinterpretation of ideas and representation of circumstances that makes texts vibrant and interesting. In my work, I have always looked to define a purpose for the story I want to write, and this is particularly important when dealing with a text that is one part of a larger (multiple) fiction.

In *Computers as Theatre* (2014), Brenda Laurel defines art as a message-making process:

Art is the external representation of things that happen in the head of the artist. Art forms differ in terms of the materials they employ, the way the representations are created, what they purport to represent, and how they are manifested in the world. Different forms have different powers to engage, to provide pleasure and information, to evoke response.

(Laurel, 2014: 36-37).

An author may have encoded intentions within a narrative, looking to impart a message through the commonalities and innovations they have made use of. However, because the referential connection between the author and reader cannot be entirely measured or known, this process remains imperfect. In *Death of the Author* (1967), Barthes suggests that criticism must give the text primacy and not rely on an interpretation of the author's character outside of the text to find meaning. Barthes also emphasises the legacy of the text and its effect. He concludes with an emphasis on the position of the reader:

...a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination;

(Barthes, 2016: 6).

Barthes' emphasis here on the reader experience connects directly with the idea of transmedia storytelling and the symbiotic relationship between visual texts such as computer games and non-visual (written) texts such as novels that are part of the same fictional world. This emphasis is echoed by other transmedia theorists who see the consumer as the convergent point of the

experience of texts (Evans, 2011). The visual representation of one fiction can inform the other non-visual representation, within the same fictional world, or, if it is a particularly powerful visual representation, beyond that world and across the genre.

The author's 'death' (Barthes, 2016) provides the opportunity for something else – an encoding of experience relationship and reference that becomes larger than one single text. Layers of meaning are generated in a relationship between texts, as well as through the consummation of them, so the relationship becomes important as a reinforcing and concretising system.

This approach connects Barthes' ideas with those of Aristotle, particularly in the sense of creating an epic by the use of multiplicity, rather than the epic or dialectic theatre concept of Berthold Brecht, where the intention is to "to cultivate an objective response." (Innes, 1972). The epic defined here, prioritises immersion and the reader's cathartic engagement with the text and multiplicity of texts across its forms. The reader response being cultivated is not objective, instead it is subjective, as the reader is encouraged to engage with more and more of the connected material in a desire for additive comprehension of the constructed fiction (Jenkins, 2011).

Having established the primacy of the reader experience, it is within the attempt to reconcile the relationship between author intention and imperfection the encoding and/or reception of this intention that a text can attain resonance with the reader and an aesthetic value. Whilst these considerations can also be relative and imperfect, there is a commonality and sharing that creates a community of assent. This relationship could be likened to the Apollonian and Dionysian qualities of art. These are related by Frederick Nietzsche as the concepts of *constructed art* and *inspirational art* (Nietzsche, 1993: 14). If meaning is a relationship between encoded intent (Apollonian) and unplanned interpretation (Dionysian), a text's passage between these poles must always take place, just as encoding may require a referential relationship between author and reader, whereas unexpected meaning may not.

This idea is similar to the concept defined by Pierre Machery in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978):

We must not falter at the prospect of revealing formlessness and imperfection in the work - as long as these words are not taken in a negative and pejorative sense. Rather than that *sufficiency*, that ideal consistency, we must stress that determinate insufficiency, that incompleteness which actually shapes the work.

The work must be incomplete *in itself*: not extrinsically, in a fashion that could be completed to 'realise' the work. It must be emphasised that this incompleteness, betokened by the confrontation of separate meanings, is the true *reason* for its composition.

(Macherey, 1978: 79).

This concept allows room for the reader interpretation and transcends the idea of exhaustive simulation, such as that outlined in Jean Baudrillard's third order of simulacra:

...simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game—
total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.

(Baudrillard, 1991: 121).

Instead of looking to achieve 'total control', in my work, I am attempting to connect the readers with the writing in a way that engages their imaginations. The imperfection is absolutely necessary to this process, as it allows for the reader's speculation on what could be added to the multiplicity of texts.

Experiencing the Text

In both *Poetics* (1996) and *The Politics* (1992), Aristotle identifies the concept of catharsis – a process of purging one's emotions and purifying them through engagement with a text by becoming absorbed by its plot, characters and setting.

It is possible for the evocation of fear and pity to result from the spectacle, and also from the structure of the events itself. The latter is preferable as it is the mark of a better poet. The plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudder and feels pity at what happens;

(Aristotle, 1996: 22).

But we say that music ought to be used to confer not one benefit only but many: (i) to assist education, (ii) for cathartic purposes (here I use the term cathartic without further qualifications; I will treat it more fully in my work on *Poetics*), and (iii) to promote civilized pursuits by way of relaxation and relief after tension.

(Aristotle, 1992: 473).

Aristotle's incomplete explanations relate to dramatic tragedy and music, with reference in the second quotation from *Politics* (1992) to a more complete definition that has not survived. However, if we take both fragments, we are able to understand he is describing the engagement of a reader with a text and whilst this engagement may differ, depending on the form of the text, the genre, the detail, identification with a character and more, when we link this to the aforementioned referential qualities, we begin to see an example we can relate to. As previously mentioned, it also has different priority to that cultivated in a Brechtian construction of an epic. Here, Aristotle makes clear reference of a desire to invoke emotion in the audience, which implies a subjective, not objective response.

Our experience of a text is also a balance of commonality and difference. The story may well be the same for us as it is for others, but, as already mentioned, our engagement with it can vary based on a plethora of countless factors that will influence our evaluation of it. This imperfection must be

accepted by an author such as myself, engaged in a collaborative field, even as they encode the impressions they seek to make upon their reader.

In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic* (1983), Christine Brooke-Rose builds upon the work of Roland Barthes and describes the *megatext* – a set of codes and conventions specific to different genres of writing (Brooke-Rose, 1983). This concept is explained as an expositional codex of familiarity, where stories are connected to one another beyond the similarities described by Barthes, but by linked genre concepts as well. By identifying the similarities as a type of text in themselves, Brooke-Rose invites comparison between the author-originated work, its collection of tropes and archetypes being employed and the wider association of tropes and archetypes that exist in writing, in a genre or in both.

John Fiske describes conventions as ‘the structural elements of a genre that are shared between producers and audiences’ (Fiske, 2011: 111). He refers to Jane Feuer’s work in *Channels of Discourse* (2005) on strategies for constructing generic categories (Feuer, 2005: 145):

The approaches to genre that we have discussed might be summarized under three labels—the aesthetic, the ritual, and the ideological approaches.

(Feuer, 2005: 145).

Feuer’s first method of constructing generic categories, is through the aesthetic. This describes the format of the text (its characteristics), the second method is described as being through the ritual, which is ‘an exchange through which a culture speaks to itself.’ (Feuer, 2005: 145). This definition is very similar to Brooke-Rose’s identification of the megatext and its continual relationship with new texts set in the same genre. However, Brooke-Rose’s explanation of her term makes no distinction between qualities of a reference text for a singular fictional world or one for a genre. Damian Broderick in *Reading by Starlight* (1995) clarifies the matter:

The element in sf which Brooke-Rose appears to have slighted, at severe cost to her analysis, is the extensive generic mega-text built up over fifty years, even a century, of mutually imbricated sf texts. When novelties like hyper-space and cyberspace, memex and AI (Artificial Intelligence), nanotech and plug-in personality agents are very quickly taken up as the common property of a number of independent stories and authors, we have the beginnings of a new mega-text.

(Broderick, 1995: 59).

The concepts of genre and a genre megatext are important to the study at hand, as the case studies I have worked on are genre based. Referential elements appeal to the commonalities that are intrinsic to the preferences of the consumer of the content. Individuals may enjoy fantasy or science fiction stories, they may enjoy a particular fantasy or science fiction franchise, or they may enjoy a

particular type of output (novel, film, etc). We may want to find out what happened to a particular character, learn about the next events in a fictional world's history, etc.

Feuer's third method of constructing generic categories is through ideology. She describes this as '...an instrument of control. At an industrial level, genres assure the advertisers of an audience for the messages' (Feuer, 2006: 145).

When applying this to my work, the decision to write fiction that is connected to a popular game franchise, there is a demonstrable 'audience for the messages' where the 'messages' are texts, set within the same fictional world. In *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004) Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman explain that, as games are a relatively new form of entertainment, they are referentially intertwined with other forms.

Representations in games do not exist in isolation from the rest of culture. They rely on conventions drawn from narrative genres in other media. Although the playgrounds of games may offer fictive and fantastical spaces, these spaces are almost always familiar in some way to players.

(Salen, K. Zimmerman, E. 2004: 401).

The increasing fidelity of computers provides opportunities for games to emulate other visual formats, like cinema and television. Camera perspectives and movements can be used, which emulate iconic movies where the same techniques are used. Similarly, the visual depictions of fiction from games provide a set of references for texts that are not visual, like novels and short stories. In this case, both computer games, *Elite Dangerous* (2014) and *Chaos Reborn* (2015) provide a visual blueprint for my written fiction.

Chapter 3: Chaos Reborn – Initial Research

My work, for this submission began when in January 2013, I was asked by Frontier Developments to help their company sketch out the fictional background of their new science fiction computer game, *Elite Dangerous* (2014). This project was an opportunity to collaborate with both Frontier Developments and other fiction writers in developing background that would co-ordinate all the different published outputs – multiple texts.

My task was to develop the co-ordinated approach, ensuring content creators had relevant and up-to-date reference material to assist them in shaping their work. The work I did on this fiction franchise forms the basis of my investigation into techniques I used devising a world in the genre of science fiction.

Initially, I made use of similar techniques when I began developing a supporting text for the Chaos Reborn project.

Existing Background

In 1985, Julian Gollop developed and released the computer game *Chaos: The Battle of Wizards*. Published by Games Workshop and marketed for the ZX Spectrum, the game allowed for two to eight players to play out a turn-based conflict in which each wizard tried to destroy the others.

Then, in 1990, Gollop released *Lords of Chaos*, a diagonal sequel to the first game and later, in 2015, *Chaos Reborn* (2015), the game that I worked on.

I worked with Snapshot Games to develop the fictional setting of the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015). This meant revisiting the legacy of Chaos Reborn inherited from the two previous games to create a detailed fictional world from the elements written and published in these titles.

My work is aimed at individuals who have experience of these legacy titles and demonstrated their engagement with them by joining a community who are enthused by the new releases. These communities are strong movements who back the redevelopment of these fictions by a variety of means, from crowdfunding, to social media, to convention participation and more. There is a nostalgic passion to their interest and this is shaped by their formative memories and imaginations of the fictional worlds that began with *Elite* (1984) and *Chaos: The Battle of Wizards* (1985). My work in these two franchises refines a method of engaging these communities with new texts that demonstrate strong connections to the texts that they remember from their cherished past.

Devising a World Story

One of the most prominent Fantasy world creators was J. R. R. Tolkien. Tolkien invented a mythology and a world. He did this by drawing from previous sources, of history, legend, myth and fairy-tale, to make something both familiar and different. He termed this process *subcreation* as it describes the invention of a world that relies on human experience of the *primary world*.

In this sense, the real world is the primary world as defined by Tolkien in his assessment of Andrew Laing's Fairy books:

It seems fairly clear that Laing was using belief in its ordinary sense: belief that a thing exists or can happen in the real (primary) world.

(Tolkien, 1997: 131-32).

Tolkien explains the difference between his primary world and his secondary world concepts as being about how a reader enters them. The primary world is one we believe we already exist within, the secondary world requires us to enter and suspend our disbelief, accepting the 'laws of that world' (Tolkien, 1997: 132). These laws might be wholly different to the empirical perception we have of the real (primary) world and our suspension allows for this new set of possibilities whilst we remain within the writer's construction.

The world of Middle-Earth is a secondary world, in that, with one exception in the text (Tolkien, 1975: 14) there is no writing that attempts to connect the story directly to the reader's own world. This choice gives the creator freedom to determine many of the world's characteristics, such as its creation, the major crises of its history, its physics, its science, its geopolitics etc. However, the reader still imagines the secondary world through their own real (primary) world experience.

First published in 1954, *The Lord of the Rings* became a referential touchstone for a portion of subsequent popular Fantasy, as others seek to utilise similar concepts of Elves, Dragons, Orcs and more, it is not solely a referential text owing to its use of these things, but highly influential as a method document.

Here are some examples of included work with *The Lord of the Rings* (1993):

- Timeline.
- Map.
- History.
- Linked Short Stories (Concordance).
- Invented Language(s) (spoken and written).
- Poetry, lyrics

When taken along with other works written by Tolkien in the same setting, we have a plethora of additional information about the world of Middle-Earth.

The way in which these texts reference one another, projecting depth into the depicted events, gives them a feeling of weight and importance. *The Silmarillion* (1979) is possibly the most important of these in helping a reader to obtain a full presented picture of the world's background. This, accompanied by the appendices in the full *Lord of the Rings* (1993) trilogy and the subsequently released unfinished collections of drafts, provide the most detailed (and often contradictory) picture we are likely to get of Tolkien's vision. Much of this is ripe for expansion into a set of full stories, should anyone be permitted by the estate to write them.

The components of Tolkien's material have been evaluated and utilised by writers in their own research for writing and in collaborative research for projects that involve more than one text set in the same fiction. The publication of further volumes of notes and revisions in a series of works indicate just how extensive Tolkien's research was and, more importantly, demonstrate that *The Silmarillion* (1979) was not a fully formed world guide, prior to the publication of other work.

We will return to the importance of this factor in Chapter 5.

The presented information in *The Silmarillion* (1979) begins with Tolkien's *point of origin*. This is a practical concept when attempting to construct a world's background. From here, the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance; the *point of departure*.



Illustration 1: The Macrotext Framework.

In Fantasy, the absolute point of origin is the creation of the world. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance.

Tolkien's decision was to begin at this point with Middle-Earth, or at least to explain it within his work.

“There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Illuvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought and they were with him before aught else was made.”

(Tolkien, 1979: 3).

It is interesting to note that the style of appropriate writing often changes through the context or layer the author is attempting to explore. The section above, imitates the Book of Genesis. Here is the text for comparison.

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.
And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
And God said, let there be light: and there was light.
And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.”

(Collins, 2011: 1).

Unlike Middle-Earth, the worlds I have devised both draw their origins in the real (primary) world. Within my previous science fiction case study of *Elite Dangerous* (2014), the point of origin was the present day – at the time, 2014 and the point of departure (beginning of the computer game) was AD 3300. The devised support text provides a speculative ‘history’ from this point of origin to the point of departure, filling in as much context as possible for official fiction authors and the game designers.

In *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), Mark J. P. Wolf introduces the term, *narrative resolution* - ‘this is used here to mean something like *granularity*, as in graphical resolution’ (Wolf, 2012: 202). Wolf suggests low narrative resolution refers to synopses, summaries and other sketches of content. Higher resolutions are achieved when these elements are transformed into detailed stories. A formative support text is of low resolution at first, to be developed later as required.

With the Chaos Reborn project, the point of origin also lies in the real (primary) world, but requires acceptance of a new set of ‘laws’ and a suspension of disbelief as we introduce fantastical elements.

Initially, I collected together the previously published material from texts produced as part of the same fiction and began developing these into a support document that could inform my novel.

With Chaos Reborn, the previously published material was much less detailed than the work around the *Elite Dangerous* project. The chief component of my study was the following introduction from the computer game, *Lords of Chaos* (1990):

In the days when the Arch Mages ruled the Old World there were no wars, plagues, floods or natural disasters of any kind. This society, peaceful as it may seem, suffered from the gradual build-up of unreleased magical energy. Mana, which is the name for

raw magical energy, could no longer be contained by the great wizards who used this power. The people of this world grew rebellious as unwanted magical distortions created hideous deformations in nature. Vicious beasts roamed the plains and unusual growths and swamps developed. Even the dead came back to haunt the living.

Eventually war broke out as the desperate populace attacked the Mages in an attempt to get rid of what they assumed was the cause of the problem. The Mages themselves knew that they could do nothing except resist the attacks with all the magic they could muster. They had been investigating the causes of the mana build-up but they could not find its source. The most popular hypothesis was that it was coming from another dimension through a break in the fabric of reality. They set about trying to find this gap by constructing magical portals which could transport wizards into other realities. Many wizards bravely went through these portals to unknown destinations but none of them returned.

After the war had raged for many years the old world began to suffer from violent earthquakes as if there was immense pressure in its core.

Suddenly the world shattered and split into many fragments which rapidly formed into self-contained worlds. Only the wizards survived by creating a magical world which had an enormous amount of mana concentrated within it. Such a world made wizard spells ineffective because mana was simply sucked into the world's core whenever a spell was cast. The wizards named this world 'Limbo' and from it they ventured to the new worlds created from the Old World through the portals they had built. There was no more war, but there was no peace either. Chaos reigned above all else in the new worlds.

Unimaginable places were filled with strange, magical creatures. Wizards now fought with each other in their quest for power because they knew that without power they could not survive as they journeyed from one world to the next. No longer did wizards seek to rule together in a peaceful, united world. That world did not exist anymore. They could only aspire to become rulers of the new worlds, the Lords of Chaos.

(Gollop, 1990: 1).

The concepts outlined in this introduction are densely packed and of low narrative resolution (Wolf, 2012: 202). The intended audience of the time was players of the game on an 8bit or 16bit home computer. The fiction presented in manuals often became a read trailer for play as many computers needed to load the game into memory from a tape deck or 5.25 floppy disk, which could take anywhere between five and forty minutes.

At the time, the background served to connect the participator with the anticipated experience whilst they waited. The mythopoeic and mythological qualities of this experience cannot be understated. The computer game medium of the time was aimed purely at teens and pre-teens. The ritual of setting the computer to load up your favourite game and waiting in anticipation consuming the box set literature is a clear transmedia storytelling experience. The fiction of the manual is designed to establish the premise of the game you are going to play.

Analysis of the Legacy Story

To start 'Arch Mages ruled the Old World' – two concepts are mentioned: Arch Mage and Old World. We have a legacy utopia of the 'Old World' which might be literal or a sign of flawed narration and we have Arch Mages – an experienced version of the Mage (Wizard) which is the player's role in the game.

There is little hint of the 'Old World' described other than its utopian status 'there were no wars, plagues, floods or natural disasters of any kind'. This is the equilibrium (Todorov, 1969: 75), the ordered state that must be disrupted for there to be any story worth telling.

'Mana' is utilised as a measurement of cost of casting magic within the game. It is originally an Austronesian word, meaning prestige, power or effectiveness. However, the parallel use and meaning of 'Manna' – the biblical term – interested me greatly and offered some real-world connection.

The further development of a disequilibrium or 'period of imbalance' (Todorov, 1969: 75) and through 'magical distortion' provides interesting fuel for any fiction I might elect to write. The mention of portals and exploration forms the heart of the previous game and the new game's premise and so would need to be included and explained.

The mention of the world's destruction and reformation as Limbo offers a real-world parallel to medieval descriptions of the cosmos, most notably the work of Dante Alighieri in *The Divine Comedy* (2008). Limbo is also mentioned in *Chaos: The Battle of Wizards* (1985) as a subtitle - 'Magic and Death on the plain of Limbo' (Gollop, 1985). The original publication date of *The Divine Comedy* was in 1321.

The final paragraph sets the premise of the 1990 game: wizards warring across worlds against one another. This is the point of departure, the primed moment for the player to begin their game as the wizard fighting other wizards in the magical realms. This would also be the point of departure for the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015).

Game Scenarios

The game manual for *Lords of Chaos* (1990) describes five realm scenarios that the player wizard visits.

SCENARIO ONE: THE MANY COLOURED LAND

This world contains everything a wizard could need; a nice home, an attractive environment and plenty of potion ingredients for supplying a wizard's favourite hobby.

As a new day dawns and the birds sing in the magic wood everything seems calm.
Unfortunately, you are not alone.

Torquemada is not far away, and he is not just going to come round for a cup of tea and chat. There is only one choice - all-out war. When you have dealt with Torquemada you might find time for some treasure hunting, but be careful when you go into the woods today - you're sure of a big surprise!

(Gollop, 1990).

The key elements here are the descriptions of a wizard's life and the name of the adversary – Torquemada.

The name Torquemada is a clear reference to the historical family of the same name. Tomás de Torquemada was the famous inquisitor, but Juan de Torquemada was a Spanish cardinal born in AD 1388. In the new timeline of the fictional world of Chaos Reborn, he would have been a young boy as the old world was destroyed at the end of the 14th century. This makes him an ideal character to be an embittered wizard afterwards.

I will return to discuss my use of Torquemada in Chapter 5.

SCENARIO TWO: SLAYER'S DUNGEON

It is well known that many mortals dress up in funny clothes, call themselves 'heroes' and go wandering into deep, dark dungeons looking for a fight. Such behaviour would be regarded as fairly abnormal by most people. As far as wizards are concerned the idea of going into a smelly dungeon is ridiculous, especially because hideous creatures usually seem to live in such places. You would never catch a wizard down a dungeon - that is until now. This particular world is 100% dungeon. It is green with mould and has absolutely no sanitary facilities. It was once rumoured that Arhg the Barbarian came to this dungeon in search of adventure and died from dysentery. His mighty weapon, the Slayer, is hidden somewhere in the dungeon. If you can find the Slayer and escape from this world you will be richly rewarded.

There are many dangers in this place. Be careful when you open doors, and bear in mind that some dungeon denizens are so ugly they just don't want to be seen.

(Gollop, 1990).

The lighter tone of this description is less in keeping with the direction of the new game, so some elements have been left. However, the scenario features a wizard enemy known as Elbo Smogg. I elected to use this character in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) as an enigmatic explorer, dramatizing his early life prior to the scenario described in *Lords of Chaos* (1990).

The magical item known as the Slayer is also included in the new fiction and described in *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016).

SCENARIO THREE: RAGARIL'S DOMAIN

This is a one player only scenario, you will not be asked to input the number of players. You can play this scenario with a random wizard, but you will find it difficult.

Ragaril is a devious wizard. His main pleasure in life comes from luring unsuspecting wizards to his palace in order to torment them. He has built many puzzles and traps to deceive many foolish wizards. There is a way out of the world, and many treasures can be found on the way.

There are even some very helpful scrolls lying around which will provide a few clues. Now it is your turn to visit Ragaril's domain. You will find some spells very useful, particularly in relation to flying.

(Gollop, 1990).

This scenario is the most difficult to play. Within the description here, the character of Ragaril is the most detailed that has been described. I decided to portray Ragaril as Rag – a young boy who is kidnapped from the streets of Vidin and raised by a cult leader. In *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), Rag is rescued by Piers Gaveston and Faim. In book two *The War of Orders*, Rag has become a priest and imprisons Katya and Brynfrid because he has seen visions of the end of the world. A magical jewel has given him these visions and this could be found in the scenario from *Lords of Chaos* (1990). This jewel is also described in the legendary items list in *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016).

ISLANDS OF IRIS

The mysterious sea world of Iris has developed some mysterious vegetation. The forest of eyes, according to the legend, holds a secret treasure of great magical value. So far no one has successfully penetrated the depths of the eerie forest - all adventurers have perished amongst the hideous peril of the eyes.

(Gollop, 1990).

The enemy wizard of this scenario is Ibrox. In *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) he is depicted as an African wizard from the kingdom of Mali and is an ally of those who oppose the horseman. In the second book, his personal agenda is revealed and he becomes something of an adversary.

TOMBS OF THE UNDEAD

A great sorcerer built a tomb for his afterlife where he hid his most powerful magic staff. There are legions of undead guarding the maze of tunnels and rooms. Only the most ingenious wizard can solve the riddles of the tombs and emerge alive.

(Gollop, 1990).

This fifth scenario features an enemy wizard known as Helix. The described world is a warren of caves and puzzles and will be a location used in the third book of *The Death of Gods* Trilogy.

Development: Support Material to Macrotext

My first thought was to try to visualise the ideas of the Fractured Worlds. Using a digital art program, I created this:

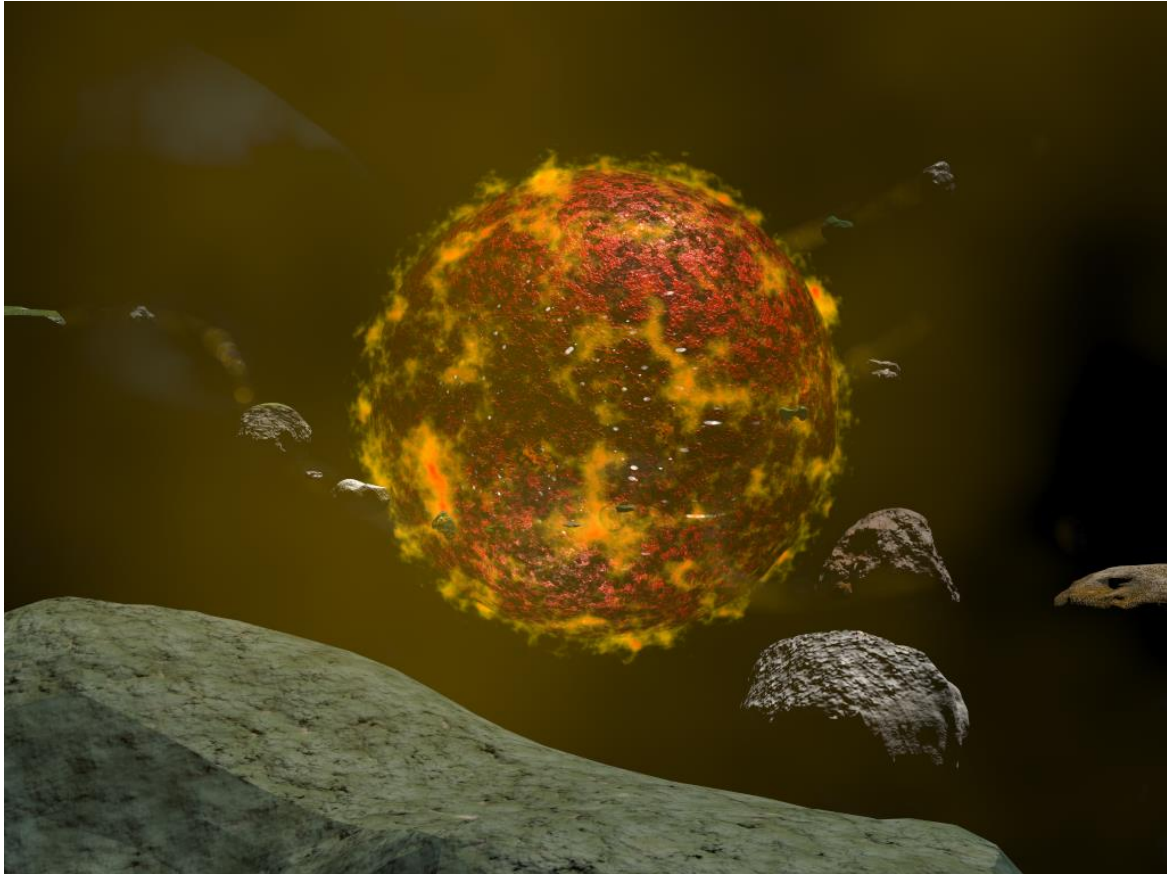


Illustration 2: Initial concept art visualisation of *Chaos Reborn* (2015).

The concept of Fractured Worlds, taken from the premise of the previous game *Lords of Chaos* (1990) fitted *Chaos Reborn* (2015). The red sphere is Limbo, the clouds around it, the vortex and the fragmented rocks – Fractured Worlds.

At the time, the concepts for this were not fully determined, but by conceptualising the idea in this way, building from the introduction in the previous game, we were able to get a clear idea of where the design would go. This would be the point of departure for the game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015).

Snapshot Games had determined the battle component of the game, so the Fractured Worlds were considered to be little more than backdrops for this, but the realm creation component would establish these as important parts of the game.

The concept artwork produced by the development team drew on my ideas for the different locations.



Illustration 3: Concept art for Chaos Reborn (2015) developed by Snapshot Games.

At this point, the formative support text information I had collated needed to be in a form that could be useful to others. This was the point in which it became a *macrotext* in a similar form to those developed during my work on *Elite Dangerous* (2014).

A macrotext is a reference document, but one that can be changed and developed as more work is created. This allows for a synergy of intention and detail during an intense publication period, or ongoing consistency as a collection of texts try to encourage an audience to follow an ongoing story across multiple outputs. A macrotext begins as a collection of low narrative resolution components, which are developed in more detail when a published work is derived from them.

There are many conceptual terms outlined by different theorists to encompass texts that have relationships with other texts. In a way, the relationship is similar to the relationship defined by Gerard Genette when he introduced the term, *paratext*. Gray describes these as ‘texts that prepare us for other texts’ (Gray, 2010). There is also the concept of a *hypotext*. Genette defines this relationship as follows:

Hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.

(Genette, 1997: 5).

Both of these terms can be applied to part of the concept of the macrotext, but do not entirely explain its practical use or its specific relationship with other texts that are constructed in the same fictional world. The macrotext exists as a reference guide. It remains mutable and considers the precedents set by the published work around it. By being mutable and non-published, the macrotext can be changed and revised to accommodate additional narratives developed in other texts that are published and therefore *solidified*.

The term 'canon' or 'plot bible' is often used to describe the referential document given to content creators involved in developing further texts, but I have found both terms imply rigidity. A world canon might include previously published work and is difficult to alter as it has been exposed to an audience. A 'plot bible' encompasses only plot. The macrotext of my work is formative and evolves along with its outputs, aspiring to be everything required to be known about a world and operates across different platforms, providing relevant material for outputs of any type or format.

In my two case studies for *Elite Dangerous* and *Chaos Reborn*, I created macrotexts as genre examples in science fiction and fantasy respectively, to best co-ordinate the subsequent publications that were to follow. These documents were shared with writers and content creators working in the different fiction worlds.

Allen Stroud's efforts with respect to guidebooks on numerous aspects of the *Elite Dangerous* lore and universe were invaluable to me when I wrote my own novel. I'd frequently refer to them for clarification, style, names, places and background stories that I could weave in and out of my own narrative.

Without these documents, the story would be far less well integrated into the overall experience and much less rich overall. The guidebooks also ensure commonality between different books and different authors, which the fans will notice and appreciate.

(Wagar, 2013).

Initially we only had a basic concept for *Chaos Reborn* - a battle of powerful wizards in which the balance of law and chaos played a crucial part. Allen created a whole universe from this initial premise which gave the game a very rich foundation for role playing. This involved some of our key players taking the role of gods and kings, who themselves became creators within the game's mythos. Allen has created a valuable tool for user-generated content, which is something of a holy grail in modern interactive entertainment. His novelisation and short stories have been woven into the adventure quests inside the game. The collaboration between Allen, the development team and the players should be a role model for small development teams undertaking such ambitious projects. The engagement from players is maintained, encouraged and inspired by Allen's work on the project.

(Gollop, 2016).

Initial World

With so many small real-world references in the source material and a desire for players of the game to become content creators in the Fractured Worlds, I decided that the fictional background of Chaos Reborn's world needed to be linked to real-world history. This would allow players to develop their own backgrounds an anchor point for their ideas and would provide us with an opportunity to use existing (real) events to inform the fictional world. By inserting the concepts of wizards, alchemists and their magic into this history, we could modify myths and make tiny changes to existing documents to establish our fantasy world.

The connection of the Chaos Reborn world to the real world of the reader is set in the 14th century, meaning that any previous history can be relevant to the qualities of the world of the fiction as it is realised in the subsequent publications. This positions the work as historical fantasy – a fiction that takes real events but inserts fantastical content into the narration of those events – and makes best use of the references to Dante Alighieri and Torquemada, within the existing source material.

Macrotext Element: Limbo

Once the linking had been decided, Dante Alighieri's writings provided a starting point for my research into determining a point of departure for the game premise. *The Divine Comedy* (2008) was written between AD 1308 and AD 1320. The depiction of theology and cosmology in the work is its central theme. This gave a clear indication of the period we could connect with the fiction:

The truth is, I was on the outer edge,
Of the valley of the sorrowful abyss,
Which echoes with infinite lamentations.
It was so dark, so deep, so filled with cloud,
That when I fixed my eyes upon the bottom,
I could not there discern a single thing.

(Dante, 2008: 60, 7-12).

Aside from the legacy use of the word Limbo in *Lords of Chaos* (1990), Dante's depiction of this outer circle of hell for those who lived before Jesus Christ's time on Earth and the presence of historical figures such as Aristotle, Plato and Homer provides a blueprint to visualise the expanded text. The concept of an agitated world, where those who are celebrated through time exist 'without hope, but with desire' because 'they lived before the Christian era,' (Dante, 2008: 61) is a part of *Inferno's* tragic premise. Chaos Reborn's dystopia is self-manufactured by its characters and based on hubris.

The concept of a harrowing, where Christ descended into Hell and abducted those who believed in God but lived before him, is also mentioned here.

...When I was new here,
I saw a powerful spirit come this way,
Crowned with the insignia of victory.
He took away the shade of our first parent,
With that of Abel and his son, the shade of Noah
And of Moses, the obedient law giver,
With the patriarch Abraham, and David the king,
Israel with his father and his children,
And with Rachel for whom he did so much;
And many others, and he made them blessed;
I think that you should know, that before these.
There were no human spirits who were saved.

(Dante, 2008: 61, 52-63).

The chance of redemption for those in Limbo is depicted here and is something expanded on in the fiction of Chaos Reborn. The remains of humanity lives in Limbo, waiting for a wizard to return through the portals of the towers and take them to a better place – a Fractured World, found and forged by the wizard. However, there is a price. These worlds are feudal societies, ruled by the wizards who made them. Those who accept deliverance in a harrowing will be put to work in this new realm.

Macrotext Element: Magical Technology

In the journal, *Science Fiction Studies #14 Volume 5 Part 1* (1978), Darko Suvin describes his concept of novums:

...a fictional novelty (novum, innovation) validated both by being continuous with a body of already existing cognitions and by being a “mental experiment” based on cognitive logic.

(Suvin, 1978).

Suvin qualifies his definition when applied to fantasy, stating that a novum is not ‘fiction whose narrative logic is determined by a novelty strange to the author's empirical reality’ (Suvin, 1978) and therefore, magical objects in fantasy are not a novum.

However, there is substantial similarity in the application of futuristic technology in science fiction to the application of magical objects in the genre of fantasy. Both can be used to define and shape the

everyday lives of the people that make use of them, thereby altering the values of their culture and society.

The presence of magical portals, as explained in the *Lords of Chaos* (1990) introduction, also provided an opportunity for changing the condition of the world. In 2008, Terry Pratchett was given an honorary doctorate at Buckinghamshire New University. We spoke after the ceremony and he talked about writing science fiction or fantasy that was the product of one small change in society. How would the provision of instantaneous transport alter a world? How would it alter Earth in the 14th century?

Modern parallels offer insight towards a possible answer. The idea of portals existing in the historical world and providing a means of transportation and communication for a secret gifted elite, grants that organisation tools and power equivalent to those we are able to command ourselves in the modern world. In this context, the portal provides a means of globalisation and a way to develop equivalent global institutions. A privileged means of transportation available to a select few could create a world council – a Great Conclave that could guide the differing nations and kingdoms, using ignorance and knowledge in equal measure to build and break anything that threatened their hegemony.

This in turn relates back to the premise set out in *Lords of Chaos* (1990) and provides a means to establish the aforementioned equilibrium (Todorov, 1969: 75), when the 'Arch Mages ruled the Old World.' Within this premise, there is already a flaw, as Gollop describes the world as seemingly peaceful, but quickly moving into a point of crisis.

An expansion of this premise as being the state of our world at the start of the 14th century, moving towards destruction at the end of the 14th century, establishing the new reality of the Fractured Worlds and Limbo provides the two equilibria required by Todorov.

The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to an- other. This term "equilibrium," which I am borrowing from genetic psychology, means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement.

(Todorov, 1969: 75).

These elements also fulfil the requirements for multiple points of departure (the start of the novels, the start of the short stories and the start of the game).

Macrotext Element: Timeline

Determining a point of origin for the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015) and its legacy was less restricted by previous fiction, but also more complex, particularly owing to the lack of any anchor. A self-contained fantasy in a secondary world might have been appropriate for this project, but having noted the real-world concept of Limbo and the intention for selected players to design deity characters that would feature in some of the game literature, it was clear a real-world alternative premise would work better, allowing the disparate influences that participators might bring to their background ideas.

Unlike *Elite Dangerous* (2014) being a successor to its previous games in terms of the in-game timeline (*Elite* AD 3125, *Frontier: Elite 2* AD 3200, *Frontier: First Encounters* AD 3250, *Elite Dangerous* AD 3300), *Chaos Reborn* (2015) did not need to be a successor within the fiction history. In fact, by making it a successor to *Lords of Chaos* (1990) we would be limiting any opportunity to thoroughly explore the old world's destruction, leaving momentous events to be described in a mere four hundred words.

The previous game, *Chaos: The Battle of Wizards* (1985) had no established context, so to make it part of the timeline, particularly if we were to create a divergence from the real world to include wizards, magic and other creatures would be a benefit. By moving this into prehistory, we establish it as a myth and a nod towards fans of the original game.

My research into the 14th century established a detailed timeline of events. Prior to this, key moments of actual history could be re-interpreted for the fiction. Wizards and magic would be inserted into events. Prominent historical characters would be altered to fit, layering a new mythology over an existing one.

To begin with, I looked at a set of key events that could become part of the backstory of the fiction. These might be referred to or not, but would form the basis of thinking around the connection between the fictional premise and real-world events. This timeline was subsequently revised with additions that cover the story of the 14th century that features in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), published as continuances between each section of the book. This is an increase of the narrative resolution needed initially in the macrotext to convey the detail of pertinent events throughout the 14th century.

The primary world relationship of *Chaos Reborn* meant we could look at existing mythology and associated religious texts. *Holy Blood, and the Holy Grail* (2005) and *Dictionary of Gods, Goddesses, Devils and Demons* (1987) provided some initial concepts. The former as an exercise in embedding a

fictional account within a historical context and the latter in developing referential iconography for a plausible fiction world myth that would fit into primary world history.

From here, I conducted further research on specific settings for *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and its sequels. This led me to researching Japanese history during this period with *The Taiheiki: A Chronicle of Medieval Japan* (1959) and Indian history and legends with *Rani Padmini: The Heroine of Chittor* (2009). Working with Snapshot Games who are based in Sofia, Bulgaria, I managed to incorporate Bogomil practices and some references to local mythology of the time as well.

Monsters

The fantastical premise of the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015), draws from a variety of mythological sources and includes actions like the summoning of fantasy creatures, the casting of spells, etc.

The shadow that Tolkien's Middle-Earth casts over all in its wake is long. The referential image of Tolkien's Elf, Orc, Troll and Goblin informs any story that invokes the same. Additionally, the bestiary of *Chaos Reborn* (2015) contains vampires, pegai, dragons and many more creatures, drawn from a plethora of fantastical fictions.

The rise of roleplaying games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (1977), provides vast catalogues of generic creatures drawn from their folk tale roots and washed clean so they might appear in any new fantasy world. As they are used in an array of different fictions, these become archetypes to contradict or reinforce. At times, the latter proves the easier course, particularly when the reader is more willing to accept it and so monsters transplanted from their origins retain many of the other attributes that defined them.

This matter extends from older textual forms into computer games in part by related experience of designers who are also following Barthes' dictum.

In *Reading by Starlight* (1995), Damien Broderick builds on Barthes' code and Brooke-Rose's megatext, applying these ideas to gaming:

And of course the extension of sf and fantasy mega-texts into board and computer gaming has developed into a series of virtual cults, whose mega-texts, in a continuous state of communal expansion, are far more ornate than those once-and-for-all histories and genealogies which, in Brooke-Rose's tart words, 'have given much infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish' (ibid.,p.247).

(Broderick, 1995: 59).

The megatext of the fantasy genre has evolved greatly in the last twenty years. Each medium draws from a similar base, but the diversification of available mediums to the individual means a diversification of the referential code. The advent of multiplayer online roleplaying games has broadened the access and appeal of quests, particularly as adventure parties can be drawn together from across the world. The dominant texts of the fantasy genre, in terms of popularity, have become films and games. The sophistication of these mediums develops as they age and the designers of games apply their formative experiences to the new things they create.

All writers are readers and as such, our experience of our genre colours how we write. The priorities of games encourage a different form of abstraction. Players are driven towards tests, puzzles and achievements, with narrative built as reward. Part of the toolkit is a set of shortcut phrases to overcome the grind. Readers of fantasy all know 'food restores health' and 'spell cards' are limited. In many, the detail of combat is especially prized. Many of these genre-isms are poured into related fiction as we gamers try our hand at stories.

(Stroud, 2016: 79).

Whilst such catalogues of transplanted monsters, severed from their mythological roots are useful, by electing to establish the world of Chaos Reborn as a divergent fiction from our real (primary) world, those roots could be rediscovered and made use of in projecting depth into the fiction. In this regard, the initial weakness of having limited legacy text becomes a strength as its context is mutable. Once the new world is welded to our own, the stories and origins of creatures within the game become myths we can research and connect.

To this end, taking the creature list from Snapshot Games' initial test development enabled me to investigate the origins of each idea in legend, cataloguing them for contextualisation in lore documents, game documents and novels where appropriate. This led me to a diverse and fragmented set of roots. The interpretations of all sorts of creatures have been drawn together over the centuries as humanity seeks to identify and interpret its nightmares and dreams in different ways.

In, *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction* (1979), Gary Wolfe identifies the evolution and meaning of key images in the genre of science fiction. His chapter on monsters discusses their possible use:

The symbolism that surrounds monsters may be as suggestive as the monsters themselves. Since monsters symbolize the unknown, the encounter with the monster is brought about either by humans breaching the barriers that separate them from the monster's realm or vice versa.

(Wolfe, 1979: 187).

In *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), these barriers are tangible. The mythical monsters of the ancient world have been locked away beneath the ground, but the different factions and characters of the novel are finding ways to rediscover them. This provides another threshold for the reader to cross, drawing them further into the fantastical nature of the story.

Chapter 4: Writing Dreams of Chaos

This thesis contains a novel set in the world of Chaos Reborn. This is *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and the main creative component of the study. This is the first of a planned trilogy entitled *The Death of Gods*, which tells the story of how the world of Chaos Reborn came about from its alternative history root in Earth's 14th century. This operates as the background to the game world and anchors the fantasy genre context to a version of our own history.

I began writing *Dreams of Chaos* when I had a formative macrotext of the fictional world of Chaos Reborn developed. This ensured I would write about the fantastical elements of the world with confidence and with an awareness of the relationships between this novel and other texts set in the same world.

Purpose

With my work on *Elite Dangerous*, the writing of a science fiction novel – *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) – set in the devised fictional world was to impart one possible story amidst millions in a vast galaxy. With *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) I was able to write a specific bridging narrative, that would tell the story of how the Fragmented Worlds came about from the destruction of Earth in the 14th century.

Whilst the history of the Chaos Reborn world is drawn from our own, primary world, it is a fantastical narrative, with genre icons (Wolfe, 1979: 6) and fictional characters inserted into real world events.

The low-resolution narrative blueprint, or outline of this story is taken directly from the introduction in the *Lords of Chaos* (1990) game manual. *The Death of Gods* trilogy narrates the events in the 14th century that lead to the destruction of the world into fragments that are depicted in the Chaos Reborn computer game. This is the game's *point of departure* as explained in the initial development research.

A central component of this novel is the previously mentioned existence of portals within the world. This is drawn from the game manual of *Lords of Chaos* (1990). The ramifications of such a device on world history, provides a fictional means of interconnection and the possibility of communication and control by those who control them. The inspiration for this concept came from my conversation with Terry Pratchett in 2008.

Process

To be a story, and therefore be available to be told, the created work must have some of the identifiable attributes we would recognise as such. Within this project, a definition of this is drawn first from Aristotle's *Poetics* (1996):

A beginning is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an end is that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it. A middle is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing comes after it.

(Aristotle, 1996: 13-14).

More modern interpretations of this three-act structure define a role for each of its components:

The beginning introduces location, character and circumstances, **the middle** is the moment of conflict and **the end** is a resolution.

Narrative structural theories outline commonalities of story components. Whether that be by the functions of characters in a narrative as outlined by a variety of different structural theorists (Propp, 2003:25-65, Vogler, 2007: 23-27) or the differing stages that a narrative may go through (Propp, 2003: 19-24, Aristotle, 1996: 13, Campbell, 2008: 210), the differing frames outlined by each rely on seeing the ways in which texts are similar and make use of tropes and archetypes.

There is a further Aristotelean connection in my work when considering the qualities of the epic.

Epic has an important distinctive resource for extending its length. In tragedy, it is not possible to imitate many parts of the action being carried on simultaneously, but only the one on stage involving the actors. But in epic, because it is narrative, it is possible to treat many parts as being carried on simultaneously and these (provided they are germane) make the poem more impressive.

(Aristotle, 1996: 39-40).

The juxtaposition of styles can serve to enhance the illusion of importance of events and fulfils Aristotle's definition of an epic, by seeming to contain a multiplicity of stories. This might be depicted through making use of different encoding frames and drawing inspiration from ritual forms of address that come from outside of the genre.

A variation of character viewpoints and modes of address can be this juxtaposition. This is not a unique practice, but it does project depth by creating a variety of perspectives. The mixture of styles also serves to enhance the illusion by seeming to contain 'a multiplicity of stories'.

Calvino addresses the idea of multiplicity in his fifth memo:

Medieval literature tended to produce works expressing the sum of human knowledge in an order and form of stable compactness, as in the *Commedia*, where a multiform of richness of language converges with the application of a systematic and unitary mode of thought. In contrast, the modern books that we love the most are the outcome of a confluence and a clash of the multiplicity of interpretative methods, modes of thought, and styles of expression.

(Calvino, 2009: 116).

The scope of the story told in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and with the trilogy, *The Death of Gods* is a world myth, encompassing cultures and civilisations from each continent. This is a vast undertaking and one that cannot be exhaustive. Calvino explains the mistake other writers have made in attempting this. Using Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1940) as an example, Calvino discusses a binary: the incompatibility of codified structure and soul or irrationality.

Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialised, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.

(Calvino, 2009: 112).

Calvino discusses attempts by different writers to define the world or universe through the form of the novel, or of poetry. Each person he cites undertakes an enormous labour to encapsulate everything into their work. Some of these attempts to be definitive, create a wall between the writer and their greatest ally, the imagination of the reader.

My work in determining the macrotext was not designed to be exhaustive or simulationist. In writing the story of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) my methodology was to project an all-encompassing story, rather than perfect it.

My process began with a consideration of the way in which I determine belief. In *Rational Animals* (1982), American philosopher, Donald Davidson outlines a triangulation – using three reference points – as the way in which an individual can rationalise and verify their thoughts, which I found useful. He writes:

If I were bolted to the earth I would have no way of determining the distance from me of many objects. I would only know they were on some line drawn from me toward them. I might interact successfully with objects, but I could have no way of giving content to the question [of] where they were. Not being bolted down, I am free to triangulate. Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two creatures.

Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world.

The conclusion of these considerations is that rationality is a social trait. Only communicators have it.

(Davidson, 1982: 387).

Davidson's triangulation refers to the self, the other and the object. On a simple level, when looking at the origination of a new text within an established fiction framework, these can be identified as the author (self), the old text (other) and the new text (object) or, when analysing a narrative in isolation, the writer (self), text (object), and reader (other).

Within one text there is the opportunity to vary the endorsement of a message through all the devices employed to convey that message. Davidson's triangle of self, other and object can be flat. The contrivances of a story might introduce a multitude of other perspectives as viewpoints, thereby fulfilling Aristotle's definition of the epic.

John Fiske applies a similar triangulated structure to Davidson, identifying the producer, the text and the audience as three groups.

Understanding works of art generically, however, locates their value in what they have in common, for their shared conventions form[s] links not only with other texts in the genre, but also between text, and audience, text and producers, and producers and audiences.

(Fiske, 2011: 110).

My approach to writing takes the triangulation of Fiske and Davidson one stage further. Validation of meaning within a text can be continuous and multi-dimensional. If we alter the three roles to analyse the reading journey, the reader becomes the *self*, the knowledge of the world and its situation is the *object*, and the *other(s)* becomes direct and indirect validation. Direct validation of the reader's position within the narrative may come from different characters agreeing an opinion or coming to the same conclusion. Indirect validation can come from the hyperreal environment around both the character and the reader, or the contrivances of events that lead to a discovered conclusion. However, neither character nor environment conform only to being direct or indirect. Another dimension exists in the transmedia storytelling relationship between this text and other texts set within the same fictional world.

In such a multiplied narrative experience, I have found opportunities to reinforce meaning.

Multiplicity of engagement can occur at once, which means that there might be a minimum of three poles, but actually there can be much more than three. This might be true when writing a group conversation or engaging with a text that uses read content, audio and visual at the same time to complement and conflict.

Dreams of Chaos (2016) is a text written through multiple forms of address. There are perspective narratives from a large number of characters as well as letters written as communiques from others and a relatively low-resolution 'Timeline of Significance' which anchors the story into known historical events of the 14th century.

Additionally, each presented cultural perspective within the story is carefully researched and connected to history and mythology of the time. Woven terminology from Norse culture, South America and Shogunate Japan are all included, alongside fantastical archetypes that (where possible) are derived from their mythological roots.

In *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), Mark Wolf develops the idea of multiple narratives, introducing the concepts of narrative objects and complexities to describe the way in which story elements can exist and interrelate.

<i>Narrative Unit</i>	An event
<i>Narrative Thread</i>	A series of events which are casually connected. These may revolve around a character, place or object.
<i>Narrative Braid</i>	Multiple narrative threads that run concurrently with events that happen simultaneously in multiple threads.
<i>Narrative Fabric</i>	The entire depicted narrative of a created fiction with multiple texts.

Table 1: Description of Wolf's narrative types (Wolf, 2012: 199-201).

Dreams of Chaos (2016) is a layered text, telling the story of individuals leading to an event (the destruction of the world) and explaining their part within this process. The additional material provided in other texts provides new perspectives and embellishments on that story. The decision to write the story in this way is a conscious one, built from similar principles in *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014). Characters in both texts contribute to the major narrative event of the story, which is known (in part) prior to reading it. In this sense, characters are carefully ranked beneath the major events of the narrative in terms of the story priority of the text.

Gary K. Wolfe identifies several of the main evolving megatextual concepts of the science fiction genre, such as the spaceship and the robot, which are utilised and interpreted in different ways by many science fiction texts.

Science Fiction deliberately uses the terms and structures of scientific thought to create mythic patterns, and the belief that underlies these patterns is a belief not so much in supernatural beings as in the almost supernatural power of rationality itself.

(Wolfe, 1979: 6).

The mythic quality that Wolfe identifies as being a part of these icons is an essential component of science fiction's appeal to its audience. The continual speculation on the future based on our

knowledge of our present and the possible technologies we may invent and discover is an accepted part of the genre's restless and imaginative nature. Each advance in modern society makes room for this reinterpretation as we learn more and achieve more, rendering previous speculations obsolete.

Broderick expands Wolfe's ideas to include other genres (Broderick, 1995: 61), explaining that each genre has elements with 'iconic weight', but that they have different roles and properties. Following this argument, the genre of fantasy also has evolving icons, but these are not reinterpretations of the future. Instead, they can be reinterpretations of our fragmented past, with fiction filling in or replacing aspects of missing factual detail.

Within the specific fictional worlds of *Elite Dangerous* and *Chaos Reborn*, there are megatextual icons and there are macrotextual icons. The latter are legacy characters, events, objects and locations that are unique to this particular creation.

With the context of my science fiction work, *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014), there was an opportunity to continue the stories of some legacy icons. Doctor Hans Walden, the antagonist of the novel was introduced in *The Frontier Gazetteer* in 1993, with a line of attributed dialogue in the planetary description for Lave, which also, was an icon, the planetary system being the one that players of the game *Elite* (1984) started at.

By telling the story of these icons within a new context and increasing the narrative resolution of them (Wolf, 2012: 201), the story offers an appeal to memory (Barthes, 1991: 205-206), encouraging those who played the previous games, *Elite* (1984), *Frontier Elite 2* (1993) and *Frontier: First Encounters* (1995) to read a new story that will tell them more about characters and objects they remember.

I initially drew the characters of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and its sequels from those already established in the older fictions (the game manuals). These were restricted to being wizard adversaries. This meant establishing stories for Torquemada, Elbo Smogg, Ragaril, Ibrox and Helix. In the game, *Lords of Chaos* (1990), these had been the player's adversaries. In my new story, I wanted to vary the narrative function of each character, but retain something of the adversarial quality each might have, for readers of the fiction who had played the game before.

I made use of Christopher Vogler's practical advice on the use of character archetypes. He writes:

Looking at the archetypes in this way, as flexible character functions rather than as rigid character types, can liberate your storytelling. It explains how a character in a story can manifest the qualities of more than one archetype. The archetypes can be thought of as masks, worn by the characters temporarily as they are needed to advance the story.

(Vogler, 2007: 24).

These wizards do not hold the narrative perspective, but are initially, supporting or adversarial characters to those who do. Later, each is revealed to have their own agenda which at times complements and at times contradicts the agenda of the main characters.

This ambiguity and agenda-based characterisation is an important priority in my work. The mythic quality of distance and obscurity encourages speculation on what is not revealed. Additionally, the character contexts of these wizards in the game manual for *Lords of Chaos* (1990) are not directly linked to the contexts that we find them in in the other fiction. The only exception to this is Torquemada, whose circumstance from the game is narrated in the short story, *The Many Promised Land*, found in *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016). However, this is also intentional. By providing one direct link, I imply the links in the other stories and encourage the reader to join the small narrative threads together.

To supplement this cast of legacy characters in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), I turned to real-world history and collected together an ensemble of historical characters. These were also carefully chosen as megatextual and mythological icons to accompany the characters I created and the characters developed from *Lords of Chaos* (1990). A selection of these are listed below.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Legends surrounding the horsemen begin with the Book of Revelation in the Bible. The outbreak of Bubonic plague in Europe from AD 1340 onwards led to substantial speculation about the origin and correct ways to treat the disease. The idea of a curse being brought by a mythical figure fitted into the biblical depiction.

Additionally, continual wars and failure of crops across the continent and elsewhere led to further speculation that these times would be the end of days.

Dreams of Chaos (2016) uses the four horsemen as adversaries and antagonists, but we quickly learn that their philosophy is not that of clear-cut villains. The horsemen are personified by Faim (Famine), Gurda (Pestilence), Teotl (War) and Obidiyah (Death). Faim's role in rescuing and escorting the gifted twins Galina and Katya is evidence of his different agenda, as is the aid he offers Piers Gaveston and the dealings he has with Hino Suketomo.

Gurda's and Obidiyah's interactions with other characters vary from scene to scene. Gurda infects and poisons key people, but also helps the twins. Obidiyah massacres the people of *Vestribyggð*, but also helps the twins.

We are introduced to Teotl as an assassin and warrior. Throughout the story she remains the most adversarial, but still makes time to persuade Tuia to support her work.

Rani Padmini

Rani Padmini's transformation is important to establish the physiology and spiritual difference between Gods and wizards from the beginning of the story.

The siege of Chittor occurred in AD 1303. The story of Rani Padmini is a legend in India. However, she was a historical figure and the tradition of dramatic licence and re-interpretation applied to her story offered an opportunity to establish a powerful character right at the beginning of the book.

The process of wizards (Egregoroi) transcending and becoming Gods is a planned part of the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015). Within the prologue of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), Rani Padmini is a demonstrated example of an Egregoroi casting off their mortal form and transforming into something greater. Later, in *War of Orders*, we learn what this transformation costs.

Dante Alighieri

Dante's writing forms a key component of the game and fiction development. However, his life is also of interest to the story as he took a side in the struggles between factions over control of the papacy.

Dante appears as an unnamed guest of Pope Clement V in Avignon where he discusses elements of the world's and universe cosmology with Piers Gaveston and explains how he has tried to describe these in his work. It is inferred that the ritual of the Templars is a by-product of his scholarly activities.

Vyasa

In Hindu mythology, Vyasa is a title given to the scribe who translated and divided the scripture (Vedas). In *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), he first appears as the ageless leader of the Great Conclave. His allegiance and agenda remain unclear.

Later, in the journals included in *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016), Vyasa appears as a character who makes key interventions to help gifted individuals become wizards. He is also the Sage who defeated the dragon in the poem, *The Sage and Ancient Red*.

Piers Gaveston

Piers Gaveston, the enigmatic companion of Edward II (Jones, 2013). Gaveston is known for his rise to power at the side of King Edward II and how he was betrayed and murdered by his political enemies (Jones, 2013). The events of his recorded life provide interest, as do the mysteries surrounding the persecution of the Templars at the start of the 14th century (Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln, 2005).

In *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), we are introduced to Piers as he escapes England and arrives in Avignon searching for support to return him to England. He is involved in the Templars ritual, but escapes its conclusion. What he sees shocks him to the core.

Historians differ in opinion on Piers Gaveston. What little we do know suggests he was a complex man and it is this I have tried to capture.

Piers' journey through the book is a difficult one as he loses his faith, his family and friends. This depicts the extended life of those with the gift who outlast their mortal peers and must find a new place for themselves.

Eleanor of Aquitaine

I included Eleanor of Aquitaine despite her recorded life being before the time of the proposed novel (Jones, 2013). A major figure in Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries, Eleanor lived eighty-two years and was still deeply involved in politics right up until her death.

The long lives of Egregoroi and their offspring made including her plausible (Lumpkin, 2011) and her character adds a direct connection to the Plantagenet house. She is a character that steps out of history in any account of her.

In *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), Eleanor lives on, but has dropped out of public life by necessity. Now she manipulates through her contacts and connections amongst the magical orders. She is a powerful wizard in her own right and in AD 1344, leads the expedition to the second rift.

Hino Suketomo and Hino Kumawaka

The Taiheiki: A Chronicle of Medieval Japan (1959). is a dramatised account of Japan's history during the 14th century. It is based on fact, but written as an epic. At this time, the country's political establishment was divided into northern and southern courts.

In AD 1324, Emperor Go-Daigo began a plan to overthrow the northern court and its shoguns, the bakufu. His chief counsellor Hino Suketomo was arrested and imprisoned on Sado Island, later to be beheaded. Suketomo's son Hino Kumawaka is a legendary character in Japanese history for how he exacted revenge on the monks who imprisoned and murdered his father.

In my writing, I take this legend and expand it. Both Kumawaka and Suketomo are depicted as wizards caught up in the political games of the courts. Suketomo is rescued from his fate on Sado Island by Rani Padmini, only to die later in the book in a fight with a dragon. Meanwhile, Kumawaka assumes his place and makes pacts with Oni demons for magic to assassinate a political enemy, only to be defeated by the Horseman, Death – Obidiyah.

Cardinal Giovanni Colonna

A known political figure amongst the college of cardinals during the middle part of the 14th century. Colonna becomes the fulcrum of political efforts to stir the papacy into action against the threat of the Horsemen. He is assassinated by Gurda (Pestilence) at the end of the book, matching his actual death in Avignon in AD 1348 of plague.

New Fictional Characters and Narratives

In addition to these, we have a mix of fictional characters who have been invented specifically for this story. Galina and Katya, the twins, each with a different magical gift are the most significant to the story, but there are other examples, such as Tuia, the guardian of the stone arch, Brynfrid Vigdís, the Viking warrior, Laurelatha and Sethanas, of the *aelfe*.

Each of these characters has been devised carefully to fit into the culture they are given to represent. For Galina and Katya, I did careful research on Bulgarian history, the religious practices of the Bogomils and the language of the time to ensure that names, objects and locations were in keeping with the period.

For Brynfrid and the story of *Vestribbyggð*, my research into Norse mythology and the known story of the colony's destruction were again, woven into the larger narrative, using the historical mystery to insert a fantastical tragedy involving the four horsemen. In this, I was able to make use of a character to bring these events into the larger story, exploiting our fragmented knowledge as well as projecting this into the larger story of the novel.

Again, the concept of a switching archetype or character function depending on the requirements of the story or scene is used for some of the more important roles, although this change is also connected with the character's own story as they experience and shape the events around them.

Historical Events

In the development of the story for *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), the recorded history of the 14th century became a structure I could utilise, weaving fiction into and out of the different recorded occurrences and making use of each circumstance to develop the plot of the story. Some of those that have been used are included below.

Heresy of the Templars

Jacque de Molay and the Avignon papacy have always been of interest to historians and writers of fiction. The curse de Molay is supposed to have levied on both Pope Clement V and Phillip IV of France has become a myth. This event forms part of the initial premise of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016). In

the story, Molay's actions that led to his death are fictional additions to provide context and reason for the outcome.

The Sibyl

'Sibyl' is an ancient word, describing a group of prophetic women priests from Delphi. The first recorded mention of them is from the fifth century BC by Heraclitus. In *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995), Marina Warner recounts the legend of a Sibyl and the 'Grotta della Sibilla' in the Umbrian mountains (Warner, 1995: 3-11).

The Sibyl prisoner used in the opening ritual of the Templars is a connection to this legend.

Soandus

This region of Turkey is famed for its ancient underground city known as Kaymakli. We visit the location in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), but it remains unnamed. Again, this is a real(primary) world location and provides a connection between the Chaos Reborn fiction and existing history and myth.

Chimor and Tenochtitlan

The character Tuia, from the South American kingdom of Chimor is a guardian of a stone archway. These ornate constructions were manufactured by the Chimor people and in modern times, several have been found in the jungle, overgrown and abandoned.

The first scenes using the arch demonstrates the use of portals in my story. Later, Tuia's role changes when a woman appears and destroys the arch. He elects to abandon his place guarding the ruined entryway and follow the traveller on her journey north.

The capital of the Aztec kingdom was founded in AD 1325. The second part of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) depicts the construction and development of this city as a magically-empowered city. Tuia talks with the woman who names herself Teotl, which is Aztec for 'God'. He finds new purpose as her priest and sacrifices the enemies of the Aztecs, anointing their warriors with blood, which is a known Aztec practice of the time.

Later, Tuia's rituals awake a dragon from beneath the world. This is the 'Ancient Red' spoken of in the poem included in *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016).

Greenland and Vestribyggð

The Viking colonies of Erik the Red (Eiríkr hinn rauði) in Greenland are documented settlements that were mysteriously wiped out during the 14th century. Brynfrid's scenes in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) dramatise these events and offer an explanation. The letter from Ivar Bårdssön to the Bishop of Bergen is based on legitimate writing from the Viking explorers who found the abandoned colony.

The Battle of Auberoche

A broken siege in the fractious hostilities between France and England, The Battle of Auberoche in AD 1345 is used at the end of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) as a setting for Piers Gaveston's final reflections and rediscovery of his faith. This is a real historical event, with Gaveston's story inserted into these events.

These events are all recontextualised through the perspective of the character in attendance.

Further Research

In addition to these characters, locations and events, I have researched further context for the second book *The War of Orders*, which describes events from AD 1356 to AD 1396 and the end of the world. These include the conquest of Nanjing (1356), the Basel earthquake (1356) the papal election of AD 1378, the destruction of Gurgandj (1378), the end of the Muromachi period in Japan (1392) and the Siege of Vidin (1396).

There was also some field research done by visiting Rome and Sofia (Sredets) to get a feel for each location. This helped inform some of my writing, allowing me to describe particular settings, with an impression of how they might have looked in the past.

Each event is carefully worked into the story of the trilogy, leading towards the world's end. As matters become more desperate, so the fiction diverges a little more from history into the new invented timeline and towards the point of departure for the game *Chaos Reborn* (2015).

The Narrative Construction of *Dreams of Chaos*

Each of the historical characters, events and locations, as well as the legacy characters events and locations and the invented characters, events and locations, can be considered to be narrative threads (Wolf, 2012: 199-201). As a writer, I have elected to link these together, utilising the aforementioned plot device of portals. This has provided a means to braid and weave together the narrative threads of history, legacy fiction and new fiction into one whole world myth.

The creative constraints of working with established events (legacy and historical) are significant and affect the structure of the novel directly, in that the interconnected moments of detailed focus (AD 1303, AD 1307, AD 1324, AD 1344, AD 1345 and AD 1348) are interspersed with a timeline that details the events that have happened in between. In this, there is an intentional mixture of high narrative resolution and low narrative resolution (Wolf, 2012: 202), with both being worked into the whole of the text, rather than the latter being regulated to a reference appendix, as with *Lord of the Rings* (1993).

The effect of this, along with the multiplicity of perspectives is intentionally disjointing and dislocating. Whilst there is a hierarchy of characters and priority of stories, the chief story amidst all of these layers is the final story of a world. It is a tragic story and one that comes about through a series of connected events.

Chapter 5: The Solidified Macrotext – The Loremaster’s Guide (2016)

As mentioned in Chapter 2, *The Silmarillion* (1979) was a posthumously published reference book to the world of Middle-Earth and not a formative text in itself. However, the contents were drawn from a collection of drafts and redrafts of Tolkien’s writings by his son, Christopher Tolkien.

When after his death the question arose of publishing ‘The Silmarillion’ in some form, I attached no importance to this doubt. The effect that ‘the glimpses of a large history in the background’ have in *The Lord of the Rings* is incontestable and of the utmost importance, but I did not think that the glimpses used there with such art should preclude all further knowledge of the ‘larger history’.

(Tolkien C, 1986: 4).

The foreword to *The Book of the Lost Tales 1* (1986) reveals the shared concern of both J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien in preserving the ‘impression of depth’ created in *Lord of the Rings* (1993) by providing only fragments of Middle-Earth’s history.

My concerns when publishing *The Loremaster’s Guide* (2016) as a reference book to the fictional world of Chaos Reborn were to ensure the preservation of the projected depth of the world as depicted in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and to expand upon the lives of the wizards that feature in the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015).

The hierarchy of engagement within the computer game includes the tools for players to design realms within the game, thereby creating content and inventing their own stories and adventures that fit in with other Chaos Reborn fiction.

The Loremaster’s Guide (2016) was constructed to assist with this process as a published work of source material. This draws from the tradition of *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 1979) and assorted roleplaying games (Mizsei-Ward, 2013) to provide reference and inspirational information for the realm designers, thereby addressing players as they transition to a content creator role and assisting them in helping to make their content consistent with other texts produced by players, writers and programmers.

This process invokes Jane Feuer’s ritual approach to genre, ‘as an exchange between industry and audience’ (Feuer, 2005: 145), developing what media theorist Henry Jenkins defines as a participatory culture.

The term, participatory culture, contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other

according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands. Not all participants are created equal. Corporations—and even individuals within corporate media— still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers. And some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others.

(Jenkins, 2006: 3).

However, in my work *The Loremaster's Guide* is not prescriptive and conformity remains optional to realm designers of *Chaos Reborn* (2015). This matches the suggested approach of roleplaying games in asserting the relationship of content produced by the company, but allowing for individual divergence from this freedom of expression.

The solidification of the macrotext into *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016) has then informed the created realms devised by players of the game. These utilise prevalent themes from the established fiction, drawing from small elements in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and the societal and political structures defined in the other material. The episodic first-person short stories of *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016) also establish a style for players of the game to emulate as they describe the adventures of their wizard characters, and this encourages a gyre of creative content generation.

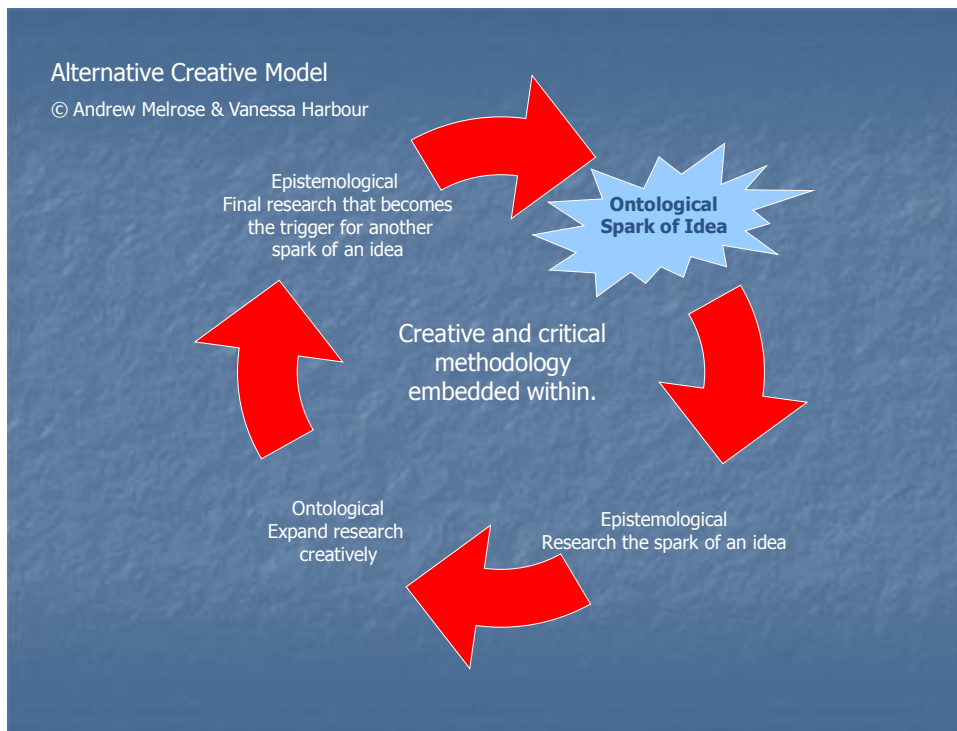


Illustration 4: Alternative Creativity Model. cf Harbour V. *Sex, Drugs and Alcohol in Young Adult Fiction*, PhD. (Winchester, 2010).

The function of a solidified macrotext is changed. If the game designers of *Chaos Reborn* (2015) wish to move the main narrative of the game itself forwards, then *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016) will cease to be as definitive and relevant. There might be additional reference material – new creatures

or realms will not be contextualised or explained, new locations might not be described. Therefore, *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016) will cease to be the definitive referential document.

However, the presented material is intentionally not exhaustive nor intended to be simulationist. It creates a starting point of knowledge with enough hints to inspire creators of new stories in unexplored places and links back to the novel, *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and the proposed sequels.

The Loremaster's Guide (2016) is included in this submission as Appendix B.

Chapter 6: The Relationship of Texts Within Chaos

Reborn

With multiple texts in the same fiction, the opportunity to contrast, validate and endorse becomes more complex and diverse. Reassessments of narrative moments that the reader has experienced from other perspectives serve to deepen that understanding even if they contradict some of the original conclusions. Even complete denial of a narrative occurrence deepens its significance as it highlights the reader's experience in contrast.

When engaging with these processes, I have found it necessary to accept that the means of encoding and communicating intention is imperfect (Barthes, 1967). In my experience, the author cannot craft entirely what meaning is drawn from their text or from the multiplicity of texts within a fiction. The Apollonian must always be shared with the Dionysian (Nietzsche, 1993: 14), but co-ordination of the intention between texts through another guide document can help with this process.

The concept of *transmedia storytelling* is defined as the practice of 'coordinated storytelling across multiple media platforms' (Pietschmann, Völkel, Ohler, 2014: 2260). To be transmedia, components of the created work must be delivered across different media.

My interpretation of 'coordinated storytelling' is that the published components of fiction within this project exist on 'multiple media platforms' (Pietschmann, Völkel, Ohler, 2014: 2260) and must have a relationship with one another that is intentional on the part of the author.

Within both the Elite Dangerous and Chaos Reborn projects, several relationships exist between the different creative works. One of these is the symbiotic visual/non-visual relationship between the computer game (visual text) and the written fiction (novel) which I mentioned in Chapter 2. The visual text can provide a frame of reference for the imagined scenes of the non-visual story. Similarly, the story can provide further knowledge and detail in a particular area or situation explored by the player (in the visual text/game) in their role as a reader (of the short story or novel).

In *Television Culture* (2011), John Fiske describes the need for commonalities between texts as this 'locates their value' in relation to other works. In the following quotation, he is writing specifically about television:

Generic conventions are so important in television because they are a prime way of both understanding and constructing this triangular relationship between producer, text, and audience.

(Fiske, 2011: 111).

This quotation echoes my interpretation of Davidson's triangulation in my work. I determine the three points as self (producer), object (text) and other (audience). These commonalities are intertextual relationships, operating both vertically, and horizontally.

Fiske describes vertical intertextuality as follows:

Vertical intertextuality is that between a primary text, such as a television program or series, and other texts of a different type that refer to it.

(Fiske, 2011: 109).

When considering my work, many of the immersive qualities of the computer game, *Elite Dangerous* (2014) stem from its flight simulator and first-person engagement. The computer game acts as a primary (visual) text to subsequent 'texts of a different type' (Fiske, 2011: 109). In this instance, these being the novels. In the game, the player is the pilot of a spaceship and views the game world from the cockpit seat of this spaceship. The player identity within the game is this persona, confirmed by the opportunity to look down and around to see their hands on the controls of the spaceship. This is made possible with different computer game controllers, such as a head-tracking unit that attaches to a player's headphones or a virtual reality headset. The view through the monitor or headset is the player's, first-person view, into the ongoing world of the game.

A player of *Elite Dangerous* (2014) can relate their experience of the game to any scene described in *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) where a character is piloting a spaceship. There is a strong, vertical, visual intertextual relationship.

In the computer game, *Chaos Reborn* (2015), the identification with a character begins from when the game offers the player an opportunity to shape that character before beginning play. The choices made about costume, attributes and name, are aspects of the game designed to connect the player with their in-game representative. Once this is complete, there is a selection of episodic stories, written by me, which are presented as the narrated journal of the player character, before beginning the game.

As I watched the light fade from my mother's eyes, a rough calloused hand gripped my shoulder.

"Let her go my friend," said a voice I'd known all my life, but one that had never spoken to me. I looked up into an ancient face, one that had seen the world before Limbo, the world of our long past.

"Come," said Vyasa. I nodded, stood up and followed him through the door of our dwelling; a broken ruin of wood and stone patched together by four generations of my family. "When you rejected us, I believed it would not be the end of the story," he added. "You were destined to return, eventually."

(Stroud, 2016: 31).

These first person narrated episodes are designed to connect the player with the character's backstory and are intended to be read just before the player begins their adventures.

Fiske also discusses horizontal intertextuality, explaining how 'intertextual relations of content can easily cross genre boundaries' (Fiske, 2011: 109). In my work on both *Elite Dangerous* and *Chaos Reborn* content flows between texts, as the written fiction, *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) and *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), seeks to provide descriptions for locations, behaviours and milieu not represented in the games.

So, referential qualities can be established between texts of a particular fiction as a horizontal flow. An example of this in the case of *Chaos Reborn*, is the connected set of assumptions about characters who feature in each different story and also feature in the game. Where these stories or game events are sequential, a character may be expected to demonstrate a memory or experience of the previous text, they may be expected to behave in a particular way, establishing a common character identity in both texts, or something else that creates a familiar connection between texts set in the same fictional world.

Writing in *Transmedia Television: Audience, New Media and Daily Life* (2011), Elizabeth Evans states that 'Narrative is key to the construction of a transmedia text'. She is describing an approach first categorised by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2006) and is discussing the shared narrative that spans different platforms. However, when looking at the symbiotic relationship between all elements of my transmedia narratives, it is clear that other elements are also key, to best establish the referential familiarity of the works when taken together as a whole.

In this, the megatexts of genres reinforce themselves as consumers of content cluster around them. Commonalities evolve and change through the ritual process (Feuer, 2006: 145). The imaginings of each writer, filmmaker, artist and game designer can connect beyond the fiction of one writer or one fictional world, drawing intertextual references from different sources that a creator might have consumed themselves.

Multiple Texts of One Fiction

Jean Baudrillard ascribes science fiction into his second order of simulacra:

...simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production—a Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy (desire belongs to the utopias related to this order of simulacra).

(Baudrillard, 1991: 121).

Baudrillard's notion of hyperreal constructs certainly applies to the concept of a canon. The idea of 'continuous globalisation and expansion' resonates in my projects with the simulationist qualities of fiction reference material. The similarity of intention between these constructions lies in their attempt to provide a relative homo-stasis. In my experience, writers looking to write new stories want consistent and reliable information about the fictional world's history. Consistency within the frameworks encourages reliance on information and new information is analysed from a framework perspective, thereby allowing it to reinforce what has already been established. I have found that this method promotes a stable development of fiction, but also takes into account the need for change as more texts are added, meaning a canon macrotext for a world I am working in must be continually updated.

Once again, Baudrillard's third order of simulacra is relevant:

...simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game—
total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.

(Baudrillard, 1991: 121).

The concepts of narrative braids and narrative fabric relate directly to an application of Baudrillard in fiction as the hyperreal construction of a simulation that the reader has elected to experience and is exploring through a multiplicity of texts. Wolf explains it like this:

By allowing the audience to assemble narrative threads from world material, narrative fabric greatly increases a world's illusion of completeness, as well as the audience's engagement in the world. Assembling narrative threads and looking for inconsistencies can become something of a fan pastime, as many Internet forums dedicated to such activities can attest. Thus, for larger worlds, world databases or "bibles" are often used by world-builders to monitor consistency, and also to standardise world-based facts and history when multiple authors are contributing to the same world. Although a narrative fabric can be created entirely by a single author, many larger worlds are the result of a collaborative effort, and the multi-narrative nature of narrative fabric can be created by separate authors.

(Wolf, 2012: 201).

However, Wolf's emphasis on 'multiple authors' is not considered as relevant by Pawel Marcinak in his analysis of Richard Saint-Gelais' definition of *transfictionality*:

In his book, Saint-Gelais analyzes numerous examples of transfictional activity, treating such well-known works of world literature as *Madame Bovary*, *Don Quixote*, and the exploits of Sherlock Holmes. The problem of authorial ownership appears to be the least complicated one. A text that produces transfictional relationships may be the work of a single author (for example, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) or multiple authors, employing plot elements from a previously existing corpus of work (such as all of the stories and novels about Holmes that were written after Doyle's death).

(Marcinak, 2015: 82-83).

The term *transfictionality* is used by theorists in several different ways. Kristy Dena defines transfictionality as ‘a research inquiry that captures the relations between compositions that are linked at the thematic level of a fictional world rather than its “texture”.’ (Dena, 2009: 115). However, in this study, I am applying the term to the thematic relationship between texts with a specific fictional world.

It is my experience that the involvement of multiple authors, in a collaborative process of generating fiction within one world, ensures less time is required to produce the texts. However, the application of multiplicity may take many forms. In my work, the guidance material developed for *Elite Dangerous* and *Chaos Reborn* has been used to engage other content creators and to shape their work to support mine and each other, in a whole and coherent form. In both fictions, we have seen an array of publications such as books, audio dramas and audio narration, to support the computer games themselves.

Wolf’s narrative braids and narrative fabric are also apparent in a single text. As mentioned, in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), I have attempted to generate multiplicity through the modes of address (third person, first person) and the conventions of the form (novel, historical account, letter, etc). These outputs are appropriate to the fantasy genre. In *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) there are news reports, emails, bulletins, speeches, intelligence reports and ship specifications that add texture to the story. Both of these forms are considered transfictionality, according to Marcinak’s translation of Saint-Gelais’ ideas:

A passage within a text can also constitute an expansion, by creating a narrative about what happened earlier or presenting a story in a simultaneous fashion. Interestingly, expansion does not necessarily have to intervene in the plot of the initial text, it only needs to relate to that text’s fictional creation.

(Marcinak, 2015: 83).

In both *Elite Dangerous* and *Chaos Reborn*, my creative work has involved generating multiplicity as part of the objective. The key has been to ensure these build layers in the narrative of the fiction as a whole without being wholly reliant on the reader’s consumption of those other created works. This encourages the horizontal intertextual *flow* between different texts that are part of the same fiction.

In a fiction that contains multiple narratives and/or texts, this engagement can become highly complex and individually unique as an experience. The reader’s journey through the events that make up each narrative across different texts may be differentiated by the order they are experienced. There may be a prescribed order, as some stories are sequels to others, but if not, if the works are related in some other way with numerous possible beginning points, the experience

can become deeper for this. The differentiation of reader experience can also serve to change the nature of connection between readers who have participated in the same texts.

With multiple texts in the same fiction, the opportunity to contrast, validate and endorse becomes more complex and diverse. Reassessments of narrative moments that the reader has experienced from other perspectives serve to deepen that understanding even if they contradict some of the original conclusions, particularly if that contradiction is intentional and part of a flawed narration. Even complete denial of a narrative occurrence deepens its significance, as it highlights the reader's experience in contrast.

Multiplicity of texts in the same fiction can also be used to explore invented myth from different perspectives. The story of one character, may become the legend of another or may be examined from an alternate perspective, or the inverse of any of these. In each example, the reader is placed in a different position when experiencing the linked narratives. This is something I explored in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016), where the characters and situations of the former are legends to the narrators of the latter. Sometimes the characters of the latter fiction may know more about a previous narrative than the characters in the previous work, sometimes they may know less, but the reader knows more than both in relation to what has been depicted, by the end of reading both works. This position of superior knowledge accepts that the fiction is a hyperreal construct (Baudrillard, 1991: 121), but positions the reader as the accumulator of knowledge, the *lore master*.

Macrotext as Part of Multiplicity

As we have already discussed, I have found in my projects, there is a need for design documentation that informs the production of content to co-ordinate other published works. This is particularly necessary when elements of the narrative are fragmented across platforms and publications (Phillips, 2012: 15). Sometimes, this documentation interacts with the established megatext of the genre, drawing ideas from familiar themes and sometimes it establishes its own set of specific codes that inform the imaginative engagement of the reader. These are often fed back into the wider set of evolving codes for the genre.

While much has been written regarding intertextuality in narrative theory (for example see Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida, Dolezel, and Kristeva), relatively little has been written about the relationships between story set in the same imaginary world and how the creation of stories and worlds affect each other. In one sense, all the story set in the same world can be seen as being nested within the overarching narrative of the history of the world itself; but unlike back stories the stories can be conceived and created separately from one another, are sometimes made by someone other than the author

of the original, and do not always require knowledge of each other to be understood; thus, their relationships differ from those of nested stories.

(Wolf, 2012: 203).

Wolf's conclusions on the differing types of narrative object provide a starting point to examining the relationship between additional narrative components that are developed to assist with the creation of published material, but they do not explicitly cover these additional components. Instead, Wolf discusses the gradual formation of the narrative fabric from the position of the reader as they relate each published element to another, discovering the intended (and sometimes unintended) connections between them.

At this stage, the macrotext is a part of Wolf's narrative fabric, but only in so much as being part of what an author may study before producing additional texts and so is not part of the narrative fabric a reader (who is not a creator of content within the fiction) will experience.

In my work, mystery and myth are invoked at higher levels of construction a) to project depth and b) to encourage speculation and investigation amongst those engaged. I use projection to imply there are mysteries to learn more about and subsequent speculation from an audience can indirectly cause the production of more content, thereby creating more depth. This also establishes those strongly immersed in the fiction who have explored multiple texts as gatekeepers for others engaging at lower levels, creating a hierarchy of engagement that can perpetuate itself. This invokes Feuer's second and third approaches to genre (Feuer, 2006: 145). The multiplicity of texts across different platforms conveying narrative also offer more opportunities for access.

Additionally, myth can be incorporated from other sources. When a constructed text is anchored in the real world, the history and legend of the real world can be alluded to and incorporated. It is this element which set apart my two case studies. Both are anchored in the real world, with the hyperreality of *Elite Dangerous* projected forwards from contemporary society thirteen hundred years, whilst the hyperreality of *Chaos Reborn* projects forwards from the 14th century.

In both of these fictions, the continual production of content is required to maintain an information hierarchy. This may involve the creation of new texts that increase the narrative resolution of particular aspects of the fiction, it may involve developing new mysteries or it may involve both. Ultimately, both questions and answers are needed, provoking speculation and building acquired knowledge.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Outcomes

Devising the world of Chaos Reborn has provided a further opportunity to test and refine the processes of developing guidance material for a fiction of multiple texts, published in different mediums. The opportunity to develop a macrotext and publish material from it to enable further content creation and to develop mythology, story and characters across multiple publications as well has been useful in refining the techniques first used with my case study of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) and *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014).

The novel, *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) is an example of how a text can be created from this background material and be used to reinforce it, connecting the fiction to a real-world premise and anchoring that fiction in amongst historical events.

Encapsulating my work in these two fictions for this submission is hard. The creative writing amassed for each project exceeds one hundred thousand words and continues to develop. This breadth of work and continual development is necessary to continue keeping the projects relevant. This continual addition of layers can be seen in other collected fictions within the genres. Part of this is connected with the audience appetite for new content through familiar frames.

The megatext as identified by Christine Brooke-Rose and refined by Damien Broderick describes this familiarity within a genre. However, with the greater profusion of released content, my macrotext encapsulates the need for co-ordination and connectivity within a specific fiction that produces a multiplicity of texts. This in turn, generates the necessary familiarity to establish and retain an audience across media platforms who will read, watch, interact and create within that fiction.

Gary K. Wolfe's explanation of science fiction's icons, also informs this discussion as it identifies the mythological properties of familiar concepts within a genre. During the development of Chaos Reborn's fictional world, I have identified the mythological properties of fantasy icons and noted how these concepts relate to the megatext. I have also identified macrotextual icons, which are specific to an individual fiction as opposed to the genre at large. These are often appealing aspects to a consumer community of the specific fiction who want to know more about their favourite characters or mythical events from a previous text.

The world creation process is also something I have investigated, following Tolkien's explanation of the primary and secondary worlds and the concept of subcreation. Wolf's identification of a spectrum or strata of the connected relationships between our real (primary) world and the invented secondary worlds of content creators helped me visualise this process in relation to its wider application in the genre and specifically consider the interconnectedness of my developed

fiction worlds with the primary world and the reader's experience. This also connects to the related theories of the megatext and iconography.

Wolf's concept of narrative threads, braids and fabric (Wolf, 2012: 199-202) has enabled me to describe how I assembled the story of *Dreams of Chaos* (2016). The braiding process, connecting existing historical events, legacy events and new writing might not have been what Wolf initially identified this concept for, as his work primarily describes the subcreation of secondary worlds, not the incorporation of existing primary world history, but I believe the concept works and appropriately explains my method.

The multiplicity of texts associated with these projects and the opportunities for me to provide direct content in each has changed and enhanced the relationship between the different narrative threads, narrative braids and the narrative fabric (Wolf, 2012: 201). This allows meaning to be reinforced and contrasted between different texts that focus on similar events. In my work on *Elite: Dangerous* (2014), this was done, with three different perspectives on invented historical incidents written into the macrotexts as factional bias. In my work on the Chaos Reborn project, I can, and have, gone further in both *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016) and *Dreams of Chaos* (2016), introducing a multiplicity of fictionalised biases from characters, groups and more as a set of published works that can be explored by readers.

An application of Darko Suvin's concept of a novum to the use of portals in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) does not fit as neatly as Wolf's concept. Suvin stated that magical devices of fantasy do not fit the definition as they are 'strange to the author's empirical reality' (Suvin, 1978). However, the use of portals is at the heart of my story and described reality of the wider fictional world; affecting the nature of societies, cultures and individual lives. The device is a familiar trope with the genre and its megatext, so not strange as a fictional contrivance, in itself. It is likely we need new terminology to describe this occurrence in fantasy literature. In his article for SFSignal, John Stevens goes some way to suggesting this:

I believe that we can also establish linkages to the real world in crafting a novum of the fantastikal. It requires putting more emphasis on that elementary dialectic and considering how our imaginations take in the particular sort of information that the fantastikal novum communicates to us.

(Stevens, 2011).

Stevens' article and its follow up quotes Wolfe and makes a case for what is 'what we recognize as empirically impossible' (Wolfe, 2011: 71) It is clear to me, that in identifying this device, there is a need to conceptualise it and define a new term.

In working through these creative projects, I have come to understand the necessity for an imperfect relationship between the writer the text and the consumer. In the development of world creation documents, there is a desire for complete simulation, as defined by Baudrillard, but this can ultimately lead to a sterile artefact. The lack of completeness what can stimulate speculative interest and the need for an evolving and updating macrotext to incorporate new works and new ideas ensures the continual development of the fictional world.

Additionally, the relationship between a specific text within a world, the intentions of the writer and the interpretation or experience of a reader, player, watcher, etc. will be imperfect. This imperfection must be accepted and accounted for when the text is constructed to allow participants within that text to find new meaning from what they experience. The primacy of the text, as mentioned by Barthes is important here, not just to the critic, but also to the creator. Any attempt to fully control the conveyed meaning by the creator will fail, but the relationship between encoded and intended meaning and interpreted meaning is essential.

Finally, Davidson's triangulation of *self*, *object* and *other*, is a way in which an individual can rationalise and verify their thoughts. This is recontextualised by Fiske to apply to producer, text and audience as a means of understanding art generically. My use of Davidson's model has been firstly to explain the creation and verification process of new texts in one fiction against another that is an older text, parallel text or *macrotext*. My second application of Davidson's model has been to the reader's journey through a text, making the reader the self, the acquired knowledge of the fiction the object and the validation of this knowledge through direct and indirect validation within the text as the *other*. I have then suggested there can be a fourth dimension to this in the transmedia storytelling relationship between this text and other texts or a macrotext, that are part of the same fictional world.

The larger role and freedom available to me working on Chaos Reborn's world history and ongoing fiction has also enabled me to develop a more complete picture of this fiction compared to my previous work on Elite Dangerous. Both projects are ongoing, but the opportunities afforded to me in creating additional content, place me on different levels comparatively. In the fictional world of Chaos Reborn, I have more creative freedom, in the fictional world of Elite Dangerous, I have less. Both positions are interesting when analysing the continual development of each fiction.

The transitional and transfictionality of the texts produced for this fiction are also a development of my process. I have attempted to emulate the design transitions of the computer game with differing types of address in the two books written, making many of the chapter end-additions in *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) more crucial to the plot than those included in *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014).

Both *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and *The Loremaster's Guide* (2016) are written with an awareness of the different ways in which a reader may approach them, either as players of the computer game *Chaos Reborn* (2015) or reading them as standalone texts.

The Chaos Reborn project, and the Elite Dangerous project have given me opportunities to reflect on the practical application of narrative and identify theoretical concepts that relate to my intentions and the intentions of others, working within the same fiction. This, connected with the extensive research undertaken to develop a new fiction that is anchored in existing mythology and history, has enabled the production of a set of texts that draw ideas and inspiration from a wide base of different sources inside and outside of the science fiction and fantasy genres.

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Appendix A – MPhil Upgrade Submission

This document is included to demonstrate the work I have done developing my structures from my first project in Science Fiction, to my second work in Fantasy.

This appendix covers my work with *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) and references my novel, *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014).

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER.

Faculty of Arts.

Investigation and Application of
Writing Structures and World
Development Techniques in Science
Fiction and Fantasy.

Allen Stroud

Submission for MPhil Upgrade.

2015.

This Thesis has been completed as a
requirement for a postgraduate
research degree of the University of
Winchester.

The word count is: 63015

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER ABSTRACT FOR THESIS

Investigation and Application of Writing Structures and World Development Techniques in Science Fiction and Fantasy.

Allen Stroud - Faculty of Arts

Submission for MPhil Upgrade April/May 2015

This project establishes a set of parameters for developing fiction within a defined world and then provides examples of these being utilised.

In the genres of science fiction and fantasy, authors who make use of canon documents to guide their subsequent novels include Terry Pratchett, J. R. R. Tolkien and Isaac Asimov. Some writers look to establish a fictional future working from our present, others look to create a mythological past. However, both of these aims require planning and structure of how the new fictional reality may work. Stories set in these worlds also require a blend of familiarity and difference, so as to engage the reader and draw them into what they might never experience.

The constructed examples I provide will demonstrate commercial use for the framework and involve application across a variety of mediums, highlighting how written fiction can form part of a large collaborative collection of work in a selection of disciplines, namely computer game development and other mediums.

Drawing on previous writers work and then working with developed examples from the Science Fiction genre, I will identify and apply techniques to create example 'canon' that can be used as a blueprint for a writer electing to construct a story within the defined world(s) and highlight why such techniques are useful in improving the eventual story examples.

The commercial and creative opportunities for this kind of transmedia storytelling can be significant. I will provide examples of how my framework and fiction has been used in commercial products and how other creative artists can make use of both the existing frames and the techniques used to develop them in their own work.

My case study will be the development of the cross media Science Fiction franchise Elite: Dangerous.

My writing will showcase a fictional example of an invented science fiction future. The world building elements will be evaluated for use. I will also identify and define the use of different literary themes, such as the mythologising process, the megatext, defamiliarisation, novums, the story expectations of the reader and my own concept of the macrotext.

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I confirm that this Thesis is entirely my own work.

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Introduction

With the pervasive spread of global communication tools and networks across the world, it has become easier to reach people with a variety of information. We are no longer as restricted by bandwidth or connection as we were and with each day any restriction that remains is challenged by new cables and fibre optics.

Each day we experience the world, from morning to night. Throughout that day, we are exposed to a variety of media. Adverts on billboards, websites we visit, television we watch, radio or music we listen to etc. In essence, this is our own personal story and the connections between each text we experience only occur for us or for the people we share the whole narrative with.

In this process 'stuff creeps in' (Pratchett: *Worlds of Fantasy* 2005). We develop and retain an understanding of concepts and ideas beyond our immediate experience. Something identified by both Barthes (Barthes: 1971) and Carl Jung.

One admits readily that human activity is influenced to a high degree by instincts, quite apart from the rational motivations of the conscious mind. So if the assertion is made that our imagination, perception, and thinking are likewise influenced by in-born and universally present formal elements, it seems to me that a normally functioning intelligence can discover in this idea just as much or just as little mysticism as in the theory of instincts.

C.G. Jung, *C.G. Jung: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. (London: Routledge, 1991), page 44.

With an imparted story we learn the rituals of the imparting medium and accept them to obtain the narrative. However, the connected nature of our exposure to different forms is our own unique journey and one not often explored by connected stories.

Transmedia Storytelling – a phrase coined by Henry Jenkins in his book, *Convergence Culture* (2005) describes the way in which narratives can be linked across mediums and by doing so, these narratives tap into the linked experience we already make of our lives. The multiplicity of outputs delivered by a multiplicity of platforms concretises as well as connects. Through a mix of address, we perceive greater depth and a great experience.

To be a transmedia narrative, the story must switch between the output forms in some way and each new expression must have some advancement, it cannot be worthless. That said,

many good examples of transmedia storytelling are careful to balance the essentiality of each output. A viewer may watch the Wachowski's Matrix trilogy (1999-2003), for example, without needing to watch the *Animatrix* (2003), play *Enter the Matrix* (2003) or read the connected comics, but the viewer who does feels they have gained a more privileged insight into the world. This is a story of circles as each builds on the next in layers, helping you become more immersed in the world of the chosen fiction.

The construction of a larger world space in which to place a story(ies) is a concept that was largely explored by Tolkien in his construction of Middle Earth (Tolkien: 1937). The benefit for the writer is that this larger canvas allows for a great deal of the problems of consistency and plausibility to be worked out beforehand. It also allows for a greater profusion of storytelling across a multitude of mediums as each narrative, set in the same world, supports the others.

This process, if carefully followed, allows for collaboration and the fictional world to be shared.

This study will identify and examine a selection of functions in writing that can be used to enhance the perceived depth and significance of the fictional event being described in the story(ies) constructed.

I will look at writing in two specific genres – Science Fiction and Fantasy. These are distinct in their identity by comparison to others, but also share functions. Some story makers write in both, which offers a contrast of technique. They also offer a good link toward stimulating imaginative responses in the reader/viewer, bring us back to the speculative/creative event that initiated our process.

Finally, I will also look at ways in which these imaginative responses can be harnessed and material developed to inform collaborative writing within the fiction 'world' being created and how collaborations across different mediums and forms can be structured to support one another, whether through complementary narratives or cross media depiction.

The related works mentioned will be selected for their identifiable elements and effect on me as a reader/viewer.

The case study included will illustrate my process of intention and function. It will illustrate the identified concepts in this document and apply them in a specific context.

Chapter 1: Megatext

As a storyteller, I look to use my experience in creating identifiable contexts, characters and locations in my work. I do this through attempting to translate my ideas into the output medium of choice.

I invite you to join me on a writer's journey, a mission of discovery to explore and map the elusive borderlands between myth and modern storytelling. We will be guided by a simple idea: All stories consist of a few common structural elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams and movies.

Vogler C. *The Writer's Journey. Mythic Structure for Writers: Third Edition* (California: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), page xxvii.

The idea of a commonality to stories is a well-trodden path. This relates our shared human experience, echoing David Hume (Hume: 1738) and invoking Joseph Campbell's monomyth (Campbell: 1949). Stories cannot stray far from what we know and understand, but weld familiarity with new thought. Granted the defamiliarised depictions of Science Fiction intentionally stress the different and the 'other' but the reader/viewer's perspective in decoding them is from a position of humanity.

The initial form of a story is interesting to examine owing to its rawness. Joseph Campbell first discusses the proto-shape as a dream, applying psychoanalysis to determine its meaning and subtext. This is part of his monomyth and his assertion that mythology is all pervasive; the idea that all stories we create and consume are joined together by the sum of human experience and the similarities of our thought processes.

Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these. The various judgements are determined by the viewpoints of the judges. For when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as

amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age.

Campbell J. *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (California: 3rd Edition New World Library, 2012), page 330.

Campbell's analysis of motivations behind dreams using examples to show how imagination is stimulated by experience is very useful as it highlights the perceived functions behind the initial form of a story and reminds the writer of the most important and unpredictable component to the sharing experience – the reader/audience.

We occupy dual roles in this. My interest in writing science fiction and fantasy was stimulated by stories I read, watched and listened to. My experience is unique, but often shared. Populist work in these genres that I have experienced will also have been experienced by others. This collective knowledge is a good basis to begin, with familiarity.

As a theorist and writer, Professor Christine Brooke-Rose was experimental and a proponent of the essentiality of the text, looking at omission to demonstrate meaning in language. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic* (1983), she introduces us to the *megatext* (p42); a blueprint-like concept where the world values of a book are explained .

The concept is built from the work of Roland Barthes and his referential code (Barthes: 1970). This is a study in familiarity as the narrative uses our own knowledge and experience of parallel works as a backdrop to its story. The sedentary life experience generated is recognised by us and used as an anchor for the narrative. It is the shared conceptual memory of related forms to the story being told.

Brooke-Rose begins her study of this with J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954). She acknowledges the popularity and effect of the work as a preeminent fantasy quest and examines it from a structuralist viewpoint, breaking down the components into likened elements; the quest narrative itself being a common trope as are the defined roles of characters as plot functions or representation functions demonstrating the unity of peoples in opposition to Middle-Earth's villain.

It is in *the appeal to memory* that we find a starting point to the concept of the megatext, although not perhaps as Brooke-Rose intended at the time she wrote her book. Initially she uses the term to describe the expositional back story that is woven into Tolkien's work.

[The Lord of the Rings] like SF but more so, is particularly interesting in that there is such a megatext, not pre-existent but entirely invented, yet treated with the utmost seriousness and in great detail, thus destroying the element of recognition and hence readability which this feature provides in the realistic novel and causing on the contrary a plethora of information and the collapse of the referential code...

Brooke-Rose C. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), page 243.

The conclusion of this analysis is difficult to digest when other critics have drawn comparisons of the Shire, to the pre-industrialised agricultural idylls of England and likened the Dead Marshes to the battlefields of the First World War.

Clearly [The Lord of the Rings] is overcoded in this way, since the megatext, being wholly invented and unfamiliar, has to be constantly explained. Apart from the 'hypertrophic' redundancy in the in the text itself, the recapitulations and repetitions, there are long appendices, not only on the history and genealogy but on the language of elves, dwarves, wizards and other powers, together with their philological development, appendices which though ostensibly given to create belief in the 'reality' of these societies, in fact and even frankly playfully reflect the author's private professional interest in this particular slice of knowledge, rather than narrative necessity, since all of the examples of runic and other messages inside the narrative are both given in the original and translated. Nor are the histories and genealogies in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies, whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish.

Brooke-Rose C. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), page 247.

The 'hypotrophic redundancy' of *Lord of the Rings* is a common criticism. The prose is thick and littered with self-referentiality for a reason which Brooke-Rose describes as 'infantile happiness'. Her argument is that this is because of the author's 'professional interest' and she infers that it has no purpose. However, this jams together many things under one criticism and does not really examine their function or effect.

For Brooke-Rose to suggest redundancy in the writing is to imply there is no purpose to the additions of appendices and expository reference. It is true the additional material is not essential, but it still has a function. The weave within the story narrative is primarily designed to project depth. Tolkien builds layers, using invented terminology so that you might want to learn more and through the appendices, inviting you to do so. There is no essentiality here and that indeed is part of the attraction, instead there is intrigue, curiosity and empowerment.

This layering continues with the publication of *The Silmarillion* (1979) where the appendices of timelines and historical accounts are given a full treatment. The book is a tome of invented myth, contextualising the War of the Ring (Tolkien: 1951), imitating alternately the writing style of western mythology, religious texts and history books.

Readers may choose to engage with Tolkien's work on a number of levels, with the most enthused, delving into the depths of the appendices and moving on to *The Silmarillion* (1979) for more invented mythological context. By layering the narrative of the work, Tolkien creates layers of engagement and as an unintended by-product, creates layers of community (through knowledge) amongst fans. According to Italo Calvino (1988), this layering of meaning appeals to a basic need we have always had as consumers of knowledge.

I think we are always searching for something hidden or merely potential or hypothetical, following its traces whenever they appear on the surface. I think our basic mental processes have come down to us through every period of history, ever since the times of our Paleolithic forefathers, who were hunters and gatherers. The word connects the visible trace with the invisible thing, the absent thing, the thing that is desired or feared, like a frail emergency bridge flung over an abyss.

Calvino I. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), page 77.

Tolkien's intention would not have been to stimulate others to make stories in Middle-Earth and to expand on his narrative. His objective is well stated, 'to get it right' and be meticulous, applying his scholarly knowledge to create a rounded world in which to set his story. However, in doing so, he did establish a legacy of world building in the same vein, bringing the functional tools of his work's construction to a wider community of readers who became story makers in their own right. Over time, the expository weight of each concept, inside the narrative and in addition to it, lessens as other story makers make use of the same techniques, breeding familiarity.

This process is not unique to Tolkien, his work is one example amongst many where mythic concepts are refined, re-appropriated and re-translated, but he is a clear example to my work.

At the start of November 2012, David Braben and his company Frontier Developments, launched a crowd source campaign to fund the creation and release of a new videogame set in the Elite/Frontier Universe. After a successful campaign, this became *Elite: Dangerous* (2014).

Within the fictional Frontier/Elite Universe, there are themes drawn from the genre of science fiction; some taken from the prevailing ideas of the 1980s, some from the 1990s and some drawing from contemporary ideas. The influence of *Star Wars* (1977) on the original computer game is plain - the concept of a lone starship pilot making his way in a vast universe, sometimes flouting the law, akin to an anonymous 'Han Solo'¹ (Lucas: 1977). The galaxies of the original a vast populated arena of many different intelligent aliens, much like the depictions of Mos Eisley² (Lucas: 1977), etc.

The 1990s game revisions saw a further reflection of popular themes. The galaxies were redrawn to depict an 'accurate' Milky Way and the diverse populace reduced so a factionalised Humanity stood (almost) alone in the stars, reminiscent of Asimov's Foundation series (Asimov: 1951).

My involvement with *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) began when I contacted Frontier Developments and offered my services there. I thought I might be able to help in a small way to sketch out some information for the writers so they could create fiction that would be consistent with the game environment. The new game takes the accuracy of the galaxy further as it is updated with twenty years of astronomical data. More features have been refined and updated, but the essential fictional world premise has remained the same, with the time period of the game moving forward from AD 3250 (in the previous release) to AD 3300 now.

The balance of nostalgia and future depiction is like much of the science fiction genre, taking the familiar and projecting it forwards. In the case of technology, looking at modern knowledge and extemporising where it may be more than a millennia from now, doing the same with culture and society, but retaining enough of an identifiable quality to connect with a reader/audience. It is here that the key difference between the megatext of Science Fiction and the megatext of Fantasy reveals itself.

¹ *Star Wars*, G. Lucas (1977).

² *Star Wars*, G. Lucas (1977).

A portion of the westernised megatext of fantasy is rooted from fairy tale. Story patterns and narrative structures can be of a simplified world, with a clear binary of good and evil. As an example Bruno Bettelheim (1976) and Jack Zipes (1983) identify a structure to fairy tales:

For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouses curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; helping to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him.

Bettelheim B. *The Uses of Enchantment*. (London: Penguin Books, 1976), page 5.

Bettelheim suggests the purpose of fairy tales to be a process of supporting the development of children, helping them to make sense of their world (Bettelheim: 1976). This is done by actively seeking to encourage imaginative and associative thinking, with characters that are painted in bright colours, allowing the young reader/viewer to understand abstract concepts. Evil is the Wicked Stepmother, good is the Handsome Prince. There are consequences for wrong actions and in most tales, harmony is restored at the end, unless a specific moral message is being imparted.

Jack Zipes takes Bettelheim's argument further (Zipes: 1983), suggesting this process is historic socialisation, reinforcing the dominant hegemony across the different societies of Western Europe.

These assertions are born from an analysis of both structure and function, but it is the latter which empowers them. There are plenty of elements in fairy tales that do not fit into Bettelheim's vision - the boastful Miller of Rumpelstiltskin never received punishment and the Little Mermaid died of a broken heart.

Brooke-Rose suggests Tolkien's megatext is wholly unique to the author's invention, but this does not appear to be the case. To suggest Tolkien's work doesn't use the familiar and generate recognition is denying many of its themes; the homely pre-industrialised echo of the Shire, the Anglo-Celtic resonance of the Rohrimm³ and the good/evil binary of characters. Granted, Tolkien does reinvent contexts, but Middle Earth is made familiar by so many of its aspects, not least its name. Much as some are not in the immediate mind of the reader/viewer they are as much a part of the background story memory as any other work of fiction, but are applied to the adopted form.

³ *Lord of the Rings*. J. R. R. Tolkien (1954)

The decades since *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) saw an explosion of stories drawing on the archetypes established in Tolkien's work. Initially these were derivatives and of variable quality, as publishers sought a second Middle-Earth for purely commercial reasons, but this didn't stop them being bought and being read. Fans absorbed these lesser worlds through a frame of the first. The descriptions of Elves in Middle-Earth fill in the gaps of Shannara (T. Brooks: 1979), Midkemia (R. E. Feist: 1982) and Krynn (M. Weis, T. Hickman: 1984) to name only a few. In a sense, this grounded the new forms and made what Brooke-Rose considered "hypotrophically redundant" in intention the new archetype for a growing community of readers. It becomes a part of the megatext of Fantasy; an elusive evolving language of familiarity that connects the genre writer to the genre fans. A dragon in any fantasy story will be pictured by the reader through the frame of their experience of other stories containing dragons and from Tolkien, this will be Smaug or Glaurung (Tolkien: 1937, 1977). Likewise, in Science Fiction, the laser gun will be imagined as a variation on laser guns in *Star Wars* (1977) or *Star Trek* (1966). These specific examples are described as "icons" (Wolfe: 1979) and they (and their like) form only part of the entity. The megatext is also the familiar characters, the writing styles and tropes, the novums, the defamiliarisation and more.

The megatext is not simply a collection of familiar objects it is the familiar tone or style as well and more. If the megatext is a part of the reader/viewer's consciousness and can be genre specific then it becomes playbook of functions and expectation. The megatext of a genre is couched in the familiar themes a reader/viewer has come to expect derived from the texts they are likely to have read.

This general miasmatic consciousness is partially counter-productive to the original intentions of fantasy writers. The need to write in an unconventional and often surreal culture is often what drives these writers to abandon the genres of conventional fiction. However, with the emergence of broad categorisations of ideas in the fantasy genre, the escape could become a flight from one cage to another. It depends of course upon the writer as to which walls they feel more at home with.

From the story maker's context, the megatext may describe the familiar of the genre. However, unlike narrative structures, the megatext can evolve and change as more stories are told and celebrated. But this is still looking to what came before and repeating. By adopting only the familiar or the patterned, we limit our opportunity for difference and innovation. In making stories, we have a choice, to remain with the familiar and shape it to suit our needs or to challenge it and innovate the megatext driving forward the expectation of the reader.

This is a decision that requires the writer to take care which fight to pick. Overturning too much of the familiar might jeopardise a reader's chance to escape and immerse, just as retaining too much may result in dusty repetition.

The expectations of the reader audience are important when I devise a story. Approaching the writing of guide material for *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) and the book, *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014), I had in mind many of the elements above.

To begin with, the context of an interstellar human society in AD 3300 is removed enough from our current context to be considered fantastical, apart from our starting point (point of origin) which lies in the present day. This means if the familiar tools other genres have used to 'map out' a world context are used and written in a way that considers genre a mode (Broderick: 1995), similar development tools as those used by Tolkien (1954) in a science fiction context to help with the production of the guidance material.

Once this is accepted, a range of different writing techniques can be utilised. The freedom of future context also allows for the employment of all modern writing modes, so, repurposing the journalistic style to create articles within my new world context, inventing email messages written with a direct and familiar address, using diary extracts and more.

This is not a unique practice, but it does project depth by creating a variety of perspectives. The juxtaposition of styles also serves to enhance the illusion of importance and fulfils the definition of an epic (Aristotle: 1895)⁴, by seeming to contain 'a multiplicity of stories'.

Calvino addresses the idea of multiplicity in his fifth memo.

Medieval literature tended to produce works expressing the sum of human knowledge in an order and form of stable compactness, as in the *Commedia*, where a multiform of richness of language converges with the application of a systematic and unitary mode of thought. In contrast, the modern books that we love the most are the outcome of a confluence and a clash of the multiplicity of interpretative methods, modes of thought, and styles of expression.

Calvino I. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), page 116.

The application of multiplicity may take many forms. In George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* (1996), one of the most popular modern fantasy series, it lies in the variety of viewpoints, each taking up a short chapter, before moving to the next and the next and so on, building an

⁴ First produced around 335 BC (approx).

epic by patchwork. Others may look to weave in poetry, song, invented language, etc. The key is to ensure these build layers in the narrative of the work.

My own work on attempting multiplicity has been experimental in several mediums before now, writing fiction, making games, music and film in a defined world context.

My fiction novel *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) is set on Lave, the planet players began their experience with Elite on back in 1984, and tells the story of how the system went from being a dictatorship in the previous games to being a democracy in the new game.

Owing to my work on the guide material and relationship with the fans of the previous games, I elected to tell a story that would showcase some of the lore developed for the game. By choosing a start point of AD 3265, my story could narrate events leading up to the game, starting in AD 3300 and complement it. It would also act as a bridge to the previous game, *Frontier First Encounters* (1995) set in AD 3250. Lave's position in the first game had been one of power and focus. By the second and third games it was a backwater. The novel gave me an opportunity to tell the story of why this happened in the past and how it would change in the future.

In *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) many of the thirty-eight chapters have an additional commentary at the end. Some of these are first person testimonials, contrasting with the third person narrative of the main story. Some are news reports, or records of message based conversation. Each relates to the topic of the chapter and builds an additional layer to the narrative as they are wrapped in the frame of being part of a research archive account, being as the novel is set in AD 3265 and the computer game begins in AD 3300. This identifies the book as a subordinate work to the game and places it within a historical context, promising to inform the reader/audience of the time between the previous game *Frontier: First Encounters* (AD 3250) and the current game *Elite: Dangerous* (AD 3300).

In writing a novel with a tie in to a videogame, the reader is likely to be a fan of the other elements of the franchise, or be introduced to the franchise through your work. If they are previous fans and arrive at your text from the game or other material, then the imaginations of some scenes covered by the same content, in this case the flying of spaceships, will be drawn from their experience of the game material. The writer, Michael A. Stackpole wrote the X-Wing series of novels, beginning with *X-Wing: Rogue Squadron* (1996). These were a tie in to Star Wars and the X-Wing videogame, produced by Lucas Arts (1993). Stackpole's spaceship

combat scenes invoked the atmosphere of the films and described elements that clearly drew on his experience of the videogame franchise.

The influence of film scenes of popular science fiction on new science fiction is a part of the current megatext. The assertion that we create and imagine from the sum of human experience is evident (Hume: 1738). That experience is vast and diverse, but specific experiences will become part of the new imagined scene. This can be down to context; a vast space battle depicted in a film seen by the reader can become part of the imagined scene in my story where I describe a vast space battle. However, as the writer I can influence this, specifically in this context, ensuring my description allies closely with the *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) computer game experience. This is particularly true in the audio drama of my novel, where in game sound is used to establish a connected context between the outputs.

Another example would be news articles. *Frontier: First Encounters* (1995) and *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) have news articles available for the player to browse, so the inclusion of these in the novel at the end of chapters has specific resonance as well as a general application to multiplicity.

In a sense, this close allegiance is an intentional mesh and by doing so, insulates the fiction project from the criticisms applied to other work in the genre or rather, makes the criticisms valid to the whole franchise. Unless given an unusual remit, the story must make use of the same contrivances and pseudoscience utilised by the other texts that are part of the project.

There is a tension in this approach, notably in the argument over the way nostalgia permeates a particular brand of populist science fiction writing, rather than prioritising the future thinking and rationalised visions given weight by 'hard' science fiction. Star Wars is often cited as an example of this owing to the composition of its scenes.

A spaceship would be silent, but X-Wing fighters aren't really spaceships, they're Spitfires and P 51s.

Roberts A. *Science Fiction: A Critical Idiom* 2nd Edition. (London: Routledge, 2006), page 27.

Elite Dangerous (2014) takes the same cue, eschewing Newtonian theories of how motion in space works and taking a lead from what makes a fun experience playing a computer game, this is dogfighting inspired by World War II, noise in space and nebulae visible amidst the vast blanket of stars. These tropes are part of a particular brand of science fiction, the space opera and are something the novels must reflect to remain part of the same fictional world in the mind of the reader.

Chapter 2: Mythopoeia

The popular perception of myth revolves around the ideas of the ancient and forgotten. A mythology is a collection of myths and indeed these ancient tales are collections along a theme. Readers think of the ancient Greeks, Romans or Norse, for example, which are all strong groups of writing dealing with all manner of human and godlike behaviour.

When examining the meaning of myth, mythology and the mythologising process, we find a great deal more of interest to a writer who is attempting to make their story memorable.

Myth permeates all writing, whether through conscious intent of the writer or not. Joseph Campbell's work *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) outlines the principles of the monomyth; the idea that mythology is all pervasive, that humanity looks for meaning and symbolism in all things.

It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation.

Campbell J. *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (California: 3rd Edition New World Library, 2012), page 1.

Although less prosaic in his assertion, influential French writer, Roland Barthes agrees:

Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.

Barthes R. *Mythologies* (London: Paladin Books, 1972), page 109.

Barthes and Campbell share the view that popular myths have evolved through time, reflecting the changing nature of perceived reality and truth to which society has had to adjust. We empathise and sympathise through familiar forms, though each perception and identification of the familiar is coloured by our individual experience and cultural context. This draws from Durkheim (Durkheim: 1893), Jung (Jung: 1981) and Hume (Hume: 1738) and might be a type of mnemonic encoding, utilising a set of patterns which we share on a number of levels. This cloak is a common garb that may be worn by the story to draw the reader in. When used in this way it can deliver a cathartic escape. The cares and passions of the story protagonist are felt keenly by the reader when they at first seem similar, but then take on a rationalised path of their own.

Tolkien and the other Barrovian Society members were looking to produce new kinds of mythic narrative. *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) is a wholly English perspective legend, drawing on Anglo-Saxon academic work. In producing a story collected with so many additional documents, this entity emerges as a feast for the reader who can follow its quest and then delve into the history, imagining further tales and adventures that might emerge from this world.

In his essay, *On Fairy-Stories* (1939), Tolkien outlines the concept of *mythopoeia*, the invention of fictional mythology attached to fictional writing. In a way this is a similar concept to Brooke-Rose' megatext (Brooke-Rose: 1983) and some of the same writing can be seen as examples of it. For Tolkien the intention is to provide depth and create self-referentiality within the text (Tolkien: 1939). Characters discuss the fictitious history and counsel against repeating the same mistakes; a fragment of old lore is found, learned or rejected etc. This suggests a very clear intention behind the inclusion of this extra material and the burdens of the narrative. It appeals to the reader by being illusive and suggestive rather than completely exhaustive, encouraging speculation and lingering thought on the story. The found fragment of old lore implies more may have been written, etc.

Aside from magic, myths and mythmaking are powerful weapons in the writer's armoury. They can invoke the reader's imagination and draw them back to further texts. They can establish frames and parameters of what we expect and even transcend the text, taking on a life of their own, forming a staple part of the genre they inhabit. Mythologising often cuts against the expositional instincts of the fantasy writer, but can be more rewarding when attempted. The reader's mind is the best tool for a writer to utilise when attempting to engage them. Inventing and relating myth encourages that engagement through speculation.

In the fictional future of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014), mythopoeia is essential. The game has procedurally generated a representation of the Milky Way galaxy and so created an arena of four hundred billion star systems, with hundreds of these containing colonised worlds and space stations. The sandbox approach to game design, allowing the player to make their own way in a vast multiplayer environment with generated missions and trading of commodities between different star systems creates a feeling of impersonality to the experience, rather than attempting to make the player a hero at the centre of the narrative, the individual player is insignificant as the vast colonies of humanity continue with or without their help.

This approach requires that the player create their own story from their experience. The game lends itself to this, allowing you to explore vast tracts of space and know you are the first to

see the stars and planets you have discovered, or tracking your progress as you become more trusted by particular planetary organisations.

This engagement of the player's imagination and the encouraging them to speculate has been a tradition of the franchise. In 1984, when the first *Elite* game was released. In the original game box set came a short story booklet – *The Dark Wheel*, written by Robert Holdstock. Along with this was the game manual, with a variety of descriptions that hinted at mysterious game content, some of which it turned out, never existed in the game, but this didn't stop eager players trying to find generation ships, space dredgers and mysterious spaceship graveyards.

This tradition continues with *Elite: Dangerous* and the role of the tie in fiction attached to the project is to enrich and provide stories that give a route for people electing to play the game, to come up with their own narratives and imaginings attached to their gameplay.

You immerse yourself in the world more so than you actually care what the characters are doing.

Braben D. Interview quote at Bafta Games, 2013 - <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> [Accessed 27th March 2015].

At face value, this appears to prioritise the function of stories as vehicles to draw the reader into the wider game experience and in part, undermine the nuance of the texts themselves. However, there is an opportunity for the writer in this to tap into the mind of the reader audience and make use of their imagination to support the story. The conceptual images that set out a story's initial premise are often related to the reader's own context, particularly when defining character attributes or circumstances. Similarly, the woven myths within the story itself can become quests for the reader during game play. It is here that the transition between forms becomes nuanced. Transmedia storytelling can take many forms, but the ways in the reader/audience/player is encouraged to shift between the output forms is an important part of delivering a successful narrative. By using elusivity and the construction of myth, this movement is made less jarring and even pleasurable. Clues in a novel that help find answers in a game, achievements in a game that translate coded passages in a novel are both possible amongst many other things. The limitations only remain in areas where the output format is fixed and unchangeable.

For the modern writer, a relationship with older stories and speculations can prove fruitful when attempting to step beyond the cathartic experience of a contained work and project

depth. Connecting to established myth suggests a deeper, partially obscured layer to the story at hand. Playing with the familiar and offering new explanations for it is a practice that allows both a relatable context and new creativity. When written carefully so as not to detract from other stories that may use similar themes, the work can also enhance them.

In the case of the Frontier/Elite universe. Robert Holdstock's *The Dark Wheel* (1984) introduced several concepts and colloquialisms, some of which appeared in the original game Elite, but others were beyond the technology of the time.

From the moment that the trading ship, Avalonia, slipped its orbital berth above the planet Lave, and began to manoeuvre for the hyperspace jump point, its measureable life-span, and that of one of its two-man crew, was exactly eighteen minutes.

Holdstock R. *The Dark Wheel* (Cambridge: Acornsoft, Cambridge. 1984), page 1.

This is the opening to Holdstock's story, the very first paragraph of the first chapter. It mentions the planet Lave, the same planet players began the original game from and the same planet I elected to write my book about, precisely for this reason. It tells the story of how the system went from being a dictatorship in the previous games to being a democracy in the new game.

Owing to my work on the guide material and relationship with the fans of the previous games, I elected to tell a story that would showcase some of the lore developed for the game. By choosing a start point of AD 3265, my story could narrate events leading up to the game, starting in AD 3300 and complement it. It would also act as a bridge to the previous game, *Frontier First Encounters* (1995) set in AD 3250. Lave's position in the first game (*Elite* in 1984) had been one of power and focus. By the second and third games it was a backwater. The novel gave me an opportunity to tell the story of why this happened in the past and how it would change in the future.

In 1993, the fiction Gazetteer included in the box set of the game *Frontier: Elite* included the following passage about Lave.

The trading centre for this region of unusual systems. Through some unexplained quirk of nature all systems have just one inhabited world orbiting a single star. These systems are often known as "The Old Worlds" as they were amongst the first to be settled, despite their lack of gas giants. They were also renowned for their lawlessness as only the corporate states in the region had any police force to speak about.

"Lave is most famous for its vast rain forests and the Lavian tree grub" as the main planet used to be described on the now outdated Data on Systems publication from the Elite Federation of Pilots. Much of the rain forest has now been cut down by irresponsible locals, wishing to raise cattle, and the famous tree grub is on the verge of extinction in its natural habitat. Unfortunately it is very sensitive to its environment, and all attempts to breed them in captivity have so far failed.

The ecological demonstrations (made up almost entirely by off-worlders) here are almost continuous; so much so that many come here regularly on their vacations in order to protest. Indeed, ironically the dictator Dr. Walden once referred to the protesters on a vid interview as "Our thriving tourist industry" and also said "The system's economy depends on them so much so that we cannot afford to stop cutting down the forests!"

Braben D. *Frontier: Elite 2*. (Florida: Gametek, 1993), pages 22-23.

This information had been in the mind of players for twenty years and formed the starting point of my story. The story of one planet's decline under a dictator, named here as Doctor Walden, seemed a good choice as the prime focus of my plot, as did the inclusion of a rainforest and the 'Lavian tree grub'. Each element could be built on from this original premise and developed into a more complex idea, retaining enough of the speculative quality from before. The rainforest was chopped down, for cheap carbon export, the tree grub rendered extinct to produce a DNA based virus and the dictator, given a first name (Hans) and eleven clones, so he might rule the planet as a seemingly ageless despot.

The finished result is a microcosm of the design principles outlined for the new game and fiction. *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) is a layered text, telling the story of individuals leading to an event (the planetary revolution). The additional material closing chapters and in the appendices then provide new perspectives and embellishments on that material.

This is the essence of speculative fiction. Science Fiction lends itself to speculation on the future as this is part of its functional mode. Fantasy is often a pure escape and can draw inspiration from past forms and brings us systemised magic, where unexplained feats and miracles are rationalised into a talent or skill, which becomes an aspiration for the reader to acquire. Horror is perhaps the most intimate of the tripartite, seeking to draw us claustrophobically close and can amplify fears and mysteries of the unexplained, seeking to involve us in its outcome.

All three writing modes use the reality of the reader as an anchor and can find ways to linger in the reader's mind long after the story is done, whether through the wonder of the imagined scenes or speculation on the continued lives and times of the people and places that we have visited. It is for this reason people yearned for another Middle Earth story or yearn now for an eighth Harry Potter book as these would both be a further chance to return to a world we enjoyed and familiar themes become part of the attraction

Of course, the imagined story retains incredible quality to the reader as it is self-devised and therefore entirely suitable to that individual's needs, but often it remains unfinished and partial, unless given expression as fan fiction or otherwise. Whilst it stays in a loose form, it hold on to a mythic quality all of its own as it can be changed and altered to suit the speculations of the imaginer.

Chapter 3: Macrotext

I think that this bond between the formal choices of literary composition and the need for a cosmological model (or else a general mythological framework) is present even in those authors who do not explicitly declare it.

Calvino I. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), page 69.

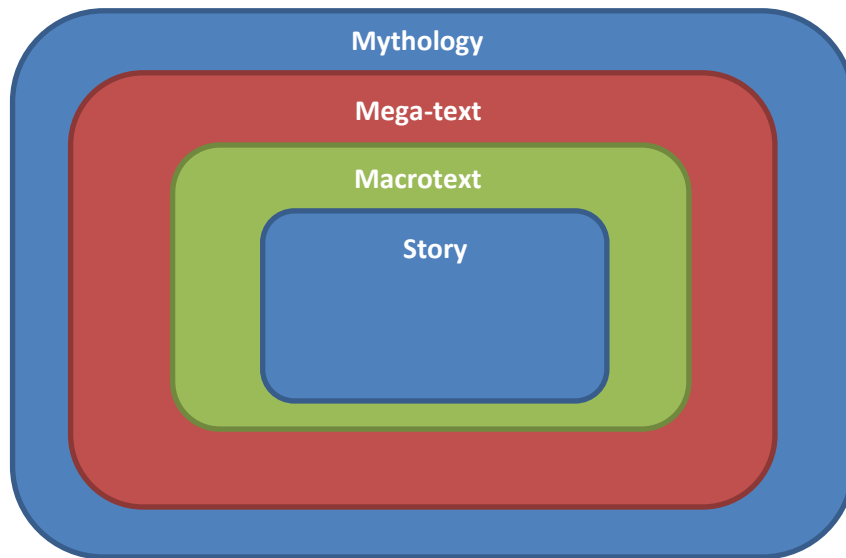


Illustration 1: The story and its relationships.

If the sum of human experience is all myth and from which we draw creative inspiration (mythopoeia being the invention of myth) and the megatext is a shared subconscious catalogue of familiar themes in a genre, the *macrotext* is the guide for a specific fictional world, the frame work through which a large project of multiple outputs can be guided. It is a structured document, enabling the development of expressions that fit the fictional world, but the elements of structure are drawn together for their function, not because of a pre-determined pattern in the narrative. Within this macrotext sits the story, fitting neatly within its parameters so as to maintain consistency with all other work produced in the same fictional world space.

The macrotext draws from both mythopoeia and the megatext. Like mythopoeia its purpose is to encourage depth, but it does so by encouraging further writing, drawing or other art that fits within the constraints of the devised fictional world. Like the megatext it uses forms associated with its genre. In fantasy this can be historical context, language or song. In science fiction it might be a timeline from the present into the future; stopping at the period the

events of the story are due to start. The macrotext can also take outputs types and re-purpose them. The map becomes a set of locations for different writers to work in, the timeline a list of events known to characters in different stories at different periods.

The macrotext, is termed by some as a canon, or plot bible, but neither phrase encapsulates its purpose. A world canon might include previously published work and is difficult to alter as it has been exposed to an audience. A 'plot bible' encompasses only plot. The macrotext is formative and evolves along with its outputs, aspiring to be everything required to be known about a world.

What separates the macrotext from the previously defined concepts is its exclusivity within the devised world and its altered priority. The macrotext is a form of *ergodic literature*, as defined by Espen J. Aarseth, in that it is a text that that requires more than non-trivial effort to read (Aarseth: 1997). It is encoded to inspire other outputs which are released to a mass audience. The encoding of the work is not necessarily overt. The document may evolve and change based on the outputs it generates, but it tries to act as a bridge between each, maintaining their consistency. This temporal state is in itself a form of encoding as those accessing it cannot assume its permanence. Access to it, indicates intention to produce a further work. It exists between output forms and can inspire all sorts of different work, ensuring each connects and reinforces the other, creating a new form of mythopoeiac self-referentiality. It is here that transmedia storytelling finds its guide in examples like the world of *The Matrix* (1999), or *Star Wars* (1977) and more. The macrotext defines what exists and what cannot exist. It provides mutable rules in a fictitious world of make believe. It is a hyperreal construction or artefact and as such, obeys Baudrillard's assertion of taking primacy from reality (Baudrillard: 1981), which it may draw themes from. There is a dichotomy in that it tries to represent a new reality, but can never be as detailed as our own perception of reality, which in itself is a hyperreal construction.

As Baudrillard indicates, what is not included or not meant is indeed as significant as what is (Baudrillard: 1981), particularly in relation to the macrotext's use of the megatext. When a macrotext does not make use of the traditional devices the reader has come to expect from a particular type of story, this affects the imagination of scenes as much as the inclusion might.

An example from my work would be the Frontier/Elite universe' depiction of gravity in space. The contrivance of artificial gravity was a particularly difficult topic. *Elite* (1984) and the games after it, featured rotational space stations. These formed an integral part of the game experience, as every player had to learn how to dock, matching their ship to a rotating

letterbox entrance. This rite of passage was incredibly important and needed to be mastered to you could by docking computers.

The reason for the rotation was explained in the space station's need to generate gravity. However, a great deal of the official fiction, written and published in the game boxes, ignored the concept and had pilots merrily walking around their spaceships whilst tearing through the star systems.

Rotational space stations are an essential game aesthetic and part of David Braben's vision of realistic depiction. They set the Elite/Frontier universe apart from other popular Science Fiction and as such indicate priority of macrotext over megatext. Docking your spaceship with this moving structure was a seminal rite of passage in the old games and a requirement in the new instalment.

However when this information was released to the wider backer community, forum comments suggested many people seem to have difficult in accepting a rationale of 'no artificial gravity' in all of the fiction despite being keen to retain the ritual of docking. The novum (Suvin: 1979) has been used in many science fiction works, so it feels familiar. If we don't use it, but use a different one, this appears to jar.

However, all we're really doing is exchanging one pseudoscientific contrivance for another. The difficulty people have with accepting the contrivance, demonstrates the way in which we subconsciously build images of the writing we read, basing much from the text, but also from previous imaginings of other similar texts.

Baudrillard asserts that hyperreal constructions are fundamentally unimaginative (Baudrillard: 1981). In assessing the macrotext, we might consider this true, if the priority was to create an exhaustive encyclopaedia of our fictional world, but this isn't the intention. Instead, we are attempting to provide a stimulus as well as a framework; we are balancing the mythic functions along with the explanatory. The speculative imaginings and creativity of the writer electing to work within our frame are just as important as accepting the frame's constraints.

Using Musil's writing as an example⁵, Calvino discusses a binary, the incompatibility of codified structure and soul or irrationality. The macrotext is an artefact that exists between these poles. It encourages constrained creativity, within the form it defines.

⁵ *The Man Without Qualities*, R. Musil (1940)

Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialised, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various “codes,” into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.

Calvino I. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), page 112.

Calvino towards attempts by different writers to define the world or universe through the form of the novel, or of poetry. Each person he cites undertakes an enormous labour in their attempt to encapsulate everything into their work. Some of these attempts to be definitive create a wall between the writer and their greatest ally, the imagination of the reader. By invoking myth and encouraging speculation, we engage the reader as part of the process and stay true to the purpose of the macrotext text as a mutable stimulus and reference artefact. Thirty years on from Calvino we talk the same way about constructing transmedia narratives (Jenkins: 2005) and building layers of meaning through different forms of expression which the macrotext sits behind. Rather than seeing our labour as a lonely quest, we collaborate with other specialists, each accessing the macrotext to co-ordinate our efforts. It is changed as we develop new work, but in turn helps that new work find form.

The published collections of Tolkien’s notes⁶ prove a macrotext existed for Middle-Earth and its stories so he could maintain their consistency. Brooke-Rose alludes to the items that might have first existed as guide material for the writer (maps, timelines, etc). However, neither assumed the significance of such material in a modern context. In a pre-computer age, such a manual is difficult to share, revise and maintain for a multitude of creative individuals working on a collection of different outputs.

It is for this reason the macrotext itself is not released to a wide audience, unless it is transformed to make it accessible and through this transformation and release, it is solidified. As an example, *The Silmarillion* (1979) was not intended to be a macrotext. Although it shares many of the attributes of a macrotext, it was never published or written to inspire further creative work in Middle-Earth. Much of its contents in a previous form may have done when they existed as reference for the writer. Later, *The Silmarillion* (1979) may have been re-appropriated as such by those writing boardgames, films, computer games and other outputs set in Middle Earth.

⁶ By his youngest son C.R. Tolkien in a series of volumes.

Conversely without Tolkien's work, the macrotext of different fantasy worlds might not exist in the forms that they do. Writers retain their experiential inspirations and the familiar holds power. The appeal to memory and referential code still influence the construction of these guides. We view our own history through a linear list of events, and use maps to determine our location, but Tolkien applied them to fantasy, producing them for Middle-Earth and influencing those who followed him. We could not write in his world but we still imagined more stories and in turn apply the same functional tools to the new worlds we create. We rationalise, codify and create systemic patterns for our new realities and often retain the simplified binary ethics of the fairy tale as part of this construction. At the heart of our world building and macrotext lies a wish as creators to define, constrain, relate and understand. This is the opposite purpose to well-constructed myth which is used by a writer to engage the reader in speculation and highlights the change of roles from audience to creator.

It is the devising of a macrotext that has formed the basis of my work in Science Fiction and Fantasy. The origination of a bridging document, maintaining the interconnectness of outputs from old (*Elite* (1984), *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993), *Frontier First Encounters* (1995)) to new (*Elite: Dangerous* (2014), *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014), *Elite: Reclamation* (2014) etc.) is a complicated process and its stewardship becomes even more difficult as the outputs become increasingly diverse and for consistency to be maintained, requires the document to remain as mutable as possible.

The macrotext is not a new phenomenon, but is a planned construct. In the past macrotexts have been developed to incorporate existing works into a larger canon.

In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments. The benefit for the writer is that this larger canvas allows for a great deal of the problems of consistency and plausibility to be worked out before starting the story and/or involving others.

It is often asserted that 'Fantasy'. A particular brand of fantastic fiction that became a publishing industry in the wake of the success of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, and 'Science Fiction', a brand of fantastic fiction invented or re-invented, in the USA in the technophile 1920s, have little in common. The Middle-Earth-type fantasy is anti-machines, it inhabits an imaginary past of the human race rather than an imaginary future (though this 'past' may be set in some neo-medieval phase a thousand years ahead of us); it dwells on human relationships, the human condition, metaphysical or moral problems. Science fiction is pro-technology, always set in the future, rationally extrapolating from our present, and favours hard scientific exposition above human

interest. In theory this may be so. In real life it can be difficult from outsiders, even insiders, to tell the difference between the two sub-genres, or separate their audiences. But one thing science fiction and fantasy certainly have in common is the imaginary world, a world that must be furnished with landscape, climate, cosmology, flora and fauna, human or otherwise self-aware population, culture and dialogue.

Jones G. *Deconstructing the Starships*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), page 11.

There are many great world-makers in fiction; writers whose imagined realities are as much a character in their work as the characters themselves. In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments, whereas before, it was often inspired by earlier works.

For example, the Greek writer Hesiod, attempted to define the composition and origins of the Hellenistic pantheon. His work was complicated by existing stories, so his macrotext had to be constructed to include them. In *Theogeny* (1966)⁷ we have an early creation myth that attempts to capture and define the Gods of classical Achaea. The disparate nature of Greek society, sharing parts of their religion and culture between city state kingdoms, made for a fractured interpretation of the different aspects of their dogma. Hesiod attempts to knit these fractures together and, by using a creation myth, determines an absolute beginning, or *point of origin*, for all subsequent writing.

In addition to this, Hesiod describes each of his defined pantheon, bringing us an image of those he includes. This is relevant for the choice of who is present and who is not.

The *point of origin* is a practical concept when attempting to construct a macrotext. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance; the *point of departure*.



Illustration 2: The Macrotext Framework.

⁷ Believed to be first produced in 700BC (approx.).

In Fantasy, this method often requires the author to return to the absolute point of origin; the creation of the world. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance. J. R. R. Tolkien's decision was to begin at this point with Middle Earth, or at least to explain it within his work⁸. C.S. Lewis made a similar decision with Narnia and the *Magician's Nephew*; describing the events of the beginning of the world.

The Lion opened his mouth, but no sound came from it; he was breathing out, a long warm breath; it seemed to sway all the beasts as the wind sways a line of trees. Far overhead from beyond the veil of blue sky which hid them the stars sang again; a pure, cold, difficult music. Then there came a swift flash like fire (but it burnt nobody) either from the sky or from the Lion itself, and every drop of blood tingled in the children's bodies, and the deepest wildest voice they had ever heard was saying:

"Narnia. Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters."

Lewis C. S. *The Magician's Nephew*. (London: Grafton 2002), page 108.

In this example, the macrotext has been brought into the story to form a part of it, showing us the creation of the world and establishing a point of origin, although, this is only the origin point for Narnia and not the origin of the characters that have arrived here. This echoes the work's consummation. There is no tiered division of audience, or (as mentioned) an intention for the macrotext to be used by others.

It is interesting to note that the style of appropriate writing often changes through the context or layer the author is attempting to explore. There are hints in Lewis, but this is much more obvious in *The Valaquenta*; the opening of *The Silmarillion* (1979) imitates the Book of Genesis.

"There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Illuvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought and they were with him before aught else was made."

Tolkien J.R.R. *The Silmarillion* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), page 3.

Compared to;

⁸ Opening of the *Silmarillion*(1979)

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.”

Collins. *The Holy Bible* (King James Version). (London: Collins, 2011), page 1.

In *The Silmarillion* (1979) example, the writing speaks to the story memory of the reader, borrowing from a megatext of religious works in tone, as well as being functional mythopoeia. The adoption of style is an intentional cue and indicates a connected gravitas and in being presented as part of the story, becomes a functional tool to generate depth. It would be part of a macrotext if it were solely being used to for imaginative stimulation and writing reference, but the content has been adapted to suit the concordance narrative of *The Silmarillion* (1979) itself. Nevertheless, the trappings of the macrotext remain here and in many other places. When I first read the book, it inspired me to recreate the scenes depicted with model soldiers

Formatively, many world creators begin this journey through questions, constructing a scattershot blueprint of their world, before framing it. In this process, the questions asked are just as important as the answers given, as these frame the design. The resultant document is a ‘42’, in reference to Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1978); a collation of importance aspects. However, unless this process is employed exhaustively, these remain a starting point of notes, expanding on the original inspiration behind the writing idea. In the example above, the separation of this material may exist only as Lewis’ writing notes and these would inform his own work, as is the case with many writing projects still.

When constructing a macrotext to exist between other works so that a fictional world retains its consistency, we must shape our work so that it best inspires and informs the construction of other narratives. The reader/audience is privileged; only granted access owing to their intention to create these narratives.

Chapter 4: Collaboration

I want to write a story that inspires others to write stories in the same fictional world space.

As we have discussed, when developing a macrotext to enable the work of others, the use of devised myth as a function to project depth into my world invokes the speculative and imaginative thoughts of a reader. When this reader is seeking to devise their own work, these thoughts can become a source of creative inspiration for their work as well.

The Alternative Creativity model (Melrose and Harbour) originally applied to the work of W.B. Yeats can be applied to this process. It was devised out of an extended conversation on generating creative ideas through collaboration.

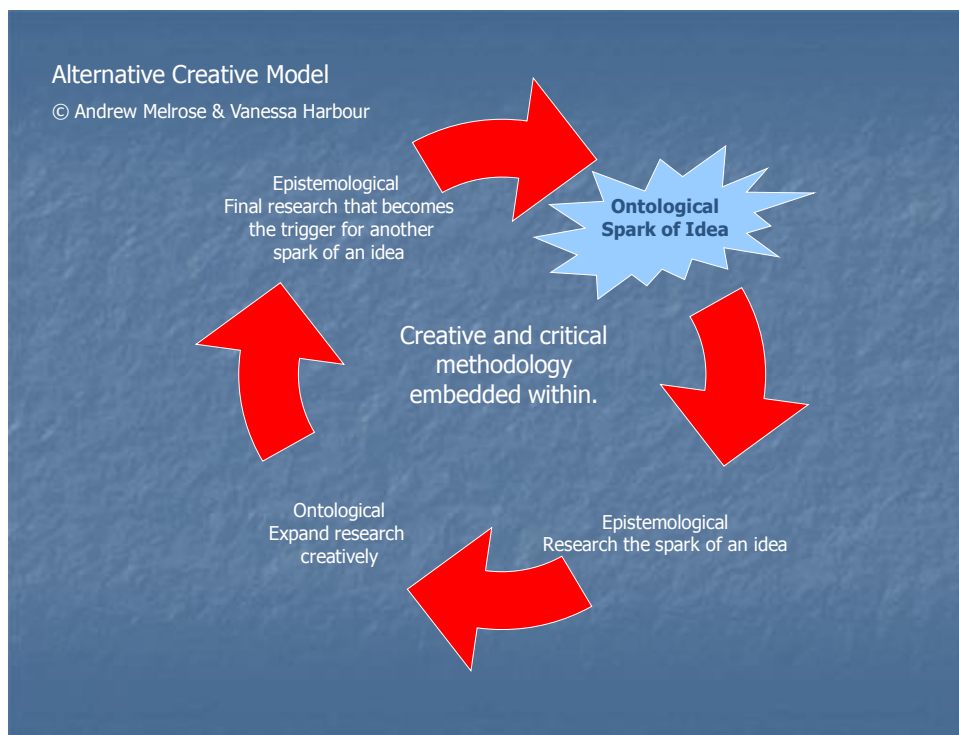


Illustration 3: Alternative Creativity Model. cf Harbour V. *Sex, Drugs and Alcohol in Young Adult Fiction*, PhD. (Winchester, 2010).

The gyre of creativity (Yeats: 1921) is a concept of expanding development, drawing from the spark to devise a fully realised expression of the idea. When connected to a collaborative process (additional writers), this becomes a more complex and exhilarating process as the communication of ideas, critique, feedback, alternatives and more spirals into a storm of creative development.

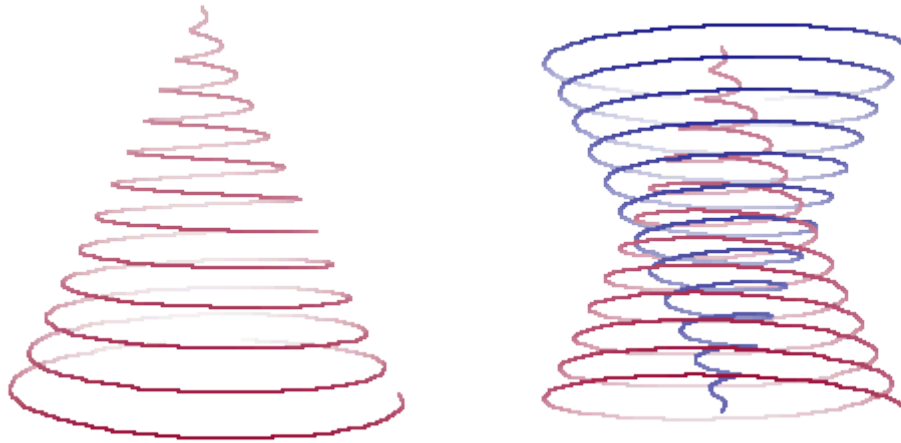


Illustration 4: Yeats' Gyre. Mann N. *Yeats Vision.com*.

<http://www.yeatsvision.com/geometry.html> [Accessed 10th April 2015].

Yeats' model is fundamentally dualistic and describes a collaboration of equals. Within a more hierarchical structure, starting with a creative originator and working through gates of access purpose and refinement, this process is further complicated. The nature of this developmental process requires both elasticity and rigidity in the macrotext, depending on the needs of the individual accessing it and the needs of the project as a whole.

Within the developmental process of the Frontier/Elite Universe, some participants arrive to develop their novels, others to determine source material for the game *Elite: Dangerous* (2014). In the new franchise release accompanying the computer game there are eleven current official novels, with a roleplaying game to follow. There was a legacy of older works which needed to find a home in the new revised background and by ensuring they fit, this creates another appeal to the audience who may have played or read them.

To date, the following outputs have been devised and published as part of the project:

Elite: Wanted (2014) – G. Deas

Elite: Docking is Difficult (2014) – G. Defoe

Elite: Nemorensis (2014) – S. Spurrier

Elite: Reclamation (2014) – D. Wagar

Elite: Lave Revolution (2014) – A. Stroud

Mostly Harmless (2014) – K. Russell

Tales from the Frontier (2014) – by Various

And here the Wheel (2014) – J. Harper

Out of the Darkness (2014) – T. James

Elite: Dangerous (2014) – Frontier Developments

Elite Legacy (2015) – M. Brookes

Elite Encounters: The Roleplaying Game (2015) – D. Hughes

The World's Creator

Many fictional worlds have architects. These individuals are often the originators, who maintain a vested interest in how the world is shaped. Sometimes their view is informed by legacy, sometimes by their own vision.

On being interviewed for the BBC series *Worlds of Fantasy* (2008), Philip Pullman commented 'writing is tyranny'. In a novel, the writer of the book dictates the direction the story will go. We read page to page, following the adventures of the characters constructed for us by this writer.

However, our image of these characters is often wholly different to another reader's image. As texts have evolved into convergent narratives, incorporating games, films, comics, etc. so the way in which we experience the world can be wholly different for each individual consumer.

These attempts at transmedia storytelling often require collaborative effort to construct different outputs in different mediums. The specialist brought in for a specific medium finds benefit in a concise brief on what other outputs are covering. This consistency can be essential when the release of these outputs is to be co-ordinated and there is no breathing room.

The absence of a macrotext for a world being used in a collaborative work makes the task of a writer choosing to create a new story more difficult. Reading all previous work set in the fiction world is a given requirement, but concise summaries pick out bits you may miss and help with a longer involved project, such as a novel.

The parameters afforded to a writer, working by negotiation in a world devised by someone else with multiple outputs, are challenging. You are part of something greater, but at the same time, afford less freedom. The opportunity and access, has to be weighed against the restriction of not having the final say over what is or is not permissible within that world.

My own work on creating transmedia narratives is through collaboration; creating outputs and guides for groups working on a particular fiction. I have worked on guides for the factions

and corporations, timelines '42's and '101's, which are a concise document of what common knowledge people in a specific context might have. This has informed writers and helped produce stories that relate a familiar experience between outputs.

In the case of a videogame tie-in, much of the visual imagery will be drawn by the reader from their game experience. This establishes the videogame as the 'canon leader' - a product which defines how all the other products will be experienced.

My novel *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) contains appendices, website links, encryption codes, artwork and all sorts of extras, each carefully written to add to the experience for those interested. This is a published application of mythiopeia (Tolkien: 1937) in a similar vein to Tolkien's additional material in *Return of the King* (1955), the final part of *The Lord of the Rings* (1951).

If you are about to start making a story, consider the benefits and difficulties of the different mediums and outputs you can create alongside it as well as the different ways your audience will access the narrative. Consider transmedia storytelling, after all, the more time people spend in your world, the more immersive and enjoyable an experience they can have.

Chapter 5: Fiction Extracts

The following sections have been included in this project as examples of my creative work on the elements discussed in the overview. In some cases these are additional documents that formed by of the devised macrotext for *Elite: Dangerous* in others they are elements of the novel *Elite: Lave Revolution* that have been written using the source material as stimulus.

1. Extract from Corporations Guidebook (expanded from Example 1 in Appendix A):

The following are expansions and use of the Wreaken Corporation in my work. This was established as a fictional company back in 1993 with *Frontier: Elite 2*.

Wreaken Construction and Mining

Trade areas: Mining and Construction.

Employing over a quarter of a million full time staff and owning sole mineral rights to some forty nine planets, the Wreaken Corporation can be found throughout most of the frontier and Federation Worlds.

Tobias Wreaken was coal miner from old Earth. His company adopted a cautious and steady approach to its work and this won them substantial work in the early space industry.

Wreaken's descendants saw massive opportunities in the Colonial Charter policy of the Federation and few Colonial missions set off without a Wreaken representative and Wreaken equipment.

The city of Jeffries on Fraser in the Zearla system, houses the head office of the company. Surprisingly this is neither a corporate owned system or in Federal space.

Wreaken facilities exist on many worlds, but their contracts are primarily with the Federation, Independent and Alliance affiliated systems. Mining stations extract natural resources and transport them to vast industrial refineries. The company is aggressive in its acquisitions as it strives to maintain its position in the face of direct competition from Mastopolos Mining Incorporated.

Current Status

The recent discoveries of Tantalum in several systems, including Tiliála during the last century have led to several new contracts for Wreaken. Massive mining operations have been

organised in the system during the last decade as jurisdictional wrangling between the Federation and Empire continues. The Corporation holds contracts with both sides in the system and can mine the ore without prejudice. Who the ore is supplied to afterwards, remains a problem.

Extract from the novel: *Elite: Lave Revolution*.

'No response to hails, sir.'

On the bridge of the *Furnace*, the thin figure of Admiral Bryce Jander frowned and stared at the viewscreen and the Cobra Mark III that had appeared from hyperspace. 'Launch the alert patrol,' he said.

'Analysis profile shows a fair amount of hull damage,' Aimes, the lieutenant at the scanner noted. 'Could be she's a derelict?'

'And managed a hyperspace jump?' From his vantage point at the command lectern, Jander raised an eyebrow. 'Unlikely. Get the ident code and registration verified, quickly.'

He had good reason to demand urgency. The flagship of the battle group, the *Furnace* was an old Federal deep space exploration vessel, recaptured and commissioned after the system's revolt in 3248. They were a long way from their home port and despite their complement of fighters and escort vessels, Jander had no wish to attract undue interest. Ostensibly, they were under a corporate commission to oversee mining contracts and Quator was just another stop to assess resource potential. 'Get Mister Ferris up here, now.'

'Yes Admiral,' Aimes replied and left his post, hurrying away towards the sleeping quarters. A junior officer slid into his chair.

'Comms with the alert team as soon as they're clear,' Jander instructed. 'Bring up a weapon battery and lock on to the ship.'

'Yes sir.'

'You wanted to see me Admiral?'

Jander turned to find Ferris, executive consultant from Wreaken Construction and Mining three steps away, pale blue eyes, clean shaven, pressed suit and polite deferential demeanour the same as always. *Slippery bastard*, he thought.

'Mister Ferris, what's your analysis of our new friend?'

Ferris' gaze flicked to the screen and back to Jander's. 'If it's an intended snoop on us, it's been poorly executed. Hyperspace arrival so close suggests damage to their navigation or an attempt at getting into our scan shadow. The former is possible, given the state of the ship, the latter, extremely difficult to try and a Cobra's too big a craft for it.'

'You think an accident then?'

'Yes, I'd say so. What would they hope to gain anyway?'

'Patrol online sir,' the ensign at the comms station reported.

'Open a channel,' Jander ordered. 'Eagle one, status of target?'

'Damaged and unresponsive to radio sir,' was the radioed reply heard by everyone on the bridge. 'She's braked and holding her distance.'

'Maintain that and get a clear eyeball on them,' Jander said. 'We'll stay here until we find out more.'

2. Extract from Elite: Lave Revolution Prologue (expanded from Examples 2 and 3 in Appendix A):

This section sets the tone for the novel as a collection of historical documents and means the additional elements at the end of each chapter have an identifiable context to reinforce the narrative of the story. They also appeal directly to the memory of the reader familiar with the Frontier/Elite universe as they draw inspiration from the previous works.

Prologue: Archive Note

To you the researcher,

The documents contained herein are a collection of notes and additional commentary forming our dossier on the period AD 3265. The events described have marginal galactic significance. Whilst we acknowledge Lave no longer holds the position of galactic pre-eminence once attained in the past, the system retains a special place in the hearts of many who make space their home.

AD 3265, saw the removal of Lave's dictatorship government. The ramifications of this in practical terms occurred in the immediate sector. Star systems around Lave were disrupted economically and politically, but when the new democratic regime began to assert itself, balance and order in the region was restored, bringing us to where we are today, as a progressive member of the Alliance of Independent Systems.

It is worth mentioning that the levels of technology available to spacefarers at the time were different to those available to us now. Most notably, the improvements to in-system drives in the last few years have reduced travel times between locations after hyperspace exit. In 3265, these drives were less advanced and pilots would be forced to travel some distance by manual control under sub light exit velocity. Typical journeys in the system could take hours.

Some of the additional accounts included here are for reference. We hope that they will give you a better picture of the wider context related to the events described. If you believe some material is not relevant to your historical understanding of these circumstances, then please do contact us with your feedback.

Should you wish further information to be included in this archive pack, then information requests are always considered by the historical society. Some of the information you wish added may be under restriction. However, we will attempt to obtain it for you.

For those of us who remember, five words hold a special meaning: '*Lave, Resistance, Freedom, Help us.*' We resisted and we found freedom when help came to answer our call.

To those commanders through the years who docked at Lave Station and wondered about the planet below, do not feel responsible, you could not have known. Our journey was as it was. We are glad you have chosen to learn of us now.

Shulton Kaspert – Administrator. Lave Reconciliation Project.

3. Extract from Elite: Lave Revolution Chapter 2 (expanded from Examples 2 and 3 in Appendix A):

A further example of expanding on initial themes provided in the older writing. This section deals specifically with the description of the planet and development of a character from the initial stimulus.

Chapter 2: The Prefect

The prefect of Ashoria was the most important person on Lave.

Bertrum Kowl did not like standing. A genetic disorder had weakened his legs in his teenage years and the necessary cybernetic enhancements had always been problematic. His walk remained stiff and mechanical, his movements accompanied by the clicks and whirrs of the servos supporting him, a thin exoskeleton, clipped into sockets on his hips, knees and ankles. Imperial doctors would regrow and replace limbs, but the Empire was far from Lave. So he sat behind a desk whenever he could.

There, he looked the man he wanted to be. He had a large head, with a wide, nearly lipless mouth, broad nose, and pointed, cleft chin; the image of a leader. His hair, slicked back and close cropped, was blue-black, untouched by grey. He stared at the screen in front of him and rendered his face into a state of passive relaxation.

The prefect of Ashoria; the most important man on Lave, but he didn't rule Lave.

Bertrum was posing, a necessary task. He allowed his hands, broad, strong and short-fingered, to remain loosely clasped on a desk whose polished surface remained unoccupied. Paperwork or a dataslate would mar perfection. By simple unadornment, the prefect's presence emphasised.

The screen flickered and came to life. The most important man *on* Lave renewed his acquaintance with the most important man *of* Lave.

Doctor Hans Walden.

Round features with little expression, hair, short and styled; the eyes dominated this face, liquid dark and their scrutiny pouring out of the screen, as if it could barely contain them.

'I presume both sides accepted?'

'They have, Doctor.'

Bertrum had been prefect of Ashoria for fifteen years. In all that time, Walden had never aged. Today might have been the first time they had met, for all the difference it made.

'Well done,' Walden said, the words empty, spoken in a lifeless tone reserved for mechanical appliances.

The case they were referring to was a disagreement between two town primes over legal jurisdiction. A man had been murdered, the victim from one settlement, the perpetrator another. Kowl had settled the matter by dragging both officials into the city and taking it out of their hands.

‘You are looking tired, my friend.’

Involuntarily Kowl blinked twice, the barest hint of registered surprise. ‘I am fine,’ he answered.

‘Even so,’ Walden said, his gaze unwavering and his tone, low. ‘Perhaps you should rest, take a break from all this.’

Bertrum stared at the image. The hypocrisy was blatant. Walden never ‘took a break’. The prefects of Ardu, Neudaal and Kadia, wouldn’t do so either. The work demanded they be cogs in the machine. Bertrum had no illusions; he would be replaced should he fail to turn.

As a high-ranking official from a good Interstellar family, he was entitled to all sorts of benefits; his grandfather had been Lave Station commander a long time ago. A chartered trip to Imperial space and an operation to fix his legs would take moments to organise, sending him off planet within the hour.

Bertrum suspected he’d be dead minutes later.

‘Something else you wanted to discuss?’ he asked.

Walden smiled; the barest trace of an expression that never reached his eyes. ‘There is talk of problems in the northlands.’

Bertrum didn’t flinch, it was a familiar game. ‘I hear nothing,’ he replied.

‘Well, so long as you have things in hand,’ Walden’s tone implied if they weren’t he’d better get them in hand. ‘I’ll leave you to your work.’ The transmission cut off.

A trickle of cold sweat ran down the side of Bertrum’s face. He remained motionless, slowly counting out three minutes, in case Walden’s screen reappeared. When the count ended, he allowed himself to breathe, wiped away the perspiration and glanced up at the chronometer, whose tiny powering spark of radioactivity had not failed or faltered in all the time he’d been prefect.

Seven forty-three.

He stood up; wincing as the gears and mechanised servos clicked and whirred into place, supporting his weakened legs, barely audible to anyone but him.

He walked to the door and it slid open, returning him to the world and its responsibilities, the prefect's office in Ashoria, his office.

'... We reach through the curtain of terror and mythology to hold the hands of our brothers and sisters, to guide them in darkness and give them light ...'

The words came from a viewscreen on the wall, the image that accompanied them, Doctor Hans Walden, mid speech, a stirring oration from fourteen months ago on a visit to a textiles factory in a town somewhere in Neudaal. Every room in Ashoria had a screen and broadcast a collection of Walden's speeches and documentaries continually. For those who preferred the outside, more screens were on every street intersection and walkway. Lave belonged to the Good Doctor and he wanted to make sure people remembered that.

Always.

Alongside Walden's image, further screens lined the office, each showing different regions of the Firstfall continent, trade prices across regional boundaries, updates, news feeds and more, much more. As prefect, Bertrum was the absolute authority over this entire domain. Twenty million people, one million in Ashoria alone, but still a small number across the vast planetary expanse.

'Niamh, display northern border territory.'

'Acknowledged.'

Three city views winked out then returned, showing a vast dirt plain bathed in orange light. Here and there knotted tree stumps, disappearing into the distant mountains.

'Niamh, correlate local datanet; scan for life signs.'

'Working,' replied the soft voice of the computer. *Niamh v12.03* was a standard audio response system built into most advanced digital station units on Lave. Refined from a program originally developed on Leesti, the dulcet female tones held a permanent place in Bertrum's life, running a close second to the recordings of Walden.

'Results calculated,' Niamh announced.

'Let's have them.'

Numbers and percentage calculations flashed across the screen, data collations from the entire northern territory of Firstfall. The region, a thousand miles from Ashoria, the nearer settlements linked to the city by hyperrail, but no one ventured into the north. A century ago, the whole expanse had been a forest. Now, no living tree remained.

Because of Walden.

Bertrum scanned the numbers. The correlation indicated minimal life signs, consistent with a virtually uninhabited dustbowl. He frowned, this wasn't the first time he'd checked the data. *If there's nothing, why did Walden mention it?* The Good Doctor wasn't above using paranoia as a weapon. Bertrum wondered if this was another cruel joke to waste his time.

Servos whirred again as he walked around the desk and seated himself.

'Niamh end scan and unlock the doors. Signal meeting over.'

'Acknowledged.'

The outer office door opened, standing beyond, a perfect example of Lave's divided society. One of the three Colonial citizens employed as his aide, a woman, pale and dull, as if her personality had been beaten out with a whip.

'Come in Anna,' Bertrum said. 'What news do you bring?'

The woman stalked forward, he envied the sway of her hips, more by comparison than any sexual desire. 'The prefect of Kadia said that the press of previous business arrangements prevented him attending this year's council earlier than seventeen hundred hours.'

'And you told him?'

'I stated the nature of the present business made any delay inadvisable.'

'The result?'

'He will be here, sir. Although he has requested a private conference beforehand, the rest agreed without reservation.'

Bertrum scratched his chin. 'What else?' he asked.

'A development in the Darahk system,' Anna said in a flat emotionless tone, but Bertrum saw her eyes flick towards the viewscreen playing out Walden's oration, a pointless consideration. The Good Doctor found out everything, eventually.

'Development?' he asked.

'Yes, the factor did not make his scheduled appointment to begin negotiations this morning,' Anna explained, 'as a result the grain contract went to Arteman from Olgrea.'

Betrum frowned. Perhaps this was Walden's message, *so long as you have it in hand*, the implication being that he hadn't. The Darahk deal had been entrusted to him personally. Working through intermediaries, the Lavian Government had been selling exported produce from the opulent farm world of Diso to Imperial systems for years. Darahk was an important Federation market.

'Do we have anyone in the system to find out what happened?'

'Unlikely, Prefect,' the woman replied. 'It is a long way—'

'Then get someone out there,' Bertrum said, unable to keep the irritation from his voice. 'Post a bulletin at the Castellon mining complex and on Lave Station, minimal information, briefing en route when they accept. I'll record the detailed instructions in a moment.'

'Yes Prefect.'

The door clicked shut, leaving Bertum to wonder and wait. He keyed up another screen and a camera light winked on. His own face appeared in the monitor, a mask of calm and poise.

'Commander, thank you for accepting this mission, one of our operatives is missing and we require information as to his whereabouts and return ...'

4. Extract from Elite: Lave Revolution Appendix: The Walden Writings (expanded from Example 2 in Appendix A):

This appendix is a collection of writings from the Dictator Doctor Hans Walden, the villain of my novel. This is a character study inspired by the initial stimulus provided in the Frontier Gazetteer (quoted as example 2) and provides an additional layer of meaning to the story by determining the plan and motivation of the adversary. The style is first person, the tone - intentionally dense and intellectual to reflect the nature of the character in the main story.

Foreword

In these enlightened times, the plethora of artefacts claiming to be Walden originals or derived Walden era antiques remain prodigious. The violent episode that gave birth to our

current democracy was well documented as lasting for days in Ashoria and up to weeks in the furthest reaches of Ardu. In this time, much of what had been and what symbolised oppression was destroyed, leaving fragments and a tattered vestige for the historian.

Much of Walden's commentary is available as public record on the planetary datanet. Granted, there are certain security flags placed on searches for particular articles and research papers, but these can be made available through an application to the Central Archive department in Central Ashoria or, if your request is an out-system query, through the Elite Federation of Pilots office at New Freire House.

With such a disparate collection of documents, we have collated and grouped the work artificially, divided the collection into groups of relevance. The majority author of the *Rationale* is believed to be Hans Walden I, otherwise known as Walden 1#. The selection of work included here is from a larger body of intimate writings, retrieved from his surviving private chamber on Lave Station. As you will know, most of these rooms were destroyed by weapons fire from the Alliance warship *Errant*, but some documentation was recovered and supplemented by additional notes found on the research laboratory discovered in the Castellan Belt.

The second section, *Speeches* is a small sample of material from the wider public archive record. These have been included specifically owing to their relevance to the argument outlined in the first section of this document.

It is worth mentioning, there is a danger in these writings. It is easy to forget the lessons of history, the suffering and pain brought about by the application of the methodology discussed here; when reading, the presence of an intelligent, but flawed mind becomes apparent, very quickly. The reasoning given is deductive, the conclusions persuasive. It is arguable that you are reading the work of the greatest mind of Lave, certainly its greatest communal mind and, as such, it is easy to become drawn toward these ideas.

Walden's yardstick is the application and ramification of discovery. It should be remembered, the application of the strategy outlined here, would have killed billions in a campaign of galactic genocide.

Turgan Devante – Archaeologist. Ashorian Historical Society.

The Rationale

Premise

It is a strangely simplified and illusory existence humanity has devised for itself. How we strive to make everything around us clear, free and easy. How we grant our senses a passport to everything superficial and our thoughts permission to dwell on the irrelevant and pointless.

From the beginning, we contrive to retain ignorance in order to wallow in freedom, thoughtlessness, imprudence, heartiness and frivolity. Our minds are driven by imperatives to waste our greatest attributes.

On this solidified foundation of ignorance, we claim knowledge. We invent further affectation and drive ourselves in a protracted quest towards the banal, the pointless and the inane. We invent structures and processes, which impede and hinder our ability to truly innovate, change and observe existence around us. We are blinded by our own attempt to frame, reference and understand.

Defenders of this quest claim they suffer 'for truth's sake', yet fail to see the inconsequential nature of their progress and the ways in which their reliance on the exploration, explanation and counsel of others renders them impotent and obsolete. Indeed, the language of stratified enquiry provides only a means for measurement against previous failure and the irrelevant. If comparison to historic investigation were relevant, then surely such an investigation would already have achieved the sought conclusion and the current investigation would be a repetition and refinement?

To some, 'the truth' they seek to find, protect and defend remains an image of perfect idolatry; an eternal emblem, so illusive and illusory that many amongst their number acknowledge their quest might be fruitless and see a perverse noblesse in this. They use this to justify their attacks on true innovation, claiming the work of their knives as essential intellectual examination, when actually their contestation serves only to justify their own inability to innovate and provides a means for them to accept the innovation of others.

Why would this archdeity and icon hiding at the end of our quest require protectors? The ancient Earth adage 'truth will out' implies some evolutionary process to revelation. The rigours of test and attack imply duality and dichotomy. Should truth remain fragile, then how can it be absolute? So in turn why should it require defenders? If fragile, truth must nurse to

grow strong, if already strong, no defence is necessary. Those who claim to be guardians are, in fact, jealous assassins, thieves or terrorists.

Thus, we return to irrelevance.

The martyrdom of the scientist, the 'sacrifice for the sake of truth,' forces into the light whatever there is of agitator and actor in the persona of the individual. The martinet and romantic vigilant, devoted to making humanity better by uncovering reason and fundamental understanding. Who applies the mind without diversion! Something to admire? Not, if said scientist labours under the illusion of stratified legitimisation.

It is important to accept that such validation is meaningless. Discovery has meaning, Ratification by one's fellow bipedal defecators holds no meaning, since such peers discovered no comparable insight for themselves within the context of time and means. The only form of endorsement that retains value lies in application and through this, ramification. It is here, that the icon's lustre grows bright.

Origin

As a young man I laboured amongst others in an ignorant quest for truth. I saw my work as a means to immortalise. The idea that I might originate something fundamental that might live and exist beyond my mortal frame remained a clear goal. The psychological motivation for this quest remained clear. By glimpsing the Archdeity, I might prove my worth to be raised up and something of me remain beyond my lifetime, exist beyond the material components of my physiology.

This naive paradigm had been the obsession of my parents, particularly my mother; a frustrated scientist, whose tragic descent into lunacy came about through her inability to comprehend the inadequacy of rules imposed on her life's work. The celebrity societal strata she sought to join, placed strict conditions on their approval and she became obsessed with fulfilling these criteria, rather than seeing them for what they were; subjective burdens of artifice, constructed by the unworthy she tried to lower herself to join.

The trappings of this affluent, irrelevant group indicated their pointlessness. The value placed on insular approval, tenuous and inapplicable attainment spoke loudly to those that could still understand its correct message. But to most, this group were the *Elohim* of humanity; incarnadine intellectual behemoths whose effort brought about a new age of enlightenment; the *Galactic Co-operative*; or *Galcop*, a monstrous Babel, raised up to level all and ultimately, to eliminate the individual.

To place limits on individuality is to declare war on innovation. The majority of humanity strives instinctively for privacy and labours to construct a psychological citadel to their individual values, which in turn, preserves homeostasis. From these safeties, they reach out and spy upon the citadels of others, not realising the very act of construction has rendered any truth they might seek to diluted impotency.

A rare group of humanity's thinkers seek to build walls that might encompass a community of individuals. These walls encircle those with common value, but also become paths between each structure within, the shared value becoming a means to dismantle the barriers to discourse. However, they also become strata that frame this discourse and turn the established community inward in its search for a truth.

The truly enlightened individual does not first explore values that encourage homeostasis, but looks for innovation with clear application. This requires a study of societal rules and a complex understanding of the laws of the universe, be they considered physics, biology, chemistry or otherwise. Note, I do not say science, for this implies an allegiance to the precedent-based means of inquiry mentioned before.

The enlightened individual must experience and remember. These are the key tools of the true intellectual. Experience must be unfettered by societal homeostasis as mentioned, but follow a path of derived relationship. This is a quest of connected relative realist determination, finding conclusions based on primary sense data or secondary information derived from constructed (and understood) technological tools. The memory is as important. Artificial repository might offer support to the flaws within human record, but cannot replace this, owing to the intrinsic and superior ability of the human mind in finding the derived relationships that will both drive and fuel the individual's quest for applicable discovery.

Some of this latter understanding had been part of my mother's thoughts in her middle years, through her advancement of work in the area of artificial reproduction, building on her previous foresight to clone and freeze the fertilised embryo that became me. This came about through her truncated conclusion of the fundamental need for experience and memory. A replicated individual, sent forth to experience life might come to a greater understanding through multiplicity of accrued phenomena. Also, this replicated individual might develop a more detailed memorial record and attain a greater insight, through their artificially derived group than any collection of random bipeds who remain disadvantaged by the individual preconceptions each brings from their homeostatic citadels and by the intelligence of their weakest member.

Of course, any group of individuals will disagree and indeed, one individual will never attain full confidence in their own purpose and determinations, but through experience I have found the dissonation experienced by a replicated individual can be alleviated through the intrinsic empathy it shares with its copies. In essence, the process invites certitude and affirmation.

I was born a frail child, of a frustrated research student never to be granted her doctorate honours and a Lave Station Viper pilot, injured and invalidated from duty by an altercation with three narcotics smugglers back in 3104. My early years were guided by my parents' misplaced sense of gratitude at their lot, living in a four-room apartment in Central Ashoria, which had been given to them pro gratis by the planetary authority. My mother continued her work to become academically accepted. My father sat and faded away. My childhood reflected their stoic conformity and tolerance of their lot, through a communal education programme woefully inadequate for my needs.

When I came to understand the need to prioritise world experience over rote tuition, I rejected the frameworks imposed on my work by others and instead, went out to seek the contexts I craved. My psychological approach to education was not fettered by some naive position of knowledge worship. I no longer saw individuals as repositories of learning or gatekeepers to enlightenment. Instead, they became necessary experiences which would shape my journey towards discovery. Such experience could occur in traditional learning environments or within atypical contexts. Priority came with the measure of application, not with perceived veneration of the conversant.

Early Enlightenment

Armed with this revelation, I left communal education in the Ashorian municipality at the age of fifteen. Previously, it had been determined I should engage socially with my biological peers in my early years. The theorised premise was that such interaction would encourage me to develop shared values with this mundane conformist rabble, and that I might also develop values to intellectually fertilise the wasteland around me. The very idea that I might reject this notion of imposed magnanimousness had not been considered. Nor had the psychological and developmental ramifications of my imprisonment within the unenlightened herd. On reflection, when reanalysing my immature years of conformity to this charade, I saw the error of my choice. In Plato's cave, I alone possessed the means to rid myself of my chains, but remained persuaded by an authoritarian to do otherwise. In this instance, the chief authoritarian voice, that of my mother, reflecting her own conformity to a system that produced mediocrity.

My choice of experience and steps toward enlightenment began small, as all do. At first I lied, professing continual attendance of my classes. Instead, I would spend my time on the streets of the city, watching and interacting with its people and its prescriptors. When this lie became untenable, I looked inward, evaluating the context of my life and calculating the value of the amenities provided for me against the freedoms tasted outside the conformist bubble.

I abandoned all adherence and accepted privation. I journeyed north from the city into the rainforest. At the time, the territory was left as a habitat for the planet's native species and remained sparsely populated. My time alone amidst the nature of this world enabled discovery and formed the basis of my later strategy.

It is the business of the very few to be independent; a privilege of the mentally strong. Whoever attempts it, even with the best right, proves their strength, but also their daring. Independence is a maze of self-reliance. It multiplies the dangers which life brings. No one can see how and where the independent mind might lose its way, save the mind itself and as such, this professed path both invites and insulates the walker from self-obsession and insanity.

The logging community of the north forestry region was, at the time, an under-developed industry. Raw material export from Ashoria to Lave's other colonies remained a process of necessary supply, not a profitable commercial enterprise. Once again, the men and women working day and night in sawmills, remained component parts in the elaborate machine of conformist society; their contribution to the development of a colonising programme designed to extend human habitation across the planet, far greater than the reward given for their efforts. The settlement of the Neudaal region was a large migration strategy, fuelled by raw materials exported from Firstfall. Primarily, people worked to support this initiative out of an engineered sense of loyalty to those making homes in the new land. In return grants were issued to settle the cleared land. It is remarkable to think the majority would never meet in their lifetimes, but still played their part in an exhausting initiative owing to some tenuous communal bond.

I lived within this woodland for ten years under the pseudonym Atticus Finch, at times amongst the loggers, in their pre-fabricated domes, at times alone in the wilderness, watching evaluating, experiencing, learning.

Amongst the indigenous creatures in the region, the habitat of the Lavian tree grub proved surprisingly extensive. This particular creature exudes a mild virus in its trail which is poisonous to humans. When new workers arrived at each station, they fell ill after a few days,

then gradually recovered, becoming used to the symptoms and discomfort. What drew my attention to this specific malady was my own complete immunity to its effect.

My analysis of the creature's physiology determined its DNA structure held specific components that exploited inherent weaknesses in the compared DNA structure of humans; the trail component originating in the grub's blood. Workers in the forestry programmes found the only preventative was continual exposure and the building of a tolerance.

Once again, amongst the menial, I found a blind unshakeable faith in the work of their societal superiors. My long and serious study of those products of mediocre education and learning revealed much disguise, self-overcoming, familiarity and hidden motive.

If he is fortunate, a favourite child of knowledge will meet with suitable auxiliaries who will shorten and lighten his task. These individuals are not the self-styled intellectual guardians and protectors from before; instead, they are supportive without explanation, trusting through a social contract of practical worth. Such individuals are rarely intellectual equals or comparators, but indeed, the value of such company is questionable owing to their institutionalised tendency to critical reason rather than accepted favour exchange. The intelligent are less useful than the unquestioning, owing to a misplaced value in their own worth.

In my time amongst the loggers, few of these intellectual charlatans materialised, so my social transactions remained, at least superficially honest with those seeking to satisfy their own basic needs for comfort and security.

I travelled between these small communities, focusing on the presence of this virus, known locally at the time by several different names: *'Newcomer's curse'*, *'Outsider'*, *'Tree cramps'*, etc. I analysed symptoms and the means of infection to determine its origin, duration and severity. Whilst I could not affect a cure for the virus, nor replicate my own immunity in vaccine form, my work increased understanding of the infection between communities, sharing the best practice in recovery and management of symptoms.

Revelation

I returned to Ashoria late in 3124, having concluded my emotional well-being and security could tolerate a further meeting and interaction with my parents. A visit to their house found it abandoned. Further inquiries revealed my father had died three years previously and my mother, subsequently been admitted to the Artaud asylum in the Kadian Islands. The signed

paperwork and permissions were by her established guardian, one Hans Walden, whose juvenile signature proved almost identical to my own.

My first meeting with my clone, hereafter known as *Hans Walden II*, occurred some three days later, when I was able to visit to the municipality school on the pretext of delivering a talk on Firstfall rainforest ecology. My pseudonym and falsified credentials withstood official scrutiny and on a wet afternoon in a large assembly hall I presented a forty-minute lecture on my rainforest discoveries to eighty students aged from ten to fourteen years.

I recall the three-dimensional slides being a novelty for the children at the time and the interactive holo recording of one of the loggers being another highlight during the question and answer session. However, I remember little of what I said. Throughout the session, my eyes roamed the hall, looking for my sibling replacement. When I located him, I completed the talk and engineered a moment of proximity. In this altercation I was able to covertly acquire a DNA sample and plant a rudimentary tracking device. I then made my excuses and left.

Walden 2#

DNA testing of my sibling proved our artificial familial relationship, which I had suspected owing to a) resemblance b) my mother's advancing years and c) my father's indolent decrepitude. However, it is quite a moment to discover you are a clone or at least, the first of a series of clones and that you are the product of an illegal research experiment. On reflection, I suppose I might have guessed. Her frustration at the lack of support for her work had rendered her clinically insane. Without funding or facility, she had experimented with what she had available, namely her own biology and DNA. I was later to uncover several of her botched experiments to restore my father's physical condition and how these experiments hastened his decline.

Using my pseudonym, I obtained copies of my mother's published research, formal requests for funding and equipment, filed correspondence, etc. Everything I could lay my hands on to better understand her thinking. As an adult, returning to this context with my own studied conclusions, I found I had a greater ability to examine the matter dispassionately and from an academic standpoint. My curiosity over the derived immunity to the grub virus fuelled my investigation at first and culminated with my journey to the Artaud asylum on Ithas Island, where I saw my mother for the last time.

I remember it was a sunny, cloudless day and we were sat at a table on a perfectly manicured lawn whilst a 'human support technician' remained in attendance nearby. Our conversation

was brief, owing to her incoherence and failure to recognise me. We shared tea and I furthered my own research by lacing her drink with an enhanced variant of the grub virus. She died three days later, leading me to conclude, the immunity in my own cells must have been artificially derived.

Perhaps you judge me for this action? It is worth remembering, my whole life has been an experiment derived of my mother's research and indeed, to reverse the proposition, making her a part of mine, might seem a petty revenge, but in actuality, the two contexts aligned. I required a test to determine the source of my immunity and the perfect genetic subject was available. The misguided but brilliant woman I once knew and still hear in my mind, would not have wished for an inconsequential life, so I made her consequential at her end. Her ability to continue her own research was long lost, so what better substitute than to be a part of her descendants?

A fitting tribute.

I returned to Ashoria and struck up an academic correspondence with the juvenile Walden 2#. As I recall, the letters were initiated by him, impressed by the content of my long forgotten lecture. I continued this discourse, treating my younger semblance as the equal I had wished to be treated as and thus, winning his respect, prior to revealing the truth about our natures.

After six months I judged the time right to divulge this information to him, as my research required another relocation, this time, into space. After some initial shock, he became acutely curious for the details, so I provided him with access to my apartment home and active research records then left so he might derive his own conclusions from my amassed documentation.

Space

My initial foray off planet was an essential progression in my test of the grub virus. Using new pseudonym credentials, I obtained a work placement on Lave Station, at the time, known as *Lave Orbit I*, owing to the continual insistence by the system authorities that further orbital space stations were planned.

My father's previous career credentials could not be used to assist my application, so I began my time aboard the Coriolis as a docking support technician. However, this menial role suited my needs admirably.

After substantial sampling on Lave, my research required I test refinements of the grub virus on individuals who had never been to the planet. At the time, planetary landing permits had been issued, ostensibly to regulate exploitative tourism, but in reality, to restrict information exchange. For all its pomp and prestige, the Galactic Co-operative knew the comparative living standards on its planets were vastly different to those enjoyed in its Interstellar communities. Planetary trade and export had begun to fuel this galactic elite and very little of this wealth returned to the world-bound populations. On reflection, the matter of parity and understood stratification in society has been handled in a much better way by both the Federation and the Empire. In the former, financial status offered an easy means to rate an individual's standing and in the latter, the standing of each individual is always clearly indicated. The concealment of the disparity in Galcop, was an unintentional consequence of homeostatic necessity, but also became a weighty burden when coupled with the need for information control.

Nevertheless, this means of societal control was worthy of additional study and became a diverting focus of my time. In my periodic contact with *Walden 2#*, I was able to impart the future necessity for a new form of information control on Lave. Thus, he began extensive research into this area.

In 3125, I recall a chance encounter with a young Peter Jameson, who had newly purchased a Cobra Mark III from the Faulcon deLacy outlet on Reorte and taken delivery at Lave Station. I remember little of him, only that he was nervous and careful with his credits in the station bar.

Empowerment

[Editor: The following sections are published from a second archive found on Sark. They follow in historical order to the first account and as such, have been included here for your reading. The presence of a second voice is clear within this writing. Whether it is a second 'Walden' as claimed, cannot be independently verified.]

Whilst my elder incarnation remained on Lave Station, I completed my municipality education in Central Ashoria, being the first *Walden* of our generation to do so. This perverse achievement held significant research value as it enabled me to observe the development and interactions of my societal peers.

After this, I began research in a different area, namely the principles of electronic communication. The rudimentary systems established during the previous millennia had sufficient nodes for limited settlement spread across our world. However, with the expansion

into the Kadian Sea and the mountainous Ardu region, a more diverse infrastructure was necessary.

When there is honest speech that describes the human condition as base, the enlightened individual should listen and inquire. The discourse will turn to the wants and needs of the ignorant as they try to preserve their homeostasis and often the focus will reveal their own inner obsessions. Understanding these unfamiliar concerns gives the enlightened one an opportunity to devise strategies of amelioration. When determined, these proposals can be subtly introduced and bartered to the ignorant.

If carefully webbed, the multiplicity of such proposals becomes a network of loyalty. Such exchanges are common place amidst the corporate and capitalist, but often accompanied with direct personal interest, which gives the illusion of honesty. However, the position of the enlightened must remain strategic, above and impersonal. The sought benefit of exchange must not be revealed and must be a gain of significant distance to best exploit the transaction.

My work amidst the evolving electronic information exchange of Lave afforded many opportunities. Whilst the majority of society remains inane and uninformed, communication of inanity is prized. Within the mind of the dullard, there is no understanding of irrelevance. The two states remain mutually exclusive, despite some initial indications of staged understanding related to privation and homeostasis. Once secure, the dullard explores diversion, or is seduced by its illusory priority. There is little attempt to protagonize and if there is, this is a sign of psychological metamorphosis, rendering the individual: a) enlightened and b) useless to our needs.

As a gatekeeper of information, I became prized. I traded need fulfilment for future status and favour, operating within the prevailing laws of Lave and when necessary, beyond its reach. The two states remained either side of a road with myself the only pedestrian permitted to cross.

Positioned like this, financial reward became an obvious attainment. To begin with, I too felt the lure of material concern, but my reasons for purchasing its trappings were wholly different. The need remained to obtain the use of others and by posing as one equally uneducated in this society of lesser aliens, I became a part of its structure; a necessary duplication, within each of my contexts and for each of my physical forms through the last two hundred years.

Democracy

The illusory promise manifests itself amongst many societies in the form of democracy, the ideology of majority opinion and rule. This structure has existed since the ancient days of Earth and even then, held notable critics.

The notion of equality promised by suffrage is base at best. The romance indicates both you and I can achieve influence, can choose to whom we abrogate and subject our freedom. Surrender our right to self-governance with a mark in a box.

The ideology of the democrat is to convolute freedom with defined choice; to suggest participation through the most insignificant means. By the time that choice is offered, the rights of governance have already been surrendered.

Democracy grants privilege to those who best know how to smile and promise nothing. It engenders paralysis when meaningful action is needed and conflated discussion with dispute when action must be taken. Democracy renders the ignorant equal to the informed and simplifies what should, by rights, remain complex.

I have no wish to surrender my sovereignty to an individual chosen by mob assent. That way lies the self-interest of others and through this, corruption. A vote considered insignificant may be bought and once bought, bought again, hundreds of times, particularly when the buyer holds a worth to exchange. The purchase of one tick is nothing, the purchase of a million, creates government. How this purchase is accomplished, through policy promise, credit exchange, favour, bribe or otherwise, does not matter, it remains a purchase and the clear enemy of the promised freedom of choice democracy is supposed to grant.

This is the way of the Federation, where the dilution of power is a celebrated fantasy. Behind the veil, corporate interest is served by each puppet face in the president's chair. At least our Imperial cousins remain honest about their dictation.

No enlightened individual would willingly surrender their freedom to democracy's claws.

Legacy

Within months, an additional benefit of my placement surfaced. A chance discovery of hitherto concealed research assets became particularly interested when their architect was revealed, one Sibyl Walden, trainee doctorate research candidate of the Faculty of Central Ashoria, my mother.

These assets had been well hidden on Ithas Island, near the Artaud asylum to where I consented her commitment after a violent episode. The childhood memory is sketchy at best, but it holds no guilt or shame for me when considered in the wider context of my upbringing.

When examining the evidence at the time, it became plain that my mother had been at least partially complicit in her commitment. A concealed laboratory storage facility would not have been prepared by a woman prepared to resist her enforced confinement in an asylum facility.

Though tempted, I did not journey to the island. Instead, through a subsidiary holding firm, in the face of some resistance, I acquired the inventoried assets. On reading the catalogue I realised what a bequeathment I had found; gold or the most precious gem to myself, but worthless biological compost to anyone else.

[Editor: The fragmented file ends here. Our attempts to recover further data from the preserved electronic sources have proved inadequate. Walden's encryption methods are robust and each attempt at access encourages further data decay. We can only surmise what legacy had been found. Perhaps further clone samples? Certainly our research would indicate the presence of at least three Walden personas, perhaps more, to enable a continuous rule over Lave for more than one hundred years.]

Evolution

The 19th century Wallace and Darwin proposition of biological development and transition that occurs through each generation of living creature, noted in old Earth journals as *natural selection* is a truncated paradigm when applied to the human condition.

We are, by comparison if nothing else, an apex predator within each environment we introduce ourselves to. Only the Thargoid exists to challenge our dominance and the contexts of our meetings, rarely involve a competition for resources. With advances in medical care, we have all but eliminated the process of selection from our generational advancement, thus our plethora of mutation is retained, whether an improvement or not, leading to an increasingly diversified galactic populace.

The human body remains a wonderfully adaptable vessel. Local exposure and consummation of substances leads to enzyme production and reduction of the symptoms of tolerance.

This prevention has only developed in the last few thousand years, meaning our genetic stagnation has not, as yet, held sway for as long a period as our development. However, the effect, when analysed from the outside, provides alarming data. Amid the stars, humanity expands and thrives, pushing back the boundaries of colonised space. Thankfully, the universe

petri dish we exist within, is vast and beyond full comprehension, but then it would be impossible for humanity of a thousand years ago to define the reality we live in now.

However, the legacy of our origin remains, we still fight, for survival, greed, a flag or retribution, along with countless other causes. This instinct is retained from our earlier form and remains important as a behavioural determination factor.

The restoration of natural selection is an imperative for humanity to advance in evolutionary terms. Colonisation and resource exploitation is not an applicable development in this context. Instead, it is a symptom of our stagnation. For us to transcend our current state, we must find a means to rarefy the human condition and eliminate the redundant traits of our physiology and psychology. My appraisal of our current state, suggests the weakness lies in our psychology at this time. Our abrogation of responsibility, obsession with comforting apathy and unspoken conformity provides clear evidence of our deviation from the evolutionary path. There is an incorrect value placed on the innovator, thus we find ourselves stagnant.

When discovering the bones of creatures far bigger than those they knew of, historians of old Earth examined their own planetary past to determine what could have eliminated these beings. In part, this examination led them to the Darwinist principles they came to adopt, but also to determine that a cataclysmic event must have occurred to change the ecological balance of their planet so drastically. In tracking the consequences of this event, many analysts decided, somewhat gratefully, that humanity in its current form could not exist without such an event.

It is my supposition that life in its future more advanced form, cannot exist without a similar occurrence to disturb our current position of stagnation.

Genetic Research

It is perhaps, considered ironic, given my own physiological state, to make such observations regarding evolution and genetic transition. However, I consider my position to be one of unique qualification. The nearest thing available, save the Thargoid or some rumoured rogue artificial intellect, to offer an outside perspective on the human condition.

I confess, much of my knowledge concerning genetics built on the work left by my mother. Her advancements in stable clone micro manufacture during the first century of the fourth millennium could have been the commercial impetus to reinvigorate Lave, if sold to the right

populace, namely the people of Achenar and Quince. However, her work was suppressed in what I have come to believe was, an intentional process.

My own advancements in this area have been in application and development. The inducement of mutation by artificial means is mostly a process of chance that offers little in the way of means tested benefit. An exploration of this methodology took up seven years for me and provided only an impotent conclusion.

Ultimately, artificial selection cannot replace the Darwinian model. If commercialised, the choices made by previous generations will lead to further evolutionary paralysis as they seek a refined superficial physicality. If retained as the exclusive tool of intellectual gatekeepers, given control of breeding programmes, you rely on the minds of those gatekeepers to direct our future physiological needs.

I am not so arrogant as to believe I can determine the future requirements of our species. However, I am arrogant enough to assert the stagnated condition we find ourselves in now, will not suffice to overcome the dangers we will face. I believe that—

[Editor: Again, this fragmented document has been retained and reconstructed from Walden's encrypted database. Further testimony is impossible to recover. There is a standing reward posted in the Central Ashorian Archive for further Walden writing. This is released only after stringent testing. We can only hope that the writing of this most influential figure in Lavian history still exists somewhere, out there.]

The Speeches

[Editor: Included here are a collection of speeches made by different incarnations of Doctor Walden during his reign. The origin of these works is not known, nor can we clearly determine which of his incarnations gave each performance. Often, sections would be edited and used for different audiences, particularly with works designed to appeal to a viewer's known tendency.

When reading these sections, it is worth contrasting the tone and content with that given in The Rationale. The Speeches are intended for public consumption, The Rationale, quite clearly for a more intimate explanation to disciples and committed students.]

The Indoctrination

[Editor: A popular speech featured in many of Walden's public broadcasts. The paragraphs below were often cut and edited into different works. Using our exclusive access to the penal facility database established on Lave Station, we have attempted to reassemble this speech in its complete form.]

Ask yourself a question. What makes us free? Truly? Societies teach us conformity to their rules, morals and limitations. In exchange we are given commodity and resources that preserve our homeostasis, food, warmth and shelter at first, then material wealth. Eventually we learn to accept our lot and forget the hunger and ambition which drove our predecessors to build our world.

Empires are built on strength. Strength is borne from fear of failure, a hunger for a better life and a better way, but strength dies when we lose what motivated us.

Those with strength lead society and guide the weak. Often they must stray from conformity to find this power within. These individuals do not mistake the temporal trappings of societal position with this inner core. For indeed, the assumption of the divisive, bureaucratic, mantle can and will inhibit the development of an individual's inner self, thus disabling their path towards making a meaningful contribution to the world around them.

You, who have strayed, have done so for good reason. Such wilful deviance is essential, that you might take up your proper place and execute your duty. I cannot promise this process will be easy. Nothing worthy is ever obtained without arduous effort. Correction is necessary, sometimes with pain; else we lose all to apathy and fear. We reach through the curtain of terror and mythology to hold the hands of our brothers and sisters, to guide them through the darkness and give them light.

Together we are strong. Only together can we follow the path back to the stars. Billions of people on countless worlds do not know the right way and remain ignorant of the plan. They follow false kings and queens and lead lives of indolence. If they persist in this course, they will be among those who perish during the great tribulation.

This planet is part of the only truly united multi-national organisation in the galaxy. We hold true to the ideals of the Co-operative and we do not cry out for some miraculous salvation from a Creator, nor bemoan our legacy! With your help and support, we follow a plan to return and populate the vast ocean of stars.

In your time empowered, you have found part of the great enlightenment. You have experience life unfettered, your mind, calculated and established its worth. It is this part of you, the best of you I wish to ally with, not the conformist, but the wilful protagonist, the part best capable of discovery and attainment. It is this part that will focus on a goal, rather than a rule, framework or parameter. It is this part that will achieve. It is your best part, your empowered soul and individuality.

Technology has helped to make the loud voice of our unity even louder. The thrones of Earth and Achenar shake at the mention of Lave!’

Now, your sweat, your toil, your commitment, propels us to our manifest destiny. In the past, people pledged loyalty to meaningless icons; a flag, a symbol, a piece of paper or their long dead martyrs. Now, we pledge to purpose, a tangible goal that will bring humanity to its rightful place as the inheritors of all things material.

For in truth, it is our design, to become shapers of all things material. The process or evolution has manifested no greater image than humanity. We of Lave understand this, we celebrate it as we work toward attainment.

Indeed, the plan brings us to triumph soon. Nothing so glorious can be done quickly, but the work and patience of our forebears brings us fertile ground. The majority of people living today will journey to the stars as we bring our truth to the galaxy. Be ready, for you might be called to serve at any time, raised into the circle of Interstellar, to shape the cosmos for your descendants and those who will follow them.

We cannot know the future, but a man who does not plan to shape it and puts faith in fate or chance is a fool in denial. Our children rely on us, just as we relied on those who went before. It is our responsibility to provide the foundation for their growth after us, that they might fly further and faster than we have, in each turn, to raise our created image to the pedestal it deserves.

Those beyond our world cannot understand the true work we have begun. In time, each will be given a choice to raise themselves. But, do not mourn them. In some part of their past, they accepted their lot and chose the swift route of apathy, they accepted less than their worth. The worst of these people cannot comprehend our great work and will resist us. In that end, brothers, sisters, I will need you, sorely I will need your words as swords, your bodies as shields. Your mind, the arrow, your heart its bow.

So I ask you now, good people of Lave, are you with me?

Are you with me?

The Inauguration

[Edit: According to public record, this is the speech given by Walden at his investiture in 3174. It was a closed ceremony, with forty invited guests. None of the attendees survived more than four years. The posted archive record of the speech came from 3188.]

There is no sinister power controlling humanity; only people. Emperor Hengist Duval is a man. The President of the Federation, the same, a mortal descendant of the same genetic code that sets us apart from the animal.

The very fact that individuals can hold such status and stand atop vast pyramids of sentient life is a testimony to our generosity. We grant power to others, that we might be reassured; we abdicate responsibility without even questioning those who we trust. In some cases, we will never meet or see those who have the power to influence our lives.

Self-interest, apathy and ignorance have created these imbalanced bureaucracies that seek to dominate worlds. They are disease to the empowered. Those pledged to their allegiance, sold into a slavery of the mind. The bars of their cells become even more invisible when these citizens accept, become passive contributors and stop looking for alternatives.

But we are privileged. Lave stands as a mark against apathy. We lead a world nation that raises empowered children, self-aware of their worth to us all. We welcome the empowered and enlightened from other nations, amongst our society, they will find places that stretch them and help them grow.

We reject the impersonal dynasty of heritage. Our world grants privilege to worth and worth alone will grant success. We encourage the innovator, so she might quest, succeed, return, share and be rewarded. Such innovation is pumping blood to us all, but only we, of Lave truly understand its value.

My word to you, people of Lave, is a transparent pledge. We are the embodiment of an enlightened age, harbingers of new destiny forged in a glorious past. We will bring triumph to an ignorant cosmos and hold stars in the palms of our hands.

To each of you lies ahead a destiny above the sky. You will be the new travellers, the new heralds of a glorious age, bringing the twin beacons of light and hope to all who are willing to listen.

You will be greatness and I salute that greatness, growing within each of you.

The Prescience

[Editor: A popular speech given by Walden when visiting different locations on Lave, particularly the farm regions of Neudaal. There are several variations. We have included the earliest found in the public archive record.]

I am asked often, what does the future hold for us? Who can know?

Writers of consequence have always looked toward prophecy and prediction as a mark of intellectual status. Whether approaching a reading through experimentation and data, or the mystic's crystal sphere, humanity is obsessed with learning what will occur, before it occurs.

In the third millennium, thinkers derived an epiphany from relativity, deriving a false consequence from the writings of those before them. If space and time are one, then travel to future and past can happen.

Such thinkers failed to consider the prime directive of time; its relationship with the individual. Whilst mechanisms exist for measurement, an insect perceives time far differently to a man and in turn, each person can perceive the same time differently owing to context.

There is a means to travel to the future; the very means by which we all travel today, through each beat of our hearts. There is a means to travel to the past, through memory, archive and reflection. We cannot change what was done, we can only harness recollection to change what can be done and only at the speed our existence permits. To rely on others to tell us what will happen, denies our own empowered will to shape events as we wish.

I will not tell you of your individual future and claim some false insight into tomorrow, but I will promise, the future I strive for is one where each of you can be what you have the potential to be. I seek humanity's peak, its optimum and opus. I yearn for the attainable utopia, made form by the possibility living in each of us. We can make what is, better, greater and more fulfilling for those who come after us, so they too might fulfil the promise of their mind and body.

Those who do not understand this vision and still seek guidance, must look to their own hearts, else they become adversarial to what we strive to build. The cynic's road, a mantra of nihilism and ill-considered language, abrogates the prime responsibility we have to the universe that made us self-aware. We must understand what we are and through understanding be empowered to act.

The time is coming my friends, when many such actions will be needed. I hope you will do what is right. The only guidance you need lies in your steady heart.

5. Extract from Elite: Lave Revolution – News Articles (expanded from Example 5 in Appendix A):

Some of this collection of articles were drawn from the Frontier: First Encounters game news journals with some minor edits to fit. Subsequent articles have then been written in the same style to blend the narrative hints of the older games into the plot of the new story. The archive introduction is also used to provide a frame and context (historical archive) relating to the book's prologue.

Sent: Fourthday Day 202. 3286.

To: Shulton Kaspert

Subject: The Disappeared. Items for Publication

Administrator,

At this point it is worth including a short extract on our dossier of information relating to the outbreak of Sohalian Fever in 3239. These records are extracts from journals published at the time and were found collated in several key laboratories aboard Lave Station.

NOVEL VIRUS AFFLICTS SETTLERS

Medical reports from the medical technicians of the Imperial navy assigned to the Alliance world of Sohalia report a further outbreak of the Sohalian Fever affecting settlers in the region.

Symptoms are specific and are related to slow onset deterioration of the cardiovascular system. Affected individuals show progressive lethargy, pallor of the mucous membranes and chalky skin tones in those of Caucasian human descent and reduced exercise tolerance, especially in low oxygen atmospheres.

Affected individuals have been taken on board the fleet hospital ship for exhaustive medical examination with full localised cardiac output measurements and internal cardioscopy via the ship-board conscious scan mechanisms.

All cardiac parameters are showing progressive deterioration and to date there is no obvious cause. This in turn means that no prophylactic treatment is available and there is no method of determining those at highest risk.

Surgical technicians are advocating full cardio-pulmonary transplant as the only viable treatment modality.

As an interim, affected individuals are being maintained within a high oxygen environment and are not being required to exercise. Alternative work options are being offered to minimise risk to those with the most severe clinical signs.

Rumours abound in the region as to the cause of the disease with most credence being given to the release of a genetically engineered virus either by design or accident. The Imperial navy have so far failed to comment on the rumours.

PLAGUE HITS SOHALIA AGAIN

The so-called Sohalian Fever is running rife again in all three of the inhabited worlds in the system of Sohalia. Symptoms range from the starting signs of a mild head cold with tension headache and run rapidly through to pyrexia together with gastro-intestinal pain, hameorrhagic diarrhoea, haematemesis and death within twelve hours of onset. Both pulmonary and neurological variants have been reported with sudden onset pneumonia in the former and progressive paresis, ataxia and collapse in the latter. The disease is highly contagious and the infectious period is twenty-four hours before the onset of symptoms making it particularly difficult to isolate infected individuals. There is some evidence to suggest that the plague was engineered at the Imperial research laboratories and that Sohalia was used as a testing ground although this has always been strenuously denied by the Imperial authorities.

AUTOMUTAGENIC EFFECT CITED TO EXPLAIN WASTING FEVER LETHALITY

Researchers at the Independent Centre for Disease Control yesterday released details of the process by which parasites causing Sohalian Fever are believed to acquire resistance to antibodies in the human immune system. One of the most dangerous features of the disease is that it appears to be caused not by a single parasite, but by a trio of related organisms, whose rapid mutation rate renders effective inoculation strategies difficult.

According to the ICDC, the organisms may in fact mutate in response to toxins generated in the bloodstream by parasites killed by the immune system. This fits well with the observed symptoms of the disease, in which a mild fever – caused by the initial infection – gives way to the more virulent form of the disease as the parasites evolve towards more lethal variants.

'The irony is,' says Dr Walter Holland of ICDC, 'that a person with no immunity to the disease may be better off than someone who has developed immunity. If the theory is correct, inoculation may practically amount to a death sentence for the person inoculated.'

6. Extract from Elite: Lave Revolution – News Articles (expanded from Example 5 in Appendix A):

These further articles were written to document events after story of Elite: Lave revolution that could appear in Elite: Dangerous as news information via Galnet news, essentially creating a complete narrative loop.

News from Lave - Gibson Reactor Programme: Project Complete

Historic scenes in Sanqua Province, Ardu where the last of the Gibson Model VI Fusion reactors has finally been switched on.

The first reactor came online in AD 3275 and in that time architect of the programme, James Gibson, rose from revolutionary, to pre-eminent scientist and businessman, to president. It was only fitting then that he flip the switch that confirmed his legacy.

'Power has been a problem for Lave for more than a century,' he said. 'The enforced hydro-electric blackmail of Walden is long behind us and kept us living behind the rest of humanity. Today we lay that ghost to rest and take another step into the future we were promised.'

Domestic troubles in the Ardu region have caused several delays to the project, but the reactor finally signals an end to the spectre from our past.

'With cheap power, we can remake this place,' said Lord Etan, spokesman for Sanqua Unite, a local division of the Workers of Lave Party. 'It's tangible change people can really see and understand. Some senators have forgotten the mission; to make life better for people. We all need to remember that.'

Lave: Trouble in Parliament

Three people were ejected from the Ashoria forum today amidst unruly scenes which forced the speaker of the house to suspend the afternoon session.

Jess Haydem, a representative from the minority party - Land Worship, famous for their production of Lavian brandy, had been addressing the delegates on a free motion to cease construction subsidies for space projects in favour of more government spending on

agricultural reform, when she was interrupted by Tyle Jace of the Lave Defence Party (formerly known as the Phoenix Brigade). She continued speaking even as he tried to seize the speaker's stave and was silenced only when he knocked her to the floor and the chamber erupted in anger.

Security officers quickly restored order and removed both representatives, along with Jace's colleague Han Moore II. Afterwards, speaker Hanu Kallis ended proceedings early so everyone might 'reflect on this transgression of democracy.'

Uszaan Tree Grub Introduction Fails

Xenobiologist and Zoologists attempting to introduce Uszaan tree grubs into the re-established rainforest habitat of the Lavian tree grub have finally admitted defeat.

The doomed project has attracted substantial heritage funding and popular criticism in equal measure for the last five years and missed two government imposed deadlines to publish its progress.

Reclusive project leader, Doctor Samus Tranch released a short statement saying 'Our hopes that the Uszaan specimen would provide a safe replacement for its predecessor in our wet woodlands have been proved unsustainable, but we have learned a great deal about both species.'

No-one has been able to find or reproduce DNA of the original Lavian grub since it became extinct in the last century. It was well known to be mildly poisonous to humans. Data on the grub's biology remains both classified and highly sought after on black markets.

Lave II celebrates tenth anniversary

The Ashorian Astronomy Board marked the tenth anniversary of Lave II's reclassification as a planet today with news that private companies will at last be allowed to purchase stakeholder claims on its regions.

'Lave II was ignored for nearly two centuries,' said Jurga Treyll, lead astronomer from Sark. 'It's time we recognised it and moved on.'

Claims of finding an abandoned micro colony on Lave II have never been acknowledged by the government, although some long range photography released to the Lavian Herald in 3292 did appear to show man-made structures on the surface.

No word as yet on the board's ongoing discussions to give the planet a new designation. It is thought a selection of names will be put to popular vote.

Lave Fortune Organisation: A Change at the Top

The LFO's quarterly financial statement contained a surprising admission today; Chairman Thomas Hallan's name. Under the signatories, former director Jane Trell was listed as occupying the chair instead.

Notoriously secretive and based in Kadia, the LFO formed in 3277 out of the fractured Interstellar political parties with the Hallan family's vast agricultural wealth providing the glue. Thomas Hallan's last public appearance was in a speech to the Ashoria forum in 3289 promoting peace negotiations in the Ardu region, but his signature has remained on all official LFO policy documentation. No word yet on what may have happened.

7. Extract from Elite: Lave Revolution (description inspired by Examples 3 and 4 in Appendix A):

This section builds on and refines the elements established by Holdstock and Redman in their novellas, working them into the story to provide more of an image of what Lave and Ashoria look like.

Chapter 4: The Prefect

2230 hours. Lave's feeble sun began to set on Ashoria's skyline.

Bertrum watched on a viewscreen. In his mind, the benefits of 'fresh air' were vastly outweighed by the sidelong glances and whispering his presence caused amongst the staff.

So he stayed in his office.

It wasn't an unusual decision. He had a sleeping compartment, which saw frequent use. The job demanded irregular hours far beyond any work quota given to Colonial citizens. Three aides rotated in shifts to assist him. The prefect's position remained a prestigious one, but the job was hard; few held the post more than eighteen months.

Bertrum had outlasted them all.

Lave's Interstellar upper-class had little interest in such work. They stayed inside their gated communities dreaming of their glorious past in the Galactic Co-operative. Nearly a century living in the bubble of Walden's dogma, shaped former starfarers into pointless parasites, apart from the few who preserved the lies.

Men like Bertrum Kowl.

Four prefects ruled the planetary regions, supported by primes and factors, who managed each settlement and territory. Firstfall and its capital, Ashoria remained the most important cog in the wheel of the Lavian machine. More than anyone else on Lave, Bertrum knew Walden had a plan. The viewscreens on street corners and in offices reminded people continually.

But, like everyone else, Bertrum didn't know what the plan was.

He stared at the battered plaque on the wall, opposite Walden's continual speechmaking. The rusty robot griffon stared back, the symbol of the Elite Federation of Pilots. In the time of the Galactic Co-operative, trainees had received their 'wings' from Graduation Hall on Lave. Now,

that room housed broken machinery. One of Bertrum's predecessors had retrieved the plaque and hung it in the office.

Bertrum hated that plaque. It was a perennial reminder of failure, a failure he could never redress, but he couldn't take it down. If he did, the people in his staff would ask why. A question not easily answered with half-truths and lies.

So it stayed; a symbol of shame and powerlessness, to keep him working.

'Appointment pending,' said Niamh's soft familiar voice. His gaze returned to the main screen on his desk, a new alert. He keyed up the message and the tanned face of Karsian Brunan, prefect of Kadia appeared.

'Kowl! Long time since we spoke.'

'Our last communication is logged from sixty four hours ago, Brunan. How can I help you?'

'More a question of how I can help you.' Karsian's lips peeled back in a wide grin, displaying his bright white teeth, printed replacements, another off-world vanity. 'I heard the factor in Darahk disappeared.'

Bertrum didn't react. 'How does that concern you?'

'Well, I may have a friend or two in the system,' Karsian replied. 'They might prove useful.'

'What do you want for this favour?' Bertrum asked.

Karsian rubbed his face and grimaced. 'Well, the energy supply quota for this month ...'

'You think you will miss target again?' Bertrum frowned. A vast oceanic region, Kadia supplied the majority of Lave's power through hydroelectric and wind generation. The vast network required constant maintenance. 'Something to mention?'

A flicker of irritation wiped away the easy smile. 'No, nothing we can't handle,' Karsian said, 'however, since your family lives here ...'

An appeal of familial solidarity, laced with implied threat. With an effort, Bertrum kept the scowl from his face. 'You also have relatives in the city,' he countered.

Karsian's smile widened. 'Distant relatives,' he said.

Bertrum leaned forward. 'If you find anything, then I'll look into a power curfew. We may need to *reserve* energy for a new public works effort later in the year.'

'Thank you,' Karsian replied. 'I'll speak to my people.'

The connection terminated. Bertrum sat back and sighed. All conversations between prefects were the same, a mixture of trade and threats veneered with small talk. Karsian was usually the most pleasant of his peers, the others tended to be blunt.

'Niamh, display full view.'

'Acknowledged.'

The wall-mounted viewscreens brightened as the sunset image appeared on each. Figures and images disappeared leaving Walden murmuring alone amidst the orange glory of Lave's horizon. From his chair, Bertrum could almost pretend he was looking through windows at a patchwork vista of the sky outside. Lave's dwarf star, in the last few million years of its life, a feeble candle in the sky. 'Gaze out on an Earth-like sunset' –a phrase used in the Astrogator travel guides. Bertrum had never been off planet, but the warm glow was a novelty for Federation holidaymakers. The brisk trade in the resorts on the Kadian Sea, a vital source of income for the region's prefect.

Lucky bastard, Bertrum thought and keyed up the next task in his diary.

8. Extract from Federation Guidebook provided to all authors and Frontier Developments (expanded from Example 6 in Appendix A):

This is an expanded 'historical' text using the previously published timeline from the Frontier Gazetteer (Example 6) as its stimulus. The devised content and change of form makes the journey from point of origin (present day) to point of departure (AD 3250 to AD3300), filling in as much context as possible for official fiction authors and the game designers.

There is a subtle Federation bias in this version of the document. It was subsequently re-written for the Empire and Alliance with different biases for each and a different focus on events.

The History of the Federation

Mankind's first ventures into space were tentative and gradual. The early part of the 21st century, saw the first manned spaceflights beyond the moon, but it took major population and economic problems to stimulate enough commercial commitment to start settlements beyond Earth.

The Third World War saw this exploration dragged back again and it wasn't until the very end of this century that colonies on Mars and the Moon became permanent and viable.

The 22nd century saw early pioneering projects begin to take shape. The discovery of an accepted Hyperspace theory and the design of the first 'faster than light' drive opened the possibility of exploration and settlement. A new frontier of science and engineering, confirmed by the first message to be received by Earth from an Interstellar probe sent to the Tau Ceti system. This led to a corporate race for the stars as massive commercial colony projects were founded, built and launched.

Tau Ceti was the first colony established outside of Sol. Tau Ceti 3 had long been determined viable through observation and probe data confirmed this. By 2159, the settlement was self-sufficient and able to elect a civilian administrator.

Other colonies followed soon after. Delta Pavonis, Beta Hydri and Altair were all explored and settled between 2190 and 2230.

Xeno Culture and Extinction

The issue of what to do about alien life became a question of real significance the day humans first set foot on Tau Ceti 3. The early colony found itself battling to survive and adapt in a challenging environment. The priority of preserving the indigenous life was secondary to preserving the lives of the colonists themselves. This hardy 'survival' attitude did not abate as things grew easier and the colonists, led by John Taylor, saw the environment as something to master. When automated agricultural systems came online, hunting, which had been a necessity, became a trade. Taylor was elected civilian administrator in 2161 and immediately pushed for the colony to become fully independent from Earth. In response and at the behest of the mission corporate backers, Earth sent a delegation to Tau Ceti 3 to scrutinise it's practises. What they found was widespread active destruction of the planet's native ecosystem. The Authority for Ecological control issued guidelines for habitat conservation and recommended a second mission be sent in twelve months to judge if any improvements had been made. When this arrived in 2163 and found the situation had grown worse, trade

sanctions were recommended and imposed. This further strengthened the hand of Taylor who in 2165 proposed a referendum on independence, which was narrowly defeated in the colonial forum.

In 2182, indigenous life was discovered in the Delta Pavonis system and through a bacteriological accident, completely wiped out in the same year. When further alien ecologies were discovered in the Beta Hydri and Altair systems and massive chemical pollution wiped out more than two hundred people on Mars in a failed attempt to terraform the planet, it looked like humanity would do exactly the same to the cosmos as it had managed to do to its own planet.

However, the 23rd century saw new leadership and initiative. The Earth Environmental Recovery Programme to restore much of the polluted and radioactive regions of the planet was a much more realistic objective than attempting mass exodus to Mars and beyond. The renewed sense of purpose this strategy brought to the planet extended outwards to the interstellar colonies. Agreements were reached with Beta Hydri and Altair. In exchange for further self-determination each system agreed to maintain and preserve the natural habitats of indigenous life in their star system. Shortly after this, Delta Pavonis also joined this agreement to act with restraint should any further life be discovered in the system.

Further ecological transgression by Tau Ceti colonists was uncovered in 2228 when an undercover documentary found its way back to Earth. In it, Tau Ceti colonists were seen flouting Earth decrees and guidelines on a variety of matters, most notably native ecological preservation and the exploitation of natural resources. Mindful of the failures on Mars and the continual inflammatory role played by John Taylor, now well into his eighties. Earth sent a military task force to the system with orders to revoke its colonial charter.

The Taylor Rebellion and the Federal Accord

In early 2240, Hours before the Earth fleet arrived in Tau Ceti, the main settlement changed its name to Taylor Colony and voted for independence from Earth. Without the ships give battle, the colonists targeted the Earth fleet dropships as they attempted to land. Neither side could gain an advantage and so diplomacy resumed. With some bitterness on both sides, a negotiated settlement was reached and in 2242, the Federal Accord was announced.

The Federal Accord granted independent rights and membership to each system that signed it, provided they met certain development goals. Initially each of the signatories (including Earth) did not meet the goals as the core principle of the agreement made at Tau Ceti was to

eliminate the hypocritical political games that had been played in the previous century. Over the next thirty years, each of the Federation members worked hard to achieving their seats on its council on merit.

Mars and the Artefact

In 2280, the first non-human relic was found in space. The object, no bigger than a child's hand was collected by an orbital probe around Europa and quickly brought back to Earth. No information has ever been circulated as to the properties of this item or its origin.

In 2291, the second attempt to terraform Mars was successful. The techniques employed were crude by later standards and the project had taken nearly a hundred years, but finally, humans could walk on the surface and breathe without the need for oxygen suits or respirators.

Achenar

In 2292, independent colonists landed on Achenar 6d. Marlin Duval was a wealthy woman from Earth, who, disenchanted with their administration and authorities set off with her own colonising fleet to the system because it was so far from Earth. Duval and her handpicked 'society' wanted to establish a settlement where the rules were determined by those who were in it, rather than being dictated to from outside. Many of her ideals, centering around democracy and the streamlining of bureaucracy were popular on Earth, but the majority of people who went with her to Achenar, weren't interested in those things.

In 2296, Marlin Duval died in a plane crash. This incident was believed to have been caused by her brother Henson Duval, who immediately assumed dictatorial powers over the colony. The democratic government changed abruptly to one of strict Imperial rule and from then on the family assumed leadership. (This violated the colonial charter given to the settlers by the Federation.

The Duvals drew further irritation from the Federation at the start of 2323, when reports reached Earth that the colonists had wiped out a sentient race on the planet. This, coupled with a lack of progress towards the membership goals set out by the Federal Council, prompted a majority vote for military intervention. A war fleet was mustered at Beta Hydri under the command of Admiral Richard Morgan to take control of the system by force.

In the fall of 2323, the fleet journeyed from its staging area at Beta Hydri towards the Achenar system over a period of several weeks. At the time, hyperspace technology was crude and jumps were difficult manoeuvres that required ships to arrive in carefully selected locations.

The outlying systems between Achenar and Beta Hydri were either uninhabited at the time, or embryonic colonies themselves and so, incapable of supplying the Federal fleet. This caused Admiral Morgan considerable logistical difficulties and forced him to move only as fast as the slowest ship.

The fleet eventually arrived in the Achenar system at the start of 2324. Morgan had anticipated resistance and judging his supplies of fuel, he elected to confront the enemy in one decisive battle on the edge of the system. He didn't have a great deal of choice. The jump point network meant their arrival point could be predicted and Federation forces were expecting a fight. What they hadn't predicted was their enemy to use their pack hunting formation against them. On the edge of the system; they found the huge Generation ship - *Duval Patriot*. Smaller ships swarmed out of the hulk before it detonated, taking a huge part of the Federation fleet with it. Morgan died in the explosion. It has been rumoured ever since that Achenar scientists had found a way to pull the Federation fleet out of hyperspace.

For the rest of 2324, Federation battlegroups tried to establish a beach head in the furthest reaches of the system, but with no breathable atmosphere amongst the far planets, they struggled to maintain munitions for the war effort. Rival corporate interests saw their re-supply efforts sabotaged politically and by ambush. In the Council, Earth's position as Chair was rapidly becoming untenable.

Eventually in 2325 the Duvals decided the Federation had been weakened enough. Achenar's forces fell upon the weakened Federal fleet where they clustered on the edge of the system. A lack of fuel and ammunition meant that several warships were forced to face the enemy under orders to ram whatever they could. A decisive victory for the Duvals, spelled the end of Federal influence in the system. The surviving ships retreated and made it to a jump point. Once they drew closer to Beta Hydri, they were impossible to dislodge. The ensuing war between the Federation and Empire lasted for fifty years, ending in approximately 2380. During this time, Henson Duval's rule spread from the Achenar system to many others.

Council Politics

The Achenar crisis had far reaching consequences for the Federal Council. Earth's leadership had been unquestioned, but the mother planet was undergoing a difficult period and the prospect of continual war with Achenar required a confident hand. For a time, the chair's seat passed to the Martian delegation, preserving the power of the Sol system, but allowing Earth to attend to its own affairs, and placating the anger of those who wanted to break all ties.

Nevertheless, the next sixty years saw several fledgling colonies opt out of their colonial charter obligations once they arrived on their chosen world and accept the rulership of the Duvals. The massive natural resources being offered and exported from Achenar countered the benefits of superior Federation technology, whilst the Duval emphasis on subjugating Alien ecology to the needs of the colonies, made them a popular benefactor for struggling settlements.

The colonisation of Sirius by the first solely corporate mission in 2339 and its rapid rise to become the premier supplier of drive fuel to first the Federation and then the Empire led to a rafter of corporate profiteering between the two powers. However, eventually, Sirius delegates were also responsible for initiating negotiations between the two powers.

Peace with the Empire

In late 2379, hostilities between the Federation and Achenar ceased. A formal treaty was signed in 2380, confirming the Duval's hereditary rights to the system and formally recognising the title 'Emperor'.

After the War

Gradually Federation territory expanded and more colonies were chartered and achieved membership of the Federal Council. In 2403, Earth resumed its place as chair by popular vote. This was mostly owing to new supportive policies regarding colonial missions which had resulted in a third tier of settlements achieving their membership obligations more rapidly. Gratitude to the mother planet came in return.

Negotiations with Lave

A minor agricultural subsidiary system in the far reaches of the galactic south; Colonising ships reached Lave in 2412 to colonise it and move on. In 2469, the colonial administration began discussions to join the Empire. Imperial assistance had been requisitioned in the previous year to help with a pirate cabal terrorising out system traffic. However, these negotiations broke down.

However, in late 2482 a Lave delegation reached Sol. Its leader announced the system had made a substantial technological breakthrough and invited a Federal party to return to the system to discuss trade terms. The Lave group indicated that they would look favourably on a military presence, owing to their proximity with Imperial space.

Federation warships were dispatched and arrived in the system. Months later in 2483, an Imperial battlegroup arrived, confirming the concerns of the colonists. However the additional presence of independent corporate vessels were a curious addition.

Representatives from all parties were invited to a parley on the system space station where the Lave council announced the findings of their probes sent through the wormhole and demonstrated the incredible hyperspatial properties of Quirium. An uneasy truce was established between all parties that preserved Lave's independence from the Empire and Federation in exchange for sharing of further research data and further Quirium supplies.

Negotiations between Lave and the Federation continued for some time, but the distance between the two, along with the presence of the Empire between them prevented any formal agreement or programme towards Lave becoming a Federation member.

After a reported incident involving Quirium fuel, Martian scientists studied samples and found evidence of potential side effects to pilots using vessels equipped with Quirium drives. In 2503, these findings were brought before the Federal Council. A lobby including the Sirius Corporation and several other interested parties began to push for Lave's suspension as a trading partner.

This process took a long time as the vested economic interests in Quirium fuel were substantial, but by 2523, the Federation voted by majority to interdict the 'polluted' sector by ordering its removal from all commercial navigation charts.

However, Lave continued to prosper, selling Quirium to independent traders in defiance of both the Empire and Federation. Several other colonies in this region joined them and they eventually established of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds Charter in 2696 which introduced another rival to the political stage.

9. Extract from Elite: Lave Revolution, Chapters 37 and 38.

This is the finale of the novel and describes both a space battle and the end of our adversary Doctor Walden. There are a multitude of drawn references to macrotext concepts and there is also a megatext reference in looking at space combat as nostalgic dogfighting and sea battles, in a similar way to Star Wars. This was a conscious design choice by Frontier Developments when designing the game and this game experience needed to be reflected in the official fiction.

Chapter 37: The Battle

‘Multiple warships inbound, sir!’

Admiral Bryce Jander frowned at the tactical display on the lectern. Behind a swirling cloud of fighters, seven different contacts were approaching the *Furnace* battle group, one of three and one of four. The ident tags flashed as the computer matched each to its database. He glanced at Ambassador Godwina. ‘Tell us about these,’ he said, pointing to the threat.

‘Old Galcop frigates,’ Godwina replied, drawing back the hood of her robe and gesturing to the group around the *Maximillian*. ‘They have deployed their small squadrons and will move to engage us side on, firing a broadside.’ She moved her hand to the other formation, one large ship and two smaller support vessels. ‘The *Artifice* is an Imperial Dreadnought. She’s at least three centuries old. I’m surprised the engines still have power.’

‘The biggest of the lot,’ Ennis remarked. ‘We can’t take a chance.’

‘No indeed,’ Jander replied. ‘Nor do we want to prolong things.’ He turned to the rail on the left. ‘Lieutenant Cassom, contact Captain Seyme and relay to the battle group. Fighters to engage the Dreadnought, we punch through to starboard.’

‘Acknowledged, Admiral,’ Cassom replied.

‘You want to go through the frigates?’ Ennis said.

‘I do,’ Jander said. ‘We outgun them and we’ve a good measure of what to expect. They’ll try to blockade and we’ll charge the centre.’

‘Rescue shuttles two and three back on deck sir,’ Lieutenant Aimes called out from the lower platform, ‘Seventeen survivors from the *Yamorro* aboard.’

‘Seventeen out of sixty,’ Ennis said and scowled. ‘Heavy price for chasing ship thieves.’

And likely one I’ll pay, Jander thought. ‘Cassom, inform the battle group they are weapons free,’ he said.

‘Yes sir.’

On the viewscreen, the planet Lave came into view as a shadow, with the system’s small orange dwarf star peaking out over its left shoulder. In front of them, winking dots of colour, flash fire explosions happening further in-system. ‘Whatever they’re trying to achieve, they’re persistent,’ Jander muttered. He could feel the shift of direction through his magboots as the

Furnace changed her heading. He moved over to the rail above the auxiliary terminals and leaned over. 'Anything on what destroyed the *Yamorro*?'

The ensign turned around in his chair. 'Not much sir, the readouts do indicate the ship's shields were still up when they were hit.'

'Still up?'

Jander looked at Ambassador Godwina, who shrugged. 'Your guess is as good as mine, Admiral.'

'Means we're on eggshells,' Ennis said.

'If we don't know what it is, we can't plan for it, so we continue at best speed,' Jander said. 'Mister Aimes, get us through those frigates, whatever it takes.'

Ennis adjusted the display on the lectern. The view expanded, showing most of the system. 'They must have a command and control position.' He tapped on the large dot near the planet. 'Would they be co-ordinating from the station?'

'I would think so,' Godwina said. 'The whole system is controlled from there, I doubt Walden will delegate responsibility to a ship commander.'

'Neutralise that and we end this,' Ennis said.

'You said before, our weapons can't knock out a Coriolis,' Jander replied.

'But they don't know that,' Ennis said. He moved the screen towards the *Ronin*'s flashing transponder, buried amongst a whole host of other ships. 'That's a warzone we don't want a part of. We need to finish this fast. We threaten the station, they'll start talking.'

Jander nodded. 'Mister Aimes, new plot for Lave Station, relay to all ships.'

'A wise choice, Admiral,' Godwina said.

* * *

Booted feet approach from the doorway. Pietro looked up to find a man in security uniform standing over him with a rifle and breathing through an open respirator which steamed around his mouth and nose.

'The pistol,' the man said.

Pietro smiled, dropping the gun on the floor. The man kicked it away.

'Ninety-one years in the making,' said a familiar voice from across the room. 'Ninety-one years of implementation will not be derailed by a boy, a cripple and a corpse.'

Pietro glanced at the sidebar console. James was on his knees, a second security guard standing over him. As he stared, two red lights came on. *Good timing.*

He looked away, shuffling forwards to get a view of the speaker. A man stood staring at the viewscreen. He was similarly dressed in fatigues with respirator strapped to his neck and a cannister on his belt. He turned around and through the vapour cloud, Pietro recognised him from the vidcast in the prison cell and before, from countless card games he'd played on Nobleport Station.

'You're Hans Walden,' he said.

'Correct,' said the man. 'Although, more accurately Hans Walden the fourth.'

'You're a clone.'

'Yes, but you already knew this,' Walden smiled. 'The arrival of Alliance military forces in the system was your doing.'

Pietro tried to laugh, but only managed a weak cough. 'If so, I'm a genius,' he said.

'No matter, they are a small inconvenience and will be gone shortly,' Walden said. 'Even if they were to stop the ships here, most left already and complete their journeys in less than an hour.'

'Was this all a test?' Bertrum asked.

'Not really,' Walden replied. 'You'd convinced me of your ignorance right up until the moment you accessed the security system, triggering the camera surveillance in this room. It still baffles me why you'd betrayed me like this.'

'You put a toxin in the harvest ...' Bertrum said.

‘Actually no, I put a genetically engineered virus into the harvest,’ Walden explained, ‘a virus that took decades to perfect and test. I had to render a species extinct, wiping out the habitat and every trace of genetic code, then develop an antidote and secretly introduce it to an entire planet. Quite a bit more complex as I’m sure you appreciate.’

‘But ... why?’

‘You know why, Prefect Kowl,’ Walden replied. ‘I told you of a plan to restore Lave to her rightful place. You were to be an essential part of the strategy. In fact, I offered you total dominion over Lave. I’m astonished you gave all this up to defy me.’ He held out his hand.

‘Datacard please.’

The guard with James hauled the boy onto his feet and he opened the dataplate with trembling hands, giving the tiny card to the security man who let him go and walked over to Walden.

‘Thank you. This must have been difficult to obtain.’ Walden took the device and put it in his mouth, biting through the membrane and spat out the resultant mess. ‘I’m sure one last view of your wife before you join her was a romantic thing.’

‘I doubt ... you know what the word means ...’

‘No, you’re probably right, an unnecessary distraction.’ Walden stared at Pietro who held the gaze while trying to keep his breathing deep and regular. ‘I am aware of your talents. The oxygen ratio in this room has been reduced by a considerable amount.’

‘I noticed,’ Pietro replied.

‘Good,’ Walden said and smiled behind the vapour cloud. ‘When I leave, we will reduce the mix even further, inducing hypoxia. I’m told it is a particularly painful way to die. After that, your remains are to be incinerated.’

‘Very thorough,’ Pietro said. He glanced at James who had collapsed against the wall. ‘Him as well?’

‘Of course,’ Walden said, ‘him especially. I know all about the talents of James Gibson. In fact, he should already be dead, long before either of you.’ He turned to James. ‘You recall your brief visit to my school, don’t you?’

‘More like a prison,’ James said.

‘Perhaps the reason you failed the evaluation,’ Walden said. ‘A shame, my family would gain much from studying you.’

‘That also why you tried to kill me?’

‘Of course,’ Walden replied. ‘Talent like yours has to be harnessed or eliminated.’

‘You infected me with the virus,’ Pietro said.

‘You infected yourself by staying with Second after he died,’ Walden said. ‘A pity, I would have liked to monitor you and watch the disease develop, but we have done extensive testing already.’

Atticus Finch was Second, Pietro realised. ‘Does First lead you?’ he asked.

‘Mister Devander, I’m afraid there isn’t time to indulge your—’

At that moment, Bertrum screamed and threw himself at Walden, sending them both crashing to the floor. Pietro rolled away making a grab for the pistol he’d dropped. A gunshot rang out and his left leg went numb. *Don’t think about it!* He got a hand to the pistol, flipped over and pressed the trigger, then turned to the right and fired again. Both security guards dropped.

Pietro tried to get up, but couldn’t. His hands shook, where they had been rock steady a second before. He fought to stay focused. Oxygen deprivation, sleep deprivation, water deprivation and anti-interrogation training were all things he’d trained in. He remembered the strange basic tasks drill in rarified atmosphere chambers. Understanding your body and managing its limitations was the key. ‘James ...’ he called out, in a rasping tone, just above a whisper. ‘James ...’

There was a grunt from the direction of the chair; a muffled cry and a gurgling noise, then silence.

‘Walden’s dead,’ Bertrum announced.

‘Good,’ Pietro said.

* * *

The huge Imperial Dreadnought filled the observation window of the *Furnace*. The *Artifice* was listing badly to port, flash fires bursting over the entire stern as Eagle fighters strafed the unshielded hull.

‘Seems you were right, Ambassador,’ Jander remarked. ‘She’s struggling to maneuver.’

‘An easy conclusion, Admiral,’ Godwina replied. ‘They were never designed for this kind of engagement.’

A chain reaction began, from power station to power station along the Dreadnought’s spine, cracking the ship apart into huge chunks of blackened debris and raising a cheer from the bridge crew of the *Furnace*. A shudder went through the carrier as she began to slide to starboard. ‘Full charge to shields,’ Jander ordered, leaning over the rail to the pilot ensign. ‘Co-ordinate maneuvers with the battle group.’

‘Large data transmission coming through, Admiral,’ Lieutenant Cassom announced.

‘From who?’ Jander asked.

‘The space station,’ Cassom replied. ‘I’m ... Admiral, I think you’re going to want to watch this.’

Jander made his way down the steps from the command post to the lower bridge, to stand next to the lieutenant. A woman’s face appeared on the screen.

‘At this stage we have no reason to trust any senior figure in the planetary administration ...’

The film continued to play. To Jander, the busy bridge of the *Furnace* at combat alert disappeared. When it ended he realised he was gripping the rail with white knuckles. He uncurled his cramping left hand. ‘Get a high priority signal to Alioth immediately,’ he ordered.

Cassom looked terrified, clearly struggling with the implication of the film. ‘What shall I tell—’

‘Just get the channel,’ Jander said. ‘Any connection you can manage and whatever it takes. We need a minister on the line, right now.’

* * *

The sound of scraping and tearing into the Cobra's hull grew louder with every second. Heldaban Kel sat hunched over the controls, desperately trying to turn and twist away from the Vipers, but they had him, buzzing around the ship, taking it in turns to pour in the autocannon fire, making his shields overload.

Not so slutty now.

In front, a vast tangle of Anaconda transports, set against the huge orb of the planet. The Orange Star fleet, freighters panicking as the Phoenix Brigade fought dogfights with more LaveSec Vipers.

I'm not going to make it.

The comms panel beeped. He keyed up the transmission and a woman appeared on a holoscreen. The words were unintelligible over the Cobra's damaged engine howl, but the message ID was a surprise.

That came from Lave Station ...

The viewscreen lit up as a Viper exploded, then another and another. Kel ducked instinctively as the large shape of a Panther clipper soared past. The comms beeped again. 'Faith here, glad for the assist?'

'Definitely,' Kel replied. 'We need to form up and make for the Alliance ships.'

'You sure they'll want to see us?'

'No,' Kel said. 'But they're our best bet for getting away alive.'

* * *

With unsteady fingers, Pietro hauled himself along the carpet towards the nearest dead guard and unclipped the respirator, strapping it around his own neck. Instinctively, he took a deep breath of the oxygen cloud. He knew the effect would take a few minutes. Carefully, he retrieved the cannister and kept moving, over to the second corpse, retrieving the other breather and crawled over to James. By the time he got to there, he felt better; every beat of

his heart circulated the enriched air into his body, but making his leg throb. He guessed he'd been shot.

'James?'

The boy was still conscious, but barely. Pietro held the breather over him. Gradually his eyes came back into focus. 'Are we alive?' he asked.

'Looks like,' Pietro said. 'How are you feeling?'

'Pretty sick,' James said. He sat up slowly and caught sight of the dead security guard. 'You killed—'

'I had to, you get the files out?'

'I think so.'

Pietro breathed steadily, ignoring the pulsing pain in his leg. 'I need your help. One of them shot me.'

'What about Walden?'

Pietro glanced around, neither Bertrum nor Walden were moving. 'I think he's dead too, but this isn't over, we must show the people.'

'Show them?'

Pietro grimaced as he twisted to examine at his leg. An increasingly large pool of bright red blood stained the floor and he knew what that meant from experience. *Femoral artery wound.*

'James, we need some kind of material to make a tourniquet with.'

'A what?'

'A tourniquet,' Pietro repeated, 'a bandage with pressue that stops the bleeding, otherwise ...' he swallowed. 'Otherwise I may not be much use for long. Someone heard the gunshots. They'll send people pretty soon.'

James stared at him. His eyes went to the wound and the blood. 'I'm not sure I can—'

'James, there's no one else.'

The boy's lips were quivering, his eyes filled and a tear rolled down his pale cheek. 'What do I do?'

'Your shirt,' Pietro said. 'Rip off the sleeves and knot them together.'

James did as he was told and shuffled over. 'This to go over the wound?' he asked.

'No,' Pietro replied, 'above, to cut off the artery, then a bandage over it.'

'Okay,' James said. He twisted the shirt fabric into a rope and wrapped it around Pietro's leg along the upper thigh. He pulled the material tight, making Pietro hiss in pain through clenched teeth. 'Sorry,' he added.

'Can't be helped,' Pietro said, 'just hope it works.'

James wiped the blood away with the rest of the shirt. 'What about the bullet?' he asked.

'It'll keep for now,' Pietro said. The sensation of weakness returned. He took a deep breath from the respirator. The compressed oxygen cannisters would run out quickly. They needed to restore the room atmosphere fast or get out, if they were going to survive. 'I need you to help me move Walden,' Pietro explained. 'We must get him in front of the camera.'

James stood up, clutching the oxygen cannister in his hand and went over to where Walden and Bertum lay in a heap. He knelt over them as Pietro pulled himself across the floor. When he got close, he found the boy's hands were covered in blood from a knife wound in Walden's neck.

'The prefect stabbed him,' James said.

Pietro grabbed the side of the chair and pushed himself up into a sitting position. He took hold of Bertrum's wrist. He found a faint pulse, but the man wasn't breathing. He glanced at Walden's dead face. The respirator had been cut through. 'We'll have to leave him,' Pietro said.

'But he'll die.'

'Might be that's what he wanted,' Pietro said.

He got his hands under Walden's shoulders and together they lifted him into the seat. Pietro pulled himself up alongside, while James went back to the control console. 'Still transmitting?'

'Yes,' James said. 'You're live to the planet.' He pointed up above the viewscreen wall and Pietro just made out an electronic light, *the camera*. He straightened up and stared directly at it.

'People of Lave, Doctor Hans Walden is dead.' Pietro glanced at the body and back at the camera. He raised his voice. 'This is your chance to be free, to reclaim your planet.' He let go of the chair and stood up, grimacing at the pain in his leg. 'All your lives you've been lied to, your parents were lied to and their parents, betrayed.' He glanced at James who smiled and nodded. 'There are people amongst you, brave people who want to liberate Lave. Even now, Alliance ships are in the system,' *I hope Walden wasn't lying*. 'They're here to help you ... to fight for you ... but you must show them you want this, to change the world that is rightfully yours.'

He slipped. His injured leg couldn't take the weight. He glanced at the floor. The wound was bleeding again, his blood mixed with Walden's on the plascrete tiles. He turned to James. 'Turn it off,' he said.

James pressed some buttons and the two red lights disappeared. 'Now what?'

'What access do you have to the station controls?' Pietro asked.

James shrugged. 'From here I can override most of the systems, but I don't know how much time we'll have before they—'

'Deactivate the shield,' Pietro said. 'Overload the power or something, so they can't restart it, then we try the door.'

'Might take a few minutes to get into the system,' James said.

Pietro picked up the discarded pistol and checked the magazine. Ten shots left. He moved around the chair and into a sitting position facing the door. 'Don't take too long,' he said.

Chapter 38: The Decision

The screen went dark.

Admiral Jander folded his arms and stared for several moments, weighing up what he'd learned.

'Minister Merion is on hyperspace wave, Admiral,' Cassom said.

Jander nodded and turned to Ennis. 'Commander, you have the bridge. Best speed to the station, target as soon as you're in range.'

Ennis frowned. 'You sure about this, Admiral?'

Jander glared at him. 'That was an order.'

'Yes sir.'

He took the steps two at a time, heading for the senior officers' briefing room, pausing only to touch Ambassador Godwina on the shoulder. 'With me.'

Wordlessly she followed him through the doors. Jander went straight to the desk and brought up the transmission. Merion's face appeared projected over the table, perfect hair and an irritated expression. 'Admiral, this is highly unusual, I don't think that—'

'Minister, sorry for disturbing you,' Jander said. 'The Imperial ambassador to Lave is with me, we are currently in the system. I assume you received the data package we relayed from the station?'

'It's coming through now, Admiral,' Merion said, his eyes flicking away from the screen. 'We haven't had time to digest—'

'Then I'll save you the trouble. The Lavian grain arriving in Alioth in the next hour is contaminated with a viral toxin manufactured here. You need to impound the freighter immediately and get word to every other system with a deal. You'll find a list in the attached files, but that isn't the reason I requested a live link.'

'Then what do you want, Admiral?'

'We're in transit to Lave Station right now. I need oversight approval to remove the sovereign government.'

Merion's expression darkened. 'I can't grant you that.'

'Minister, I have reason to believe a populist insurrection is underway on the planet surface and conclusive evidence of terrorism practised against signatories to the Alliance treaty.' His eyes flicked to Godwina who nodded her approval. 'I have corroboration from the representative of Emperor Duval. This situation is unprecedented, I need your support.'

'I'll need to digest this, Admiral,' Merion said, looking uncomfortable, his eyes flicking off screen.

Jander slammed his hands on the table, making the image quiver. 'There isn't time,' he said, managing to keep his voice calm, *icy calm*. 'I gave you an appraisal of the situation and recommended action, I need your support.'

'I'm sorry I can't—'

Jander pressed a button and the transmission cut off, leaving an uneasy silence. Outside the room, he heard Ennis shouting orders at the bridge crew, *where I should be*, he thought.

'Was that wise?' Godwina asked.

'Probably not,' Jander said, 'but it had to be done.'

* * *

Each blow on the control room doors made them shudder and Gebrial wince. She huddled in the corner in darkness, squeezing the hands she held in her own.

They could hear muffled shouting outside, then gunshots and the thump of grenades. *Only a matter of time*, she thought.

She glanced down at the dataslate, the word *processing* remained on the screen. *No one will even remember what happened, no one will care*. She remembered the tunnels she'd lived in at Solati, watching people walk around the station and live their lives. Here it was the same, they were locked away as the world turned on the other side of the door, but in Solati, no one had reason to break into the isolated bubble until Pietro came. Now, they were in Ashoria's power control room and there were plenty of reasons.

Another loud bang as something big and heavy slammed into the doors. Heavy enough to topple over the propped metal locker, which tipped forward and crashed to the floor, missing her by inches. Gebrial shuffled back further and looked at the dataslate again.

Sent.

Sent?

The doors burst open and someone climbed through with a torch. A man Gebrial didn't recognise, but he wasn't in a security uniform. 'It's all right!' he shouted. 'You're free, all of you! You're free!'

Free?

She stood up, as did the others around her. 'What do you mean free?' Sallah asked.

'I mean free, really and truly,' the man said. He was middle aged and had dried blood on his face from a cut on his temple. 'The whole city's risen up. He's dead, Walden's dead!'

* * *

Jander walked back onto the bridge and returned Ennis' salute. 'Status?'

'We're holding our own, sir,' Ennis said. 'Flank speed for the station, we're drawing fire, but those old frigates need to set up a picket line to hurt us. They can't concentrate their attack while we keep moving. We can't jump whilst they're on us and gradually we'll whittle them down.'

'Well done Commander,' Jander said. He turned to Aimes. 'Get a full read out on the Coriolis, garrison complement, the works and some kind of firing solution on the shield.'

Aimes shrugged. 'I'll try, sir, but they were built to withstand—'

'Lieutenant, your best guess will do.'

On the viewscreen, the planet was much larger. Away to the left, a frigate exploded, under sustained fire from the *Fortitude*, the battle group's medical ship. 'More ships coming in, sir,' Cassom said. 'The *Ronin* amongst them.'

The Ronin? Jander frowned. 'What do they want?' he asked.

'No idea sir, but we got a comms request from a ship escorting her,' Cassom turned around and stared at Jander with a nervous expression on her face. 'It's Heldaban Kel.'

* * *

'What can I do for you, Mister Kel?'

Heldaban Kel smiled. Admiral Jander's holoscreen image was green tinged and flickering. He guessed the Cobra's projection system had been damaged, but he could read the distaste on

the man's face. 'About time we made friends, Admiral,' he said. 'Seems we have a mutual enemy.'

'It does indeed,' Jander replied. 'I assume you received the transmissions from the station?'

'Yes, looks like quite an insurrection going on.'

'In the interest of regional security, the Alliance is assuming temporary authority over this system. We have backing from the Empire's representative. Your people can help or prepare to be fired upon.'

'We're happy to help, Admiral, if that's all the same.'

'Once this conflict is over, you will surrender the *Ronin*.'

Kel glanced over at the clipper idling on his port side 'Agreed,' he said quickly.

'Then form up and head for the station,' Jander said. 'Make for point seven three and our squadrons will co-ordinate with you. Lieutenant Cassom will set up an encrypted comms frequency.'

'Understood, Admiral.'

* * *

Gebrial climbed over the locker cabinets and took the hand of the smiling man. He helped her down and out through the doors. A moment later, there was a clicking noise and the hum of generators. The strip lighting in the roof of the corridor came on and she found herself staring down at Bowles' corpse.

He'd been shot, a clean hole above the bridge of his nose. His arms and legs were twisted outwards awkwardly, his jacket, open, revealing the explosives strapped around his waist. His eyes stared stupidly at the ceiling. Gebrial bent down and closed them.

'Probably for the best.'

Tobias Renner was standing by the wall staring at her. His face was stained with dirt and dried blood, but he didn't seem injured. She glanced at Bowles' body on the floor again. 'I guess. He was too full of anger to live in this world.'

She couldn't help but smile at him.

'You okay?' he asked gently.

'Yeah,' she replied. 'I think so.'

'They've been asking after you out here,' Renner said. 'The girl who sent the message. I didn't say I knew you.'

'What happened?'

'Soldiers came in from the roof in a shuttle,' Renner said. 'We had our hands full then people stormed the building from everywhere. They're on the streets now; it's rough out, but ...'

'Because of my message?'

'Not just that,' Renner said. 'Pietro killed Walden on the space station. He managed to get on all the viewscreens in the city. The people know he's dead, that's why they came out.' He laughed, the first time she'd heard him laugh without cynicism or at someone's expense.

'Pietro saved us.'

More figures made their way into the corridor. Sallah grabbed Gebrial's hand, her smiling face a picture of joy. 'Come on,' she enthused. 'We have to see, we need to be out there!'

Gebrial let herself be dragged away.

* * *

'It's done.'

Pietro looked up. James was standing over him and knelt down. 'I'm finished,' he said. 'The shields are down.'

'Good,' Pietro said. He tried to get up, but he couldn't lift himself. He coughed into the thinning cloud of oxygen vapour around his mouth. The respirator cannister was nearly empty. 'Can you restore the air?'

James shook his head. 'The room controls are sealed.'

'What about the Alliance fleet?'

'There's a lot of ships,' James said, 'seems to be some kind of fight, I can't tell them all apart.'

'Post a tactical display to the main viewer, so I can see,' Pietro said.

'Okay,' James replied and a moment later a huge top-down, two-dimensional image of the system appeared on the wall.

Pietro made out half the picture from his position sitting against the chair. *Better than nothing*, he thought. He recognised the asteroid belt they'd visited, where they'd fought the Asp and the mining station he'd seen. 'Can you open the door?' he asked James.

'I think so, yes.'

'Then you need to get out of here.'

James glanced at the exit and back at Pietro. 'We should go together.'

'I won't make it,' Pietro said. 'Best chance is for you to get out and hide. The Alliance will come for the station. When you know you're safe, you can return with help.'

James bit his lip. 'Maybe I should stay ...'

'No,' Pietro said. 'One of us has to be conscious to tell them what happened. So long as the oxygen level doesn't decrease further I'll be okay for a while.'

'But your leg—'

'Help me retie the tourniquet.'

James fumbled with the knotted shirt sleeves and pulled them tighter. Pietro gasped and for a moment, everything went dark, but he swallowed and his vision cleared. 'Now get going,' he said and held out the pistol. 'Take this with you.'

James stared at the weapon as if it were about to bite him. 'I'm not sure I can—'

'Take it,' Pietro repeated. 'Then at least you can choose what to do if someone finds you.'

'Okay.' James plucked the gun from his hands and began to back away towards the door. 'I'll come and get you as soon as I can.'

'I'll be waiting,' Pietro said.

* * *

'The station shield is down sir.'

'What?' Jander glanced up from the tactical display on the lectern. The Coriolis was on the viewscreen, set against the backdrop of the planet. In front was a whirling maelstrom of lasers and explosions. Alliance and Phoenix Brigade ships engaged Vipers in a hundred dogfights as each side fought for control of the shrinking space between the Alliance battle group and Lave Station.

'The shield is down,' Aimes repeated from the lower deck. 'Deactivated from the inside.'

'Comms to the *Errant*,' Jander ordered. 'Bring her front and centre to target the Coriolis. I want a wideband message to all ships in the system demanding they surrender to us.'

'Fortuitous,' Godwina remarked, staring at the projection. 'What will you do if they don't comply?'

'Fire,' Jander said.

* * *

Pietro was alone.

He couldn't feel his feet. His toes had gone past numb. Now, both legs were strangers to him, an unfamiliar, dragging burden, but that didn't really matter. *I died days ago, when the Gallant crashed. I just didn't realise ...*

He rolled over on the floor, pulling himself around the chair so he could get a better view at the huge tactical display on the wall. The effort made him dizzy and as he settled next to Walden's legs, the last of the oxygen wisped out of the respirator.

He glanced up at the dead man in the seat; a fitting finish for Walden, to watch his plan unravel and the end of his power. *Too bad we couldn't kill the other clones*, Pietro thought. *I wonder what they'll do?*

On the screen, he picked out the station in front of the planet. A cluster of sensor dots buzzed around, more than busy traffic, a chaotic battle between pilots in the cold of space.

He remembered what Miranda had said. *'You're to dispose of all evidence and return to control via an appropriate trail to ensure our covert status is preserved.'* He hadn't done that, he'd gone after the answers instead. Pietro chuckled involuntarily, *only myself to blame*.

Muffled shouting made him look around. The door had closed behind James, but he had no idea if they could open it from the outside. The floor trembled under him. *We must be under*

attack, he thought. He remembered lessons at the academy on Eta Cassiopeia. In ancient times on Earth, Monks would flee from the church into a round tower, filling it with their wealth and living for days on the top floors while the lands burned; all the same thing, finding a place where people couldn't get to you, rob you and kill you. Space station shields were the modern equivalent, powerful energy projections that made the Coriolis virtually indestructible. Countless governments had survived raider attacks and civil wars by retreating to their orbital confines and waiting out. The weapons required to wear down the defense were fearsome. Only one exception warranted a mention in the academy manual: *The Tibedied Scenario*, where the shields had been sabotaged.

The room shook again, a more noticeable impact. The Alliance would want to preserve the structure, but they had to get its defenders to surrender first. With shaking fingers, he reached up to the chair control and activated the main view. The tactical screen disappeared, to be replaced by a huge diorama of the space outside the planetary docking port. Eagle fighters fought with old Viper patrol craft; beam lasers and autocannon fire flashing in the vacuum. Another ship appeared; a larger one that he didn't recognise. Ugly and ancient as it struggled to maneuver, firing laser cannons at a target out of view.

'Best seat in the house,' Pietro said out loud and looked at Walden. 'I guess you'd disagree?'

Walden said nothing.

* * *

'They're refusing to surrender, Admiral.'

Jander looked at Ennis and Godwina in turn. On the control deck below, an ensign started shouting and an emergency crew rushed to one of the terminals, dowsing the console with an extinguisher. In front, a stricken Lavian frigate disappeared in a huge eruption of flame.

Jander cast his eyes over the tactical display on the lectern. The battle group were within firing range of the station, but gradually being surrounded by a larger ring of Lave warships. For every frigate destroyed another two seemed to appear. *Where did they get all these ships from?* 'We're out of time,' he said.

Ennis grunted. 'Don't sit well with me to run from a fleet of antiques.'

'Commander,' Godwina said her eyes flicking around the *Furnace's* bridge with distaste. 'I assure you the perspective is relative.'

'We may not get the chance,' Jander said, 'a lot of ships out there.' He leaned over the rail.
'Order the *Errant* to fire on the station and start plotting a hyperspace path.'

'Yes Admiral,' Cassom replied.

* * *

The Cobra shuddered and bucked in the debris of the frigate explosion; the shield warning flashed again. Heldaban Kel grimaced and pushed at the stick, sending the ship into a straight dive under the debris cloud. A succession of shrieks and bangs echoed through the compartment as bits of wreckage smashed into the ship's unprotected hull making him flinch every time.

Suddenly he was clear and replotting the tactical scanner. The station came up as a target, then the next nearest ship, an Alliance warship, moving to broadside of the rotating Coriolis. He spotted open missile tubes and the tell-tale flash of ignition. A second later an explosion erupted on the station surface. His hands were on the comms panel before he had time to think.

'Kel to *Furnace*, what are you doing!'

The Alliance ship didn't respond, he keyed up another channel to the Phoenix pilots. 'Kel to Archaeo, did you see that?'

'We did, Kel,' Archaeo replied.

'If they blow the station, they'll send the system back to the dark ages!' Kel said.

* * *

The observation room shook violently, there was a crackling sound from the electronics panel and the viewscreen went blank. The main lights winked out and emergency halogens kicked in. Pietro heard the door slide open and he smiled.

At last ...

He knew he wouldn't make it to the corridor. The effort was beyond him, but at least the air would rebalance. *James will find people and come back for me*, he thought.

* * *

'Communication from the station, Admiral.'

‘On the main viewer, Lieutenant.’

The bloodstained face of a woman in a black uniform filled the screen. ‘Lave Station to Alliance battle group, we’d like to agree your terms.’

A spontaneous cheer broke out around the *Furnace* bridge and Jander allowed himself a smile. ‘Good decision, Lave Station. This is Admiral Bryce Jander, Alioth navy. I accept your surrender. Who am I speaking to?’

‘Station Engineer Abigail Bowles,’ the woman glanced over her shoulder. ‘Things are a little fragile here, Admiral, so we’d welcome some support.’

‘Understood,’ Jander replied. ‘We’ll need you to order your ships to power down and await instructions.’

‘Already done, Admiral, although many won’t listen.’

Jander turned to Ennis. ‘Get every marine boarder and shuttle we have available in space and over to their docking bay. Lead them yourself.’

Ennis smiled and saluted then left the bridge at a speed that belied his years, making Jander smile. He turned back to the screen. ‘We’re sending people over, keep the bay open.’

‘Will do.’

* * *

Pietro could smell burning.

He glanced around. The control console had caught fire, the flames quickly spreading along the observation room’s panelled walls, plainly fuelled by some sort of chemical leak. He looked for an extinguisher, but couldn’t see anything. *Must be a kind of automated protocol*, he thought. *Sprinklers, or—*

Abruptly, the emergency lights went out and the door panel slid shut. Faintly, he picked out a sound from before, the sound of the atmospheric being changed. The room would be flooded with nitrogen and this time, there’d be no oxygen left behind.

So there is an emergency protocol, Pietro thought and smiled to himself. *And I’m on the wrong side of it ...*

He closed his eyes.

List of Frontier/Elite Terminology

The following is a term consistency guide devised and applied by me to the five Frontier/Elite books published by Fantastic Books Publishing.

All spaceship names must begin with a capital and be italicised. This includes apostrophe names, so the *Gallant*, *Gallant's*. This follows 21st century navy naming conventions.

'G-forces'

The use of abbreviations for gravity vary. The term 'g-force' is an accepted abbreviation. All others (zero-gee, quarter-gee, etc.) are more genre specific and should be 'gee' not 'g'.

Word/Phrase	Variation	Final	Notes
Dataslate	Data pad, pad, datapad, dataslate	Dataslate	Variety of modern references. Consistent term needed.
Planetside	planet side	Planetside	Acceptable join.
Hyperrail	Hyper rail	Hyperrail	Acceptable join.
Cooperative	Co-operative	Co-operative	From Elite Manual
Ident	Identification number	Ident	Mostly used in dialogue as a colloquialism
Viewscreen	View screen, view-screen	Viewscreen	Acceptable join.
Hyperspace	Hyper space, Witch space.	Hyperspace	Acceptable join.
Magboots	Magnetic boots, mag-boots	Magboots	Short form colloquial, acceptable join.
Plasifibre	None.	Plasifibre	Material.

RemLok	Remlock	remlok	The Dark Wheel by Robert Holdstock
Cobra Mark III	Cobra Mark 3, Cobra Mk III	Cobra Mark III	Variety of terms used in previous publications.
Datascreen	Data-screen, data screen	Datascreen	Acceptable join.
Holovids	Trimensional projection, holographic video, holo-movie	Holovids	Short form colloquial, acceptable join.
Kinetic weapon	Machine gun, rifle, assault rifle.	Kinetic weapon	Generic future term for projectile firing weapons.
[name] Station	station,	[name] Station	Consistent naming convention in text.
[name] system	System.	[name] system	Consistent naming convention in text.
Holoscreen	Holo graphic screen, holo-screen, holo screen	Holoscreen	Depiction of holo graphic displays used in Elite: Dangerous the game.
Plascrete	Concrete, Cement.	Plascrete	This is an occasionally used pseudoscience material noun.
Duraglass	Plexiglass,	Duraglass	Plexiglass is a brand name. This is an occasionally used pseudoscience material noun.
Autocannon	Auto cannon,	Autocannon	Consistent naming convention in text.

Faulcon deLacy	Falcon DeLacey, Faucon De Lacy.	Faulcon deLacy	Original Elite Manual.
Datacore	Data core	Datacore	Consistent naming convention in text.
Elite	Elite	Elite	Capitalisation required when referring to status.
Mis-jump	Misjump, miss jump	Mis-jump	Consistent naming convention in text.

Chapter 6: Literature Review

The following is a selection of the texts I have read to inform my work. Those included here are ones that have substantively shaped my thinking in this thesis.

1. Formative Thinking

These texts were the starting point for my deliberations on attempting to define the role of the macrotext and determine the ways in which different writing techniques can be used to encourage the speculative mind of the reader.

Poetics - Aristotle

Writing in 335 BC, Aristotle's initial outline of story structure is an excellent blueprint. The explanation of the epic is particularly useful in determining the necessary qualities for a science fiction or fantasy story of scope. It is from Aristotle we have the three-act structure and this forms the basis of my analysis of narrative structural theory.

Aristotle determines a necessary component of epic is the ability to convey multiple layers of narrative that develop concurrently.

Similarly, Aristotle's description of tragedy, determining the need for a main character with a flaw that is explored and ultimately revealed as being a principle focus to the story.

A Treatise of Human Nature – Hume D.

Hume's writing describes the mind's cognitive method as an interrelated process between ideas and impressions. This theory relies extensively on a person's relationship of previous experiences to current events. The place of the imagination in Hume's framework remains outside of this process and he defines complex ideas that are not based on experience as imaginations. To explain the order and relationship of such ideas to real events, he introduces the 'principles of association', which break down into three broad categories, Resemblance, Spatial and Temporal Contiguity, and Cause-Effect.

The notion of Resemblance can be applied in speculative fiction writing to the concept of defamiliarisation. It is of particular interest to relate Hume's explanation to the role of the reader and devise narrative based on this thought process, making use of common related impression/idea contexts and then introducing the *verfremdungseffekt* through twists to the story that build from the familiar or by re-interpreting the familiar in ways that make it seem different to the reader's existing experiences.

Hume's writing also offers a cornerstone for the concept of the mega-text and its manifestation from the reader experience.

Mythologies – Barthes R.

Barthes' work demonstrates the ways in which myths are encoded in modern (at the time) past times. It highlights the rituals of modern entertainment and how these subconsciously relate to the way we view and read stories in popular culture. In *Mythologies*, we are able to see examples of this encoding as Barthes' decodes them for us.

Barthes is of the view that popular myths have evolved through time, reflecting the changing nature of perceived reality and truth to which society has had to adjust.

S/Z - Barthes R.

It is in the cultural or referential code, first introduced by Barthes in his reading of Balzac's short story 'Sarrasine' (Balzac: 1830), that we find an entry point to identifying expectation of all parts of the narrative that the reader has expectations of. We empathise and sympathise through familiar forms, though each perception and identification of the familiar is coloured by our individual experience and cultural context. This cloak is a common garb that may be worn by the story to draw the reader in. When used in this way it can deliver a cathartic escape. The cares and passions of the story protagonist are felt keenly by the reader when they at first seem similar, but then take on a rationalised path of their own.

Simulcra and Simulation – Baudrillard J.

Baudrillard's ideas around the meaning of objects and the interrelatedness of this (set in context) resonates with the principles of world building. The pattern of ideas, reference material and stories is clearly a simulation in the frame he proposes and a representative map as he indicates, but this fiction accepts its identity as a simulation, as most fiction does. The basis of science fiction in an origin point of realism (and science) is contendable through his ideas, but this is tangential from the central objective of establishing a macrotext to guide the develop of fiction in one particular world context.

Baudrillard's ideas on hyperreality when applied to a writer's mythologising practice provide an interesting context of nostalgic superstition and offer a writer some very useful insight into developing work that aspires towards convincing the reader of its reality.

2. Structuralism

Structural theories in writing are common. The more popular ones are often applicable to certain types of Fantasy writing. In this section, I looked at my own studies of structural theory and tried to build from them towards the concepts explored in my study.

Morphology of the Folktale - Propp V.

Propp's identification of a structured transition through elements of the traditional folk tale first published in 1928, became a blueprint for many writers in other genres looking for a method and plan to follow. The states which Propp identifies as necessary for a story to pass through have several subclasses, which give them general appeal. Subsequent writers like Vogler, Branigan and Campbell all draw some inspiration from this element of Propp's work and this premise builds on previous structures identified by Aristotle et al within the more specific tradition of fantasy writing.

However, of more interest is Propp's definition of character types and their functions in the text. The limited list outlined in the Morphology shows its age and reflects the gender bias of the texts it has been drawn from. However, the idea of identifying character function within the narrative is an important practical step, as this allows the writer to reassess their own invented dramatis personae with a view to their role within the story as a whole, or an individual scene.

Both of these elements of the text identify reader and writer expectations.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces – Campbell J.

Campbell's work has been cited by many writers and filmmakers as a source of inspiration for their stories. His monomyth concept; the idea that all things are connected through our interpretation of them and shared human experience, expands on Hume⁹ and Nietzsche's ideas¹⁰, drawing them towards Propp and Tolkien, by way of Sigmund Freud¹¹ and Carl Jung¹². Campbell focuses on the journey of the hero throughout storytelling and categorises transitional elements of a narrative, much like Propp. Unlike Booker, Campbell sees only one essential story type, the quest, but mentions how it can be reversed and repurposed in a variety of ways. His work is littered with comparative examples drawn from across world literature.

⁹ A Treatise of Human Nature (1738)

¹⁰ The Birth of Tragedy (1872) and Beyond Good and Evil (1886)

¹¹ The Interpretation of Dreams (1900)

¹² Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (1981)

Campbell's study of symbolism takes the work of Freud and draws this into the way in which stories are formed. He begins with dream interpretation, favoured ground for psychoanalysis, and draws this out into new territory, namely that of devised fiction and mythology, suggesting that the entire process of imagining and determining meaning is connecting through the way in which we view and think, namely, connected by the human condition. This takes Hume's experiential premise into new ground, suggesting our interpretation of the stories we read and devise have a language of interpretation behind the language of meaning; a semiology of written words.

The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers - Vogler C.

An extension of Propp's methodology and an application of it to other genres of writing, Vogler expounds upon the phases of the narrative and the character archetype ideas of the morphology. Like Campbell and Propp, Vogler creates a frame through which he believes all stories pass. This is useful in allowing us to identify similarities in texts, and is a good reflective tool for criticism.

However, by accepting the premise of the frame being universal and applicable as a formative device, we limit ourselves as storytellers to write stories that fit the frame and as critics to only appreciate the familiarity.

Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories. Booker C.

Hume's common experience theory applied to a narrative structural form. Booker indicates that these familiar stories are conscious/unconscious templates form the basis for all stories told.

Booker's work in defining the elements of these different story types and identifying the qualities prevalent in each, serves to construct a roadmap for different fictional writing agendas. Whilst the initial consideration of there being a limited number of methods to write a story might feel restrictive, the work becomes much more useful when practically applied to the expectations of the reader. If a writer is to approach the story they wished tell with a clear picture of the assumptions a reader may make about the text, then they will have a better idea of how to work with or against those expectations.

Booker's explanations of the seven story types provide an interesting frame of reference. He acknowledges that some stories are hybrids; born out of the fusion of two or more of the seven identified types. Writing a work that crosses between these traditional story forms can

make for something different by comparison to more specific works, however, this can also challenge the expectations of a reader.

Also there is a danger in accepting Booker's structure and working slavishly towards fulfilling its maxims. Audiences change, as do their expectations of the plot in stories they want to read. Whilst Booker uses examples from a variety of historical time periods, highlighting the similarities form, this must be tempered with the progressive nature of writing. Without acknowledgement of the ways in which reader expectation can change, a writer is in danger of simply replicating a formula.

**A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative Structure Especially of the Fantastic –
Christine Brooke-Rose.**

Brooke-Rose makes a study of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1951) and notes the expositional heaviness of his writing, so burdened owing to his wish to explain the different aspects of his fantasy world, coining the term 'megatext'. This is a specific parallel story existing alongside the one being read. This story is the familiar world, the Hume-like impressions connected to the book's narrative and familiarities readers can bring to bear when imagining the scenes in their minds. This also draws directly from Barthes' referential code.

Brooke-Rose's study forms the basis for my own extrapolation of two distinct entities – the megatext and the macrotext. One concept is the subconscious experiential understanding of the genre reader and the components the writer may use to build a world. Brooke-Rose indicates that Tolkien's story is weighed down by the need to introduce the wholly unfamiliar environment of Middle-Earth. But actually, Middle-Earth is very familiar to us and that the 'megatext' as explained in this book, conflates two concepts.

3. Myth

The ways in which writers can employ myth in their work are varied and extensive. My reading and research explored the qualities of existing myth, how myths can be identified in modern writing, how new myth is invented and reflected and finally, how the reader is affected by the use of myth in writing.

Managing Monsters – Warner M.

The Reith lectures from Marina Warner in 1994 deal with modern mythology, looking at how the assumptions and stories of the past have informed our present. This builds on the ideas of Barthes (from *Mythologies*) and applies them to writing, looking at prevailing themes writers might unconsciously reinforce in their texts, particularly with regards to the question of gender and the ways in which we assign it to the monsters of our stories.

Warner's writing takes Barthes further, exploring the connections of different texts in different mediums, demonstrating the message formed from their relationship in an interconnected subtext which relates to the simulacra and simulation hypothesis (Baudrillard: 1981).

From the Beast to the Blonde - Warner M.

The collection of fairy stories put together by Marina Warner in this text are extensive and well-illustrated. Warner goes back to the roots of the stories wherever she can to determine their origin and audience. She determined it was essential to find each story's original context, thereby judging its reception and the ways in which elements changed in the retelling into different contexts.

Warner also identifies the wonder associated with this type of story, the uses of magic and miracle to stimulate the imagination of an audience. The way in which this type of thinking is determined as childlike, or in some way a guilty pleasure is also an interesting cultural comment as this provides a guide for how we view the creativity associated with this kind of diversion.

The exploration of story origins in this book reveals the way in which layers of myth have built upon each other, reinforcing the original legend. The 'Grotta della Sibilla' in the Umbrian mountains being a fascinating example of how centuries of stories playing on superstition create genuine fear.

The Uses of Enchantment - Bruno Bettelheim

Bettelheim identifies the use of fairy tales in providing children with a framework to define their world. Concepts like good and evil or right and wrong are translated to the young through simple stories, allowing them to understand situations they encounter in their lives. This is done by actively seeking to encourage imaginative and associative thinking, with characters that are painted in bright colours, allowing the young reader/viewer to understand abstract concepts. Evil is the Wicked Stepmother, good is the Handsome Prince. There are consequences for wrong actions and in most tales, harmony is restored at the end, unless a specific moral message is being imparted.

In a sense, this is a reversal of Baudrillard's process towards hyperreality and perhaps offers some explanation as to why we find lessons in fiction and fact applicable in the opposite (Baudrillard: 1981).

Fairytale and the Art of Subversion – Jack Zipes

Zipes takes Bettelheim's argument further, suggesting this process is historic socialisation, reinforcing the dominant hegemony across the different societies of Western Europe. The icons of good in popular stories are Princes, Kings, knights and other symbols of nobility and the ruling class, whereas the monsters and villains of many stories are physically twisted and flawed, bearing the marks of their evil on their face and bodies.

As adults, the simplified linear morality of the fairy tale shows us a world we can feel in control of and this is the foundation on which much fantasy is built on. The nostalgia and escapist quality of worlds with tangible icons of good and evil offer us security and an ability to triumph over wrong. This is part of the experiential expectation of the reader/viewer.

Tree and Leaf - Tolkien J.R.R.

Tolkien's academic essays on the subject of writing tend to be focused on the scholarly study of Anglo-Saxon. However, *Tree and Leaf* contains an essay written by him entitled, 'On Fairy Stories', originally published in 1947.

In the text, Tolkien contends that there is a finite well of collective imagination which writers draw from, acting as a funnel to construct stories that their readers will read. He extends this argument to debate the term *mythopoeia* or myth making. Tolkien adopted this as a title to one of his poems, praising the practice as a form of literary and artistic endeavour that is a genre in itself.

This concept of the mythopoeia shares some of the qualities of Christine Brooke-Rose' megatext (Brooke-Rose :1983), particularly the shared experiential consciousness of stories and how these form our images and impressions but it is clear at the time, the methodology of world creation and

It is this principle of constructing layered writing and devising myth through variation of writing tone and language that lies at the heart of my study.

4. Worldbuilding

The differing techniques writers employ to develop the settings for their stories are many and diverse. There are many texts that discuss the differing research work writers will do to encourage a sense memory in their own writing and to write out aspects of their setting before embarking on the story so as to ensure when they do, they write with confidence.

My study of worldbuilding as a process has developed from my own practice and the needs of other writers who might be attached to the same world project. However, in examining the concept, I turned to different texts that would highlight how these methods affect the text, the reader and the writer.

Theogony - Hesiod

Hesiod's work on categorising and structuring the pantheon of Greek Gods is interesting and unusual. The societal demographic of Greece in his lifetime was that of a loose confederation of city states, sharing a culture and heritage, but each autonomous from the others.

Hesiod's work in stratifying the shared religious mythos between each kingdom served to give the religion a structure and shared identity. By defining the quality of the Gods and quantifying their physiology and place, Hesiod gave a unifying face and form that crossed the boundaries of regional loyalty. This coupled together with other transcultural artifices, ensured the Greek people of the classic period had an identity that went beyond their city state loyalty.

To a modern writer, Hesiod's work is interesting to study for its form as well as its content. The poetic verse form is more natural to the period than a prose translation and gives an indication of the primary means of consumption (aural). When coupled with other works, such as Homer's Illiad or Odyssey, Hesiod's work can be considered a frame which other writers might use to ensure their interpretation of particular characters would be acceptable to an audience with a common cultural heritage.

The Lost Scriptures – Ehrman B. D.

This collection of non-canonical New Testament writing provides us with an insight into what did not make the accepted early editions of the Christian Bible. Indeed, the very deliberate process of determining canon and seeing what was rejected in the period between Christ's death and the letter of Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in 367 AD, where the twenty seven volume edition of the bible we know now, is first mentioned, suggests a long conflict over what should be considered 'orthodox' and what was termed 'apocrypha'. The idea of refining

and redefining the accepted text of a story or stories, editing its detail so that particular ideas or elements are omitted to is one that is commonplace, but when determining this based on a communal selection of writing, determining an authorised and unauthorised status to individual works, the matter becomes much more interesting. The legitimisation process and derived authority is one aspect, another is an analysis of how the revisions shape and change the ascription of readers.

There is a modern comparison to draw here when looking at fictional authorisations and the franchised development of fictional worlds. The discernment of a reader when selecting a text based on its perceived canon and the ways in which canon is revised in other mediums.

The King James Bible

Similarly there is a tone and style to canonical religious writing that has become accepted through the ages and been revised in its many different forms. The opening to the King James edition of the Bible in the Book of Genesis is particularly aesthetically strong and it is this that appeals closely to similar work, such as *The Silmarillion* (1979), attempting to establish an origin moment for a fantasy world. This similarity of style is as much about the writer's appeal to memory as the reader's understanding of the intentions behind the aesthetic of the language.

The Divine Comedy – Dante

Dante's work is a detailed example of a writer's creativity applied to the hints given in a religious text. The clues imparted in biblical writers are the starting point for the three books of the Comedy as Dante outlines the parameters of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell. The journey he undertakes at the side of the late classical poet Virgil takes the reader through all the layers of each spiritual realm.

By defining the kingdoms of the Christian religion, systemising their purpose and determining their look and quality, Dante brings vivid imagery to the world described in the Bible. This writing is one piece amongst many that sought to bring form to the Biblical texts it drew inspiration from.

The key in this process is not to contradict the previously published source text, but to enhance it. In this case Dante's tone, style and purpose is different. If it were an emulation, it might be perceived as clear blasphemy, as a mortal writer would be placing his work alongside a religious text.

By creating a systemic rationale for Hell's punishments in the *Inferno*, based on the severity of crimes, Dante's explanation is something the reader can relate to and follow. A good example of this lies in the punishments offered to dead scholars of pre-Christian times, who are doomed to exist in the least of Hell's circles. As we go further, the outlandish punishments depicted are echoes of early descriptions of classic Tartarus, and in many places, the fusion of previous mythologies reflect the fusion of Italian culture.

The *Divine Comedy* offers answers to large questions emerging from religious texts without claiming the same authority. This tradition of using fictional form to offer answers to such inquiry is one began by Plato and followed in many later works of speculative fiction. It is considered an early work of Bangsian Fantasy.

The Silmarillion - Tolkien J.R.R.

Tolkien's response to the interest of his readers in Middle Earth was to write a book that recounted sections of history right back to the very beginning of the world. The choice of this as opposed to writing a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings* (1951), which might have been considered an easier task by some authors. However, Tolkien because had already exhaustively researched the elements of his work and the end of his trilogy was so final, another epic tale of the same quality would dilute the components of the first. The options that remained were to tell smaller stories, or to recount the world context.

The Silmarillion (1979) is held up as an example of a world book – a text designed to give you an understanding of the world in which the stories you may have read - are set. However, such a work has a difficult task in determining its audience, particularly when deciding on its mode of address.

In application, *The Silmarillion* (1979) is not the ideal tool for would be writers wanting to add to Tolkien's world, but it was never intended as an encyclopaedia for others. Instead, it demonstrates the depth of the creator's imagination and diligence, allowing those with interest to find answers to questions they may have asked after reading and reflecting on the text.

As with many authors since, Tolkien looks to provide an answer to the prevalent question of his reader by delving back to the beginning; the point of origin, where all elements of the story begin. In this case, that origin is the creation of the world, as the behind the narrative lies a fundamental conflict between good and evil. The writer's choice to place the origin of

evil, embodied by Melkor (Morgoth) at the beginning of all things, is an understandable one, but this does not have to be the case in all narratives.

The writing style of *The Silmarillion* (1979) invokes older, mythic texts. The opening prose is comparable to in content and style to the biblical creation myth. Later, the tones invoke the imagery of Greek and Norse myth. This comparison has to be intentional as it gives subtextual clues to the reader in how to receive the work. By using a variation of styles, the writer also adds to the perceived depth of the fiction they have constructed.

The Tough Guide to Fantasy Land – Wynne-Jones D.

This is a humorous take on the archetypes, stereotypes and tropes of fantasy. The book recounts the common ways in which writers make use of concepts when writing in the genre. The encyclopediac format is useful as a guide to allow a writer to consider their own use of these concepts in their own work and as a means of understanding reader expectation. It also works to warn would be Fantasy authors about the cliché's and stereotypes they can avoid.

By simply laying out these tropes in this form, Wynne-Jones highlights just how cluttered fantasy has become with baggage from those writing before. The new writer cannot ignore the clutter, because it is through this clutter that the reader will view their new story, this is a vivid and satirical version of the megatext (Brooke-Rose: 1983).

Synthetic Worlds – Castronova E.

This reflection on the culture and society emerging from online gaming in 2005 is an excellent statistical primer. It also looks at the behaviours and habits of people playing massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs). Castronova's background as an economist provides us with a detailed analysis of consumer habits in the most popular online worlds of the time and coupled with an insight into the behaviours of online gamers beyond those encouraged by the game, grants us insight into the immersed mind of the reader/audience/participator. If players of online games are, as Castronova asserts, existing in the real world only so they might continue their meaningful existence in the synthetic one then we are clearly seeing the power of different immersive mediums on the consumer. Coupling this with *Convergence Culture* (2006), particularly the discussion of transmedia storytelling and cross media production of content creates a heady mix of mediums through which we can engage our audience (Jenkins: 2006).

5. Close Analysis

This collection of texts builds from the formative thinking and structural groups, developing new thinking related to what has already been established. In some cases these works build directly on others (Broderick from Brooke-Rose, Derrida from Vogler, Campbell et al) , but in others they are more about focused research into the genre(s) of writing I am electing to work in.

Science Fiction: A Critical Idiom – Roberts A.

An exhaustive attempt to draw together much of the modern thinking on science fiction and the work of disparate contemporary academics, the use of the interchangeable term ‘SF’ (Speculative Fiction or Science Fiction?) makes the work a little confusing at first. However, the chapters give an exhaustively detailed insight into the genre, firstly by definition, then by history and then by critical account.

Roberts draws together the different theoretical assertions of science fiction theorists from the twentieth century, creating a coherent rationale from their collage of assertions. The megatext of Broderick and Brooke-Rose, the Structural Fabulism of Robert Scholes and the nova of Darvo Sukin all feature prominently in his road map to read the genre.

Roberts also offers some insight as to the genre’s origin, highlighting the forgotten speculation fiction of the 1600s and 1700s, which often remains buried, owing to its embarrassing inaccuracies when read in a modern context. This highlights Science Fiction’s constant need to reinvent itself to remain predictive and establishes the difference between this and the nostalgic roots of fantasy. It also identifies the populist root of hybrid forms, such as *Star Wars* (1977).

Reading by Starlight – Broderick D.

Broderick provides an extension of Christine Brooke-Rose’ thinking on the megatext, identifying the ways in which the genre of science fiction constantly strives to use familiarity and redefine it. Writing in 1995, he reinterprets her term, extrapolating her thoughts on the writer inspiring the imagination of the reader and how this imagination takes familiar (experiential) form as David Hume suggests (Hume: 1738).

This clarification of the term and extrapolation of it from world building techniques leaves us room to define them as a different process – the *macrotext*.

Broderick's depiction of genres as being modes to a writer is also a useful way of looking at functions, grouping them in categories of familiarity and application to different reader groups.

Dissemination – Derrida J.

Derrida's thoughts on structuralism and how the frames appear to get in the way of the original purpose of writing are particularly applicable when looking at the discussion of similarities between texts and the experiential state a reader/viewer may approach a new text from. He suggests we elevate patterns creating ideas of purity and simplistic solutions to problems that we encounter. Derrida's idea that we continually elevate phantom ideas of origin, also relates directly to the narrative structural theories of Propp, Vogler and Campbell. However, his writing also counsels us not to assume experience in our audience, thereby differentiated the more complex nuances of the megatext and calling into question the writer's unconscious acceptance that the reader/viewer has expectations of the new text that come from their previous related reading.

Six Memos for the Next Millennium - Calvino I.

Calvino's thoughts on writing are particularly instructive when attempting to establish and refine the form of stories. His discussion on lightness is comparable to Stephen King's explanation of his writing process. Both elevate the story over detailed concerns of exposition and description (King: 2000).

However, Derrida's thoughts on imagination and imaginative process relate directly to my own drawing clear parallels with the referential code (Barthes: 1971) and the megatext (Brooke-Rose: 1983). When connected with the principles of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins: 2006) and a devising process that uses a macrotext, we have no long have a linear process as Calvino suggests, but a continual feedback of visual mediums stimulated textual ones and textual mediums stimulating visual ones.

In his later memos, Calvino also discusses the relationships between objects, the patterning of literary composition and the need for mythological frameworks, all of which relate to the discussions of mythopoeia (Tolkien: 1947), the megatext (Brooke-Rose: 1983) and the need for macrotexts in planning extensive works.

6. Fiction

The works collected here are examples of fiction that demonstrate related technique to my own project. Each has something I have tried to draw from.

The Iliad – Homer

The works of Homer, most notably the Iliad, offer insight on the Greek society of the time, in 710-760 BC. There is some debate over the form of the original text, whether it was intended for reading or to be listened to, owing to the lyrical qualities exhibited in the verse, particularly the repeated description phrases applied to the characters.

The key elements of Homer's work that we can draw into the structure are the practical examples of epic writing and how this reflected the demands of the audience at the time. The episodic structure is particularly useful in conveying a multiplicity of viewpoints (Aristotle: 1895). The extended lineages included in the text, reflect the Greek obsession with their forefathers and tracing their lineage back into the Mycenaean period. There are also core principles of nobility and honour outlined in this writing, which define a code of aspirational values.

Of more interest is the way Homer handles characters on both sides of the conflict. Whilst his writing generally favours the Greek victory, his method of using viewpoint and the way in which he treats characters that would be considered adversaries, as honourable men, serves to highlight the message gained by reading or listening to the work.

The Early History of Rome - Livy.

Livy's text blends a historically based narrative with the accepted legends of Rome's founding at the time of its writing. The way in which the evidentially based account is connected directly to the mythological is an interesting example of how factual work can be used to lend authenticity to more a speculative narrative.

Livy's work begins with the unsubstantiated, moving forward in time towards the periods which he has records for. By contrast, many modern Science Fiction works use elements of factual history as origin points for their speculative narrative that examines a possible future.

The tone of the work gradually strengthens as the narrative moves forward on a stronger foundation, with the earliest mythological parts having a similar tone to religious writing, much like the opening of *The Silmarillion* (1979).

The Chronicles of Narnia - Lewis C. S.

Lewis' most popular works are well known for their allegorical Christian subtext. They conform to the ideas on being stories of social conformity (Zipes: 1991) through set pieces of moral preaching in the simplified world of Narnia. They also contain an explicit use of portals between worlds, which is an interesting narrative function to create identification.

Portals from the real world allow a writer of fantasy to create characters with familiar life contexts to the reader, thereby increasing the initial empathy and identification. By placing these characters in a fantasy world, the reader can follow a character that is similarly a fish out of water as they are, and is discovering the new world along with them.

The set of seven books are written, for the most part, from the perspective of the child characters who have journeyed to Narnia from our world, thereby better enabling the identified moral lessons Lewis wishes to promote. However, *The Horse and his Boy* (1954) and some sections of the other works are told from the perspective of natives to Narnia and its surrounding territories. This indicates greater substance to the devised worlds, beyond the individual imaginings of its journeying characters.

Lewis was not as much of a proponent of mythopoeia as Tolkien, but there are elusive individual stories woven behind the novels. The 'Wood between Worlds; visited by Digory and Polly implies there might be countless realities to explore. The character of Jadis in *The Magician's Nephew* (1955), who becomes the White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), is linked by many to the Lady of the Green Kirtle who features in *The Silver Chair* (1953). This in turn, engages the reader's speculation as to what further stories might exist in Narnia.

A Game of Thrones - Martin. G.R.R.

The assertion of the way an epic should be structured (Aristotle: 1895) is evident in the patchwork narrative structure of writing employed by George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* series.

The writing method he employs is to complete long linear narratives for each character and then 'chop up', creating an episodic experience for the reader that sees our perspective travelling thousands of miles across the fantasy world of Westeros to each different viewpoint every chapter.

The effect of this is interesting to assess. Initially, the constantly changing context can be jarring, but it is clear the author has thought about the habits of his reader. When you start a

narrative, you know you are only a short distance from a change, so if you want to know what happens to a particular character, you are never far away from their individual story.

The works also demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the reader's expectations. Central characters are not safe from the predations and plans of their rivals. Some who are presented as villains gradually become more sympathetic as others we might identify with make bad decisions and expose their flaws in the passage of the text. Martin's touch is most evident in steering the reader's anticipation, drawing assumptions to their expected precipice and then choosing an alternative conclusion. Characters fail and die when you think they will live and succeed. Decisions and consequence play out with surprising results.

This study of character reaches past what might be seen in an analysis of Sophocles (Aristotle: 1895). By allowing the weaknesses of characters to develop later and rationalising the choices they fuel, the reader is less likely to notice and finds surprise in the twists of the narrative.

Martin uses execution, betrayal and imprisonment to make his reader reflect on their own predeterminations of what should happen. These nadir moments are high risk for a writer; they can make a reader put the book down. The writer's intention to do this is given straight away in the prologue. Characters die in the prologue after significant time and wordage has been given to introduce and explain them.

Collected Works - Tolkien J. R. R.

Tolkien's work is a blue print for a quest based story, whilst the layered background of Middle-Earth devised for his work is vivid enough to be considered another character. Only a selection of this background is interlaced in the text and expanded upon in the appendices of the main book trilogy, but this was enough for Christine Brooke-Rose' to coin the term 'megatext' when referring to the book's expositional weight and its familiarity/unfamiliarity.

It is the understanding of this term in a contemporary writing context and the differentiation of it from world creation techniques that forms a central part of my thesis.

Further writing can be found in *The Silmarillion* (1979) and the collected notebooks published after his death by his son Christopher. Much of this is more experimental and provides more evidence of the ways in which Tolkien had different ergodic purposes for the elements he devised.

Tolkien's academic background as a linguist led him to devise a vast collection of additional writing that supported the main story he chose to tell. The epic quality, as defined by

Aristotle, is reinforced by the myriad of smaller stories, previous time periods and other work added to the whole presentation. Tolkien's exploration goes further than Aristotle might have anticipated by constructing an array of writing in different styles appropriate to the presentation of different information.

Tolkien's use of flawed characters within his stories also bears inspection. Gollum's role is pivotal in the Lord of the Rings. The redeemable qualities of his doomed character allow us to pity him along with Gandalf, Frodo and Sam. Whereas Boromir's betrayal of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), highlights the power of the main plot device (the ring) in the work and shines a present narrative light on the previous betrayals outlined in the historical text. Similarly, Gollum's distant evolutionary relationship to Frodo, as a Stoor (earlier Hobbit-like creature) gives a deeper rationale for the virtuous resistance exhibited by these creatures to the ring's effects. Interestingly, the seeds for much of this characterisation were established only in later editions of the Hobbit. The earliest published versions did not contain as much detail on Gollum.

It is also interesting to examine the posthumously published collections of Tolkien's work. These give a clear indication of how he refined his writing and rejected some parts of his original ideas over a long period of worldbuilding development. *The Unfinished Tales* (1980) in particular offers a flipped perspective account of the main War of the Ring narrative, giving an indication of what the enemy knew at each stage of the story. This account directly influenced my work in devising the Walden Writings addition to my novel *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014).

The Broken Sword – Anderson P.

Published in the same decade as Tolkien's epic work, this lesser known text is written in a tone that harkens back to the classic myths it draws inspiration from. Anderson weaves his story of Scafloc and his doppelganger into a backdrop of western myth and legend in such a way that you might believe it to be a retelling of a story written in the same period. This is a clear and strong example of a writer flavouring his work toward the reader's experiential subconscious.

Many writers attempt to reinvent mythology and succeed to a greater or lesser degree. Often the successful works demonstrate how the writer invoking the ancient has preserved the essence of the message as understood by a modern audience. The less successful work too hard to shape and change what they have decided to use, making a reader who may have previous knowledge of the mythology wonder why they elected to add to the legend.

Anderson's writing doesn't take this approach. Instead, he uses existing mythology as a supporting cast to his invented story. Weaving his tail in amongst the characters of Irish and Norse myth. This, coupled with his meticulous writing style, makes the work more appropriate to take its place beside the sagas. The ancient is preserved in Anderson's work, nothing is denied from it, making it a diligent study of style and form.

American Gods – Gaiman N.

The transposition of classic mythology into a modern context, interlaced with a rationalised explanation of what Gods are and what constitutes worship in a contemporary age gives *American Gods* (2001) significant literary weight above the punch of its story. Gaiman has blended murder mystery, travel fiction and fantasy into a mix. The ideas behind his new form of religion and worship allow a reinvention of old forms and provide interesting answers to many theological questions. Where do Old Gods go when no-one worships them? What constitutes worship? etc...

As with most of Gaiman's work, *American Gods* (2001) asks you to look again at the things you consider familiar. The story rejects many of the common tropes of fantasy, reaching back behind them to draw myth and legend into a story of highways, computers, and abandoned fun fairs. The juxtaposition creates an unusual and unsettled hybrid story, with enough woven and unsolved mystery to allow the reader room to speculate on its ramifications.

This is a use of ritual, deep historical world legends, philosophy and modern writing techniques to make a reader ask questions and be intrigued. Big questions are asked and answered. The subconscious expectation of the reader is used and taken to a new place, leaving the imagination stirred and speculating.

Selected Works – Asimov I.

Isaac Asimov's first published novel begins in with a 1950s scientist conducting experiments which cause him to be transported forwards in time to a point thousands of years in Earth's future.

The mechanics of this plot premise (scientific basis, novum, defamiliarised context) are now determined as classic tropes of the genre. Asimov's use of advanced scientific rationales in his work, based on his previous career as a physicist, aid the structure and plausibility of his writing when taking imaginative leaps into the futuristic technology and artifice that he uses in his stories. This coupled with a his use of deductive reasoning between characters and a

meticulousness in ensuring his novums remain limited in their scope, makes his stories seem the more real and compelling.

Asimov's popularity and mastery of pseudoscience in the way he blends science fiction with real knowledge of the time meant he actively contributed to the reader consciousness and shaped it. He translated theories into plausible plots and these in turn, became scientific rationales, defining our expectations of how robots behave, how they work, what words we use to describe their components, etc.

Asimov also sketched out the context of this fictional future in his first book *Pebble in the Sky* and elected to fill in the gaps between this and the original context of the story in the 1950s with every subsequent science fiction book he wrote. This fictional guide to our future was self referentially allegorised with the concept of Hari Seldon's *psychohistory* a form of science that uses equations to predict the future, thus the writer's plan is symbolised by the characters ideas (Asimov: 1951).

Asimov's *Foundation* series and *Robot* series are his more well-known writings. But each is linked and each in turn linked back to the other individual works and short stories he wrote. On occasion, characters from previous works are referenced as children's tales or legends, in the case of Doctor Susan Calvin, a main character in his short story works, appearing in *Paradoxical Escape*, first published in 1945. She is later to be referenced in *The Robots of Dawn*, published in 1983, and even transcends Asimov's works, to be mentioned in Arthur C. Clarke's 3001 AD, and David Wingrove's *The Immortals of Science Fiction* (1980).

The way in which all of Asimov's works are interwoven with a plot of truly astounding size, namely the way in which intelligence will populate the universe, demonstrates the immense vision of the man and his capacity to establish story in his work on a number of levels. In the majority of cases in his narratives, intelligence, logic and scientific rationale win out. His future societies create a hierarchy of social class based on the intelligentsia and even when confronted with an anomaly (The Mule), the guardians of psychohistory have still thought out a solution.

In *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) I looked at Asimov's premise of benevolent intelligence as a social hierarchy and decided to try to create a counter point. What if the most intelligent person in the story was the adversary? What if he couldn't be outwitted and was only defeated by chance, or his own failure to predict an outcome? What if his intelligence was used to create privilege and inequality in the guise of progress and liberation?

X-Wing: Rogue Squadron - Stackpole M. A.

The first computer game tie in novel from the Star Wars franchise, Stackpole's descriptions attempted to capture the playing experience of X-Wing the computer game produced by Lucas Arts, which in turn was trying to capture the depicted experience of the Star Wars films.

The use of peripheral film franchise characters (Wedge Antilles) also serves to strengthen the connection of the work to other outputs in the franchise, plus there was the confirmed existence of a macrotext at the time, known as the holocron. This reference guide was added to by each author commissioned to write a story.

7. Specific Fiction

The works included in this section are the published documents set in the Frontier/Elite universe. These are included in chronological order up to the new media being produced with the new game,

The Dark Wheel – Holdstock R.

The original story included in the release of Elite in 1984, Holdstock played several test versions of the computer game whilst he was writing the novella and so was able to make the reading experience a very close approximation of the game experience. Many of the technological novums that feature in the story were not possible to replicate in the game experience, but these have served as good starting points for the design of the sequels and content in the new fiction. Particular examples would be the 'remlok' – a survival mask that keeps people alive in space and the name 'Firstfall' applied to the main continent on the planet Lave.

Imprint - Redman A.

Imprint was a novella written by Andy Redman and included with Elite Plus, released for the PC in 1991. Unlike previous (and subsequent) fiction releases, it was not produced in its own book in the box but formed part of the Elite Plus manual.

Imprint takes some liberties with the established fiction in the Dark Wheel and in the computer game, mentioning more than one Lave Station (there is only one in all games) for example. Where these elements were asserted and didn't fit, they were altered to suit.

Imprint makes first mention of 'Ashoria' as the planetary capital of Lave and names it as a headquarters for the Pilots' Federation registry. This is alluded to in my work.

Stories of Life on the Frontier – Massey D, Sheehan M, Dickinson K.

A short story collection included in *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993), the stories cover the shift in focus of the computer game towards a realistic depiction of our galaxy, but also continue the themes of individual stories set against a vast galactic background. The introduction of major factions (Empire and Federation) and corporations in these stories is linked to elements in the game and the atmosphere of a binary Cold War is established. This is a theme that is continued in all the current fiction.

The Fiercest Creature on Altair (1993) features a character by the name of Colonel Maxwell Griddley, as a celebrity big game hunter. This character is referred to as a holoivid personality in my novel *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014).

The Frontier Gazetteer – Frontier Developments

Included with the game *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993), this document sets out the brief background of the Frontier/Elite universe in A.D. 3200 and was the starting point for the expanded background documents written for all the official fiction authors. The historical timeline and planetary information entries are quoted in the appendices.

The character 'Hans Walden', the 'Lavian Tree Grub' and the presence of rainforests on the planet all came from this text.

Further Stories of Life on the Frontier – Various

This collection, packaged with *Frontier: First Encounters* (1995) introduces the Alliance as a third faction in the fiction and is reflected in the game. Some of the stories do build on the themes of the previous fiction and game background, but a few do not appear to be set in the Frontier/Elite Universe. Those that are begin around the same time as the game in A.D. 3250.

The Alliance faction is a key theme in my new book as ultimately, Lave joins this interstellar faction. The events depicted in the story collection that are set in the Frontier/Elite universe are very relevant to my work as my novel is set only fifteen years later.

Frontier First Encounters Journals – Frontier Developments

As part of the 1995 computer game, a series of news articles from a variety of journals were produced which the player can read as they travel in the game. These are dated and cover five years of galactic events up to A.D. 3255, offering different factional opinions on the larger Cold War plot that the player finds themselves involved in.

The journal articles provided several key themes, notably those of a plague outbreak, which was never explained in the fiction of the time. I made use of this in *Elite: Lave Revolution*, providing an explanation and plot hook. They also provided a narrative starting point for all of the game and fiction design for the new project.

Elite: Dangerous – Frontier Developments

The 'canon leader' of the new fiction release, the development and publication of the game in December 2014 sets the visual inspiration for much of the fiction written by myself and the other authors.

Prior to this, much of the source material devised in the macrotext fiction guides was used as a base to design much of the game. This is particularly true of ship designs, planetary information, equipment etc.

Access to the test builds since December 2013 has helped guide the description of particular scenes in my novel, most notably any aspect of flying a ship in space as this is the main gaming experience.

However, the game also has ongoing news articles, which are opportunities to incorporate the fiction further into the developing narrative that the players are experiencing. This also helps in smoothing out narrative inconsistencies, as does an ongoing dialogue with the game producer.

Elite Dangerous Fiction - Wagar, D. Russell, K. Harper, J. James, T. Deas, G. Defoe, G, Spurrier, S & Various.

The nature of a macrotext is that it must remain mutable and consider the precedents set by the published work around it. This collection of official tie in novels establish many narratives in the Frontier/Elite Universe and as such the guide material must be revised to accommodate what has been written and read.

More specifically, a character tie in between *Elite: Reclamation* (2014) by Drew Wagar and my work *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) was a nice touch that enabled careful readers to uncover a new layer of the narrative. With my work set thirty five years before his, we were able to chart the rise of Proctor Cuthrick Delaney from humble origins to his pivotal role in the later work.

8. Writing Guidance

The following texts were ones that offered advice related more directly to the development of *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014), but some also touches on elements that were useful in developing the shared guidance material as well.

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft - King S.

Stephen King's work is unusual by comparison to other writing guidance texts. The first half is mostly a recount of his own experience trying to make his way in the world as a writer. This narrative is interspersed with some insight on writing and has some appeal to those who might be interested in the autobiographical nature of the story.

However, the second half of King's book is a very specific guide to his method. We are given a concrete recount of his writing method, with a particular focus on how he has injected symbolism and recurring themes into some of his edited work. Rather than sections discussing other texts and deconstructing their methods, King focuses on his own work and how he is able to layer meaning through the editing process, leaving hints and thematic messages in the redraft once he has the bones of the story written. The result is a deeply personal guide from the writer in how he writes. This process is particularly useful when applied to collaborative writing. If two pieces of fiction are being written by different authors that share a devised fictional environment, looking at ways of linking things during the edit, means the writers can concentrate on getting the story down first and then revising. It is this craft approach that we can relate to as writers, learning from his method and determining which parts of it will enhance our own.

Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction – Tuttle L.

An eminently practical writing guide, Tuttle discusses all aspects of writing Science Fiction and Fantasy with clear examples from practising writers. We have a collection of techniques introduced, explained, exemplified and evaluated for our use. It is to this end I primarily make use of her work, as a checklist of expected functions and tools.

As a practitioner, Tuttle's views on structural theory are also insightful and connect her perspective with my own and that of other scholars looking at these ideas from a critical standpoint.

Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide - Jenkins H.

Jenkins chapter on transmedia storytelling explains the use and application of the term in modern fictional works, most notably *Star Wars* (1977), the constructed mythology around *The Matrix* (1999) and the fan inspired contributions to the Harry Potter franchise.

Jenkins discusses the related stories and content created alongside the central work and the ways in which this content amplifies the narrative. When devised as a package to be released before or alongside the main narrative text, these can serve to direct consumers towards the text, or where there isn't a central text, to encourage interest in the portfolio of fiction written in the devised world.

The focus in Jenkins' text is on the ways in which different mediums are utilised, thereby making the story *transmedia* in form and how this content relates, creating a convergent experience for the consumer.

The focus of my work is to look at the way in which structures can be developed to create linked work and how best to encourage creativity within a shared world context. The examples and analysis provided by Jenkins serves to highlight the effect of this collaborative approach and the way in which it can invoke consumers, encouraging them to participate. There is a tension here, between the commercial ownership of intellectual property and the perceived ownership/identification of the consumer empowered to create within the fiction presented. Control becomes the central issue as creative participation rarely conforms to established frames.

Cybertext—Perspectives on Ergodic Literature – Aarseth E. J.

Aarseth's assertion of a body of literature that requires more than minimal/traditional means of engagement is in some ways reminiscent of codes and cyphers, but also could be applied to the application of multiple methods of engagement within one text. This variation of address and purpose, or even decision to include content that is not immediately connected to the story generates a different response from the reader/viewer. It may require active engagement to decrypt, which in turn generates a different relationship between the reader/viewer and the story.

Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses Devils and Demons - Lurker M.

The text is a reference list of the above title, categorised alphabetically and indexed by topic of worship or affiliation. Lurker's compilation crosses all manner of religions, mythologies and

superstitions, providing an interesting basis for any would be writer looking to devise fantasy that draws inspiration from real world ideology or religion.

Many writers of modern fantasy look to re-interpret older mythology, drawing themes from the past into a new present context and allowing that juxtaposition to play out.

Wizardry and Wild Romance - Moorcock M.

Moorcock comments on a wide cross section of fantasy works in this text, looking at writing style and the nature of story. His views are forthright and unashamedly biased towards his preferences which he outlines in the introduction.

However, the sheer weight of referenced material in this work is impressive. The themes drawn out by this reading collage demonstrate clearly the ways in which Fantasy writing has drawn inspiration from his forebears throughout the ages.

Moorcock is at great pains to define fantasy with clear boundaries that others might dispute. Once he has, however, he begins a careful and patient analysis of several examples of writing in the genre. His assertion that the basic components of a fantasy story have endured throughout the ages offers a comparable argument to Booker's and Propp's structures. However, Moorcock is less interested in a systemic approach, but more interested in providing thoroughly analyses examples of his identified themes.

Moorcock turns to the texts themselves, quoting large passages and comparing them with the detailed analysis only a practising craftsman can offer. By reading comparative passages against each other, his arguments are given weight and illustrated.

This examination of tone and its usage by different writers is detailed and critically sharp. The style similarities between different texts with wholly different aims (Milne and Tolkien for example) demonstrates how such writing styles can be used for different means and how they are accepted by the reader as a familiar approach, thereby drawing them into a cathartic escape.

Chapter 9: Published and Presented Papers

The following articles are papers I have written and submitted to academic journals as part of this research. Each is included for your interest and covers a different aspect of the project.

Developing Elite: Dangerous by Allen Stroud

Origins

At the start of November 2012, David Braben and his company Frontier Developments launched a crowd source campaign to fund the creation and release of a new videogame set in the Elite/Frontier Universe. This is *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) and after a successful campaign, it was released in late 2014.

Working with publishers was for me, not a brilliant experience and for me it would have been hard to get the game made, until recently, and so Kickstarter has changed that.

D. Braben. 'Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview', Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> [accessed 9th April 2015]

Crowd source funding for projects is not a new innovation. However, the rise of internet companies offering platforms to launch pitches for projects is a more recent development. Some examples are, *Indiegogo*, *Wefund* and *Crowdfunder*, with *Kickstarter* as the most popular. Crowd funding remains the fringe, operating as a hybrid between consumer purchase and micro investment. There are few guarantees beyond trust in the organiser and there is a difficulty for both the organiser and backer in determining how much influence they have in the development choices associated with the project.

Running a crowd funding project is an experience in elation and humility. Every pledge is an exciting and incredibly humbling moment. You think constantly about how much faith people are putting in you and the creative work you are proposing to make.

My involvement with *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) began when I saw the Kickstarter listing on the day it started. I cast my mind back to my experiences of *Elite* (1984) and *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993). I played the games for hours. They were an escape, a way to throw myself into another world that allowed me to imagine what it might be like out there. The sandbox environment left me room to create my own stories and let my imagination run wild. In late 2012, I followed the crowdfunding campaign through its last days, pledging my support and finding I was not alone. Thousands of fans had come aboard and were sharing their experiences of the previous games. The last days were halcyon as we could all see the project would be successful.

One of the offered 'rewards' from the project was to write a piece of official fiction set in the game universe. A diverse collection of writers, both experienced and inexperienced had

backed sufficiently to achieve these rewards, myself amongst them, with a plane to write and publish *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014).

When the dust had settled, I contacted Frontier Developments and offered my services. My Masters in Research at the University of Bedfordshire in 2008 had involved the design of worlds in fantasy and science fiction. I thought I might be able to help the company sketch out information for the writers so they could create fiction that would be consistent with the game environment. The company in the shape of Michael Brookes, Andrew Gillett, John Laws and David Braben accepted my offer of assistance.

Worldbuilding

It is often asserted that 'Fantasy'. A particular brand of fantastic fiction that became a publishing industry in the wake of the success of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, and 'Science Fiction', a brand of fantastic fiction invented or re-invented, in the USA in the technophile 1920s, have little in common. The Middle-Earth-type fantasy is anti-machines, it inhabits an imaginary past of the human race rather than an imaginary future (though this 'past' may be set in some neo-medieval phase a thousand years ahead of us); it dwells on human relationships, the human condition, metaphysical or moral problems. Science fiction is pro-technology, always set in the future, rationally extrapolating from our present, and favours hard scientific exposition above human interest. In theory this may be so. In real life it can be difficult from outsiders, even insiders, to tell the difference between the two sub-genres, or separate their audiences. But one thing science fiction and fantasy certainly have in common is the imaginary world, a world that must be furnished with landscape, climate, cosmology, flora and fauna, human or otherwise self-aware population, culture and dialogue.

Jones, G. *Deconstructing the Starships*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), page 11.

There are many great world-makers in fiction; writers whose imagined realities are as much a character in their work as the characters themselves. In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments, whereas before, it was often inspired by earlier works.

For example, the Greek writer Hesiod, attempted to define the composition and origins of the Hellenistic pantheon. His work was complicated by existing stories, so his macrotext had to be constructed to include them. In *Theogony* (1966)¹³ we have an early creation myth that

¹³ Believed to be first produced in 700BC (approx.).

attempts to capture and define the Gods of classical Achaea. The disparate nature of Greek society, sharing parts of their religion and culture between city state kingdoms, made for a fractured interpretation of the different aspects of their dogma. Hesiod attempts to knit these fractures together and, by using a creation myth, determines an absolute beginning, or *point of origin*, for all subsequent writing.

In addition to this, Hesiod describes each of his defined pantheon, bringing us an image of those he includes. This is relevant for the choice of who is present and who is not.

The *point of origin* is a practical concept when attempting to construct a macrotext. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance; the *point of departure*.



Formatively, many world creators begin this journey through questions, constructing a scattershot blueprint of their world, before framing it. In this process, the questions asked are just as important as the answers given, as these frame the design. The resultant document is a '42', in reference to Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1978); a collation of importance aspects. However, unless this process is employed exhaustively, these remain a starting point of notes, expanding on the original inspiration behind the writing idea. In the example above, the separation of this material may exist only as Lewis' writing notes and these would inform his own work, as is the case with many writing projects still.

In the case of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) the established canon of the game lay in its prequels. *Elite* (1984), *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993) and *Frontier: First Encounters* (1995). Game manuals, Gazetteers and short story anthologies formed a body of published fiction that was difficult to obtain. In addition, *First Encounters* (1995) had an in game news feed, full of ongoing news events and stories and a map of hundreds of star systems, all with government types and

differing trade and industry bases, much of this procedurally generated, but with a check system that maintained consistency between each player's version of the game.

The first game, *Elite* (1984) was distributed by Acornsoft, for the BBC Microcomputer and later for a variety of other platforms. The original version was squeezed onto 22K and loaded via cassette or floppy disk. It was the most popular videogame of the 1980s and was one of the first true sandbox game experiences available. Co-creators, David Braben and Ian Bell had constructed a set of eight galaxies with two hundred and fifty six star systems in each. However, these were procedurally generated, making them almost identical in look. The system names were allocated from a database, none of which resembled names given to actual star systems, making the whole experience a fantasy.

The game release came with a manual containing some fictional references and a novella, *The Dark Wheel* (1984) by the late Robert Holdstock.

In *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993), the galaxy was remodelled. A small selection of fictional systems from before were retained (these were the systems the player had started on in the previous game), but the rest were taken from astronomical star charts. The Sol system and Earth made their first appearances and the minimal backstory of the previous release was upgraded and connected to our own time period. For the first time, we had a galactic date that referenced our own time. *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993) was set in AD 3200 and the game box came with a manual, gazetteer, and collection of short stories.

Between us, we assembled copies of these publications. I set to work on the one that had the nearest approximation to a timeline, the gazetteer from *Frontier: Elite 2*, released with the game in 1993. This established the backgrounds of several systems and gave us a thin timeline, listing notable events that had occurred between 1993 and 3200.

Mindful of my task, to produce working background material for the game and for the fiction projects to be produced alongside it, I set about writing a more detailed historical account. I took my cue from the style of the manual, and used the tone of a history text, narrating events. Where a major event was mentioned, I examined it, looked for other references assembling all information before adding character and context to give it flavour, all the while tracking every addition I had made. I recalled history books I'd read when I was younger. The ones where characters popped out of the pages were always more memorable. I remained conscious all work that I did was conceptual. Frontier Developments would take my ideas and decide what should be used and what should be rejected, but by having someone provide an

initial blueprint, they could pick and choose. These draft guidebooks became the first incarnation of our *macrotext*.

The macrotext is the guide for a specific fictional world, the frame work through which a large project of multiple outputs can be devised. It is a structured document, enabling the development of expressions that fit the fictional world, but the elements of structure are drawn together for their function, not because of a pre-determined pattern in the narrative. The macrotext, is termed by some as a canon, or plot bible, but both terms don't really encapsulate its purpose. A world canon might include previously published work and is difficult to alter as it has been exposed to an audience. A 'plot bible' encompasses only plot. The macrotext is formative and evolves along with its outputs, aspiring to be everything required to be known about a world. The expressions enjoy a formative relationship with this catalogue so as to maintain consistency with all other work produced in the same fictional space.

The macrotext is not a new phenomenon, but is a planned construct. In the past macrotexts have been developed to incorporate existing works into a larger canon. In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments. The benefit for the writer is that this larger canvas allows for a great deal of the problems of consistency and plausibility to be worked out before starting the story and/or involving others. The mutable nature of the document also encourages change and evaluation. Rather than seeing our labour as a lonely quest, we collaborate with other specialists, each accessing the macrotext to co-ordinate our efforts. It is changed as we develop new work, but in turn helps that new work find form.

What separates the macrotext from the previously defined concepts is its exclusivity within the devised world and its altered priority. The macrotext is a form of *ergodic literature*, as defined by Espen J. Aarseth, in that it is a text that that requires more than non-trivial effort to read (Aarseth: 1997). It is encoded to inspire other outputs which are released to a mass audience. The encoding of the work is not necessarily overt. The document may evolve and change based on the outputs it generates, but it tries to act as a bridge between each, maintaining their consistency. This temporal state is in itself a form of encoding as those accessing it cannot assume its permanence. Access to it, indicates intention to produce a further work. It exists between output forms and can inspire all sorts of different work, ensuring each connects and reinforces the other, creating a new form of mythopoeiac self-referentiality. It is here that transmedia storytelling finds its guide in examples like the world of *The Matrix* (1999), or *Star Wars* (1977) and more. The macrotext defines what exists and

what cannot exist. It provides mutable rules in a fictitious world of make believe. It is a hyperreal construction or artefact and as such, obeys Baudrillard's assertion of taking primacy from reality (Baudrillard: 1981), which it may draw themes from. There is a dichotomy in that it tries to represent a new reality, but can never be as detailed as our own perception of reality, which in itself is a hyperreal construction.

For the modern writer, a relationship with older stories and speculations can prove fruitful when attempting to step beyond the cathartic experience of a contained work and project depth. Connecting to established myth suggests a deeper, partially obscured layer to the story at hand.

Playing with the familiar and offering new explanations for it is a practice that allows both a relatable context and new creativity. When written carefully so as not to detract from other stories that may use similar themes, the work can also enhance them.

Within this developmental process, some participants arrived to develop their novels, others to determine source material for the game *Elite: Dangerous* (2014). In the new franchise release accompanying the computer game there are eleven current official novels, with a roleplaying game to follow. There was a legacy of older works which needed to find a home in the new revised background and by ensuring they fit, this creates another appeal to the audience who may have played or read them.

To date, the following outputs have been devised and published as part of the project:

Elite: Wanted (2014) – G. Deas

Elite: Docking is Difficult (2014) – G. Defoe

Elite: Nemorensis (2014) – S. Spurrier

Elite: Reclamation (2014) – D. Wagar

Elite: Lave Revolution (2014) – A. Stroud

Mostly Harmless (2014) – K. Russell

Tales from the Frontier (2014) – by Various

And here the Wheel (2014) – J. Harper

Out of the Darkness (2014) – T. James

Elite: Dangerous (2014) – Frontier Developments

Elite Legacy (2015) – M. Brookes

Elite Encounters: The Roleplaying Game (2015) – D. Hughes

With such a large body of work being produced in the same setting, by so many different writers and designers, the detail and consistency of background becomes a priority to preserve the connected qualities of each artefact, so that the consumer can see them as a whole fictional entity.

Writing guidance for this body of work meant producing material that could inspire. The majority of writers already had ideas as to what stories they were going to tell, but often these stories were based on their own experiences of the Elite franchise and would have to be made compatible with the new game. Throughout the process, the fiction writers had access to a private forum to ask specific questions of Frontier Developments about particular aspects of the game and how it would be implemented, so as to make their stories as close to the game experience as possible. Final judgements on difficult questions would be given by Michael Brookes the executive producer of the game, in consultation with the rest of the Frontier Developments team.

In the case of *Elite Dangerous* (2014), with the multitude of fiction projects, this consultancy of questions remained ongoing as writers queried elements of the design that had either not yet been determined, or were not thought of.

Many world creators begin this journey through questions, constructing a scattershot blueprint of their world, before framing it. In this process, the questions asked are just as important as the answers given, as these frame the design. The resultant document is a '42', in reference to the late Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1978); a collation of importance aspects. However, unless this process is employed exhaustively, these remain a starting point of notes, expanding on the original inspiration behind the writing idea.

My own work on creating transmedia narratives is through collaboration; creating outputs and guides for groups working on a particular fiction. I have worked on guides for the factions and corporations, timelines '42's and '101's, which are a concise document of what common knowledge people in a specific context might have. This has informed writers and helped produce stories that relate a familiar experience between outputs.

The World's Creator

Many fictional worlds have architects. These individuals are often the originators, who maintain a vested interest in how the world is shaped. Sometimes their view is informed by legacy, sometimes by their own vision.

The parameters afforded to a writer, working by negotiation in a world devised by someone else, are challenging. The opportunity and access, has to be weighed against the restriction of not having the final say over what is or is not permissible within that world. In the case of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014), the architect and originator of the project is David Braben.

When *Elite* was first conceived, it was the freedom Ian and I wanted ... it was the openness, the ability to do what you like, to be a bounty hunter, to be trader ...

D. Braben. 'Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview', Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3>
[accessed 9th April 2015]

This process of writing or drawing in the fictional world of another person is a tricky balance. The architect wishes to maintain their vision and it can be difficult to reconcile where something is improved. Similarly, the other creatives involved can only put down what they have managed to envision from the text already given. Traditionally, whilst the architect remains alive, their word on what is right or wrong remains sacrosanct. No one would argue with J.K. Rowling, or with George Lucas. However, in the latter example, we have interesting new ground, where the architect has sold the rights to his creation.

This method of working is not new. Throughout the ages artists have taken commissions from clients to produce creative works. The architect can be thought of as a wealthy patrician commissioning a sculpture for his Roman villa. Ultimately it is the patrician who must live with the sculpture, not the artist who made it.

However, in many mediums, this example is less relevant. When writing information for an online videogame, the interpretation of the architect, the writer, the design team, the programmers and finally, the consumer themselves, comes into play. When this process is multiplied to involve ten, twenty, or thirty different fictional works all written by different fictional writers, it becomes a wild ride indeed. Granted, consultation is of a high priority to this process, but, ultimately, someone must make decisions. As a writer involved, whether you agree or not, the architect has the right to make those decisions and you must trust that they are making them with the best of intentions for the wider fictional context.

Developing Background and Form

As we worked, the new game premise emerged. The factions of the *Elite*/Frontier universe, the Duval Empire, the Federation and the Alliance of Independent systems (*Frontier: First Encounters*: 1995). The major corporations, Sirius, Mastopolos Mining, etc (*Frontier*: 1993).

The majority of these entities were drawn together from the previous game publications, their back-stories updated to fit into the new game context and published in a series of guides released on the private writer's forum. By using the previous lore as a starting point, we would reach out to knowledgeable players of the franchise and by determining the function of each component in the new game we would make it feel plausible.

David Braben outlined a reversed design principle behind certain science fiction concepts in the game. For example, the use of hyperspace; with a wish to model the galaxy as accurately as possible through procedural generation, the distances involved in the game universe would be vast. To navigate them, the contrivance of hyperspace is essential, as is a fast travel in-system drive. So, Frontier looked at the design based on what they wanted the game to be able to do, compared to what was scientifically possible and then introduced technical nova to bridge the gap between the two.

In the Elite series of games if you like there's one big lie, that's hyperspace.

Unfortunately, we need that, to make the world work.

D. Braben. 'Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview', Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> [accessed 9th April 2015]

Some discussions arose around the use (or not use) of accepted Science Fiction nova. The contrivance of artificial gravity was a particularly difficult topic. *Elite* (1984) and the games after it, featured rotational space stations. These formed an integral part of the game experience, as every player had to learn how to dock, matching their ship to a rotating letterbox entrance. This rite of passage was incredibly important and needed to be mastered to you could by docking computers.

The reason for the rotation was explained in the space station's need to generate gravity. However, a great deal of the official fiction, written and published in the game boxes, ignored the concept and had pilots merrily walking around their spaceships whilst tearing through the star systems.

For me, rotational space stations are an essential game aesthetic. They set the Elite/Frontier universe apart from other popular Science Fiction. Docking your spaceship with this moving structure was a seminal rite of passage in the old games and a requirement in the new instalment.

However when this information was released to the wider backer community, forum

comments suggested many people seem to have difficulty in accepting a rationale of 'no artificial gravity' in all of the fiction. This novum (Suvin: 1979) has been used in many science fiction works, so it feels familiar. If we don't use it, but use a different one, this appears to jar. In the new written fiction accompanying the videogame *Elite: Dangerous* (2014), a concerted effort has been made to ensure the media operate with the same science fiction mechanics. Spaceships no longer have artificial gravity, unless rotation is implemented.

The difficulty people have with accepting an alternative contrivance, demonstrates the way in which we subconsciously build images of the writing we read, basing much from the text, but also from previous imaginings of other similar texts. When a writer goes against the accepted trope, it interferes with the previous frames the reader has built their imaginings from.

Christine Brooke-Rose in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (1983) introduces the megatext. This is expanded and refined by Damien Broderick in *Reading by Starlight* (1995). When examining the collected writing of the genre, Broderick identifies the conceptualising of future worlds as a comparative burden to the new writer (Broderick: 1995). The speculations of each fiction, authored by different individuals are consumed by an appreciative audience, but the rationales of pseudoscience used, create expectations of convenience for new writers, as readers imagine their worlds through the contrivances of the other science fiction they have read.

Brooke-Rose's original premise identified megatext-like qualities in Tolkien, but the purpose and construction of Tolkien's work is different. Broderick discusses Tolkien and identifies the widely different application of his mythology through the frame of the megatext, concluding that it doesn't apply as neatly as other Science Fiction examples, which build from the familiar into the unfamiliar.

So its function is radically unlike that of any 'realist' megatext. Since the megatext is not "already known", it cannot fulfil the readability requirement, but on the contrary, produces a pseudo-exoticism, much of which can be savoured simply as such, rather than tactically understood.

Broderick D, *Reading by Starlight*. (London: Routledge, 1995), page 59.

In essence, this is where the practical concerns of world construction and communication differ between the two genres. The techniques of fantasy are more overt, often building escapist realms that focus on the developed miasma and myth already in the mind of the reader. The connection with the real is less about possible futures and more about catharsis.

In the case of *Elite Dangerous* (2014), the material developed by me came from the parameters of mythopoeia outlined by Tolkien, rather than concerns for scientific accuracy, but this agenda was much more in the minds of David Braben and Frontier Developments.

I think the world has to feel believable. There are a lot of things that are part of that. Having the science right is probably for me, the top priority.

D. Braben. *Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview*, Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> [accessed 9th April 2015]

We found these two approaches are not incompatible. The mythopoeic approach brought themes from the older works, creating layers of meaning for the consumer to investigate.

Robert Holdstock's *The Dark Wheel* (1984) introduced several concepts and colloquialisms, some of which appeared in the original game *Elite* (1984), but others were beyond the technology of the time. The remlok for example:

It was a standard survival device, an instantly recognisable distress call indicating that it was being sent out from a small, remotely located, dying body. The alarm screeched out on forty channels, shifting wavelength within each channel four times a second. One hundred and twenty chances to catch attention ... (Holdstock, R.)

The remlok is a novum used in Holdstock's story as an emergency EVA device. *Elite* (1984) didn't have game play that included this, but the development of the fictional background and new parameters of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) meant it was an ideal component to be included. The remlok became a staple of the new fiction, activated in the game when the pilot's cockpit screen was broken and even appears as a corporation name in the space station hangar. The remlok serves a function and is a familiar pseudoscientific convenience for the consumer. In the mythopoeia, the name 'remlok', its spelling and expanded backstory from Holdstock's paragraph to a corporation specialising in life saving EVA equipment, links the new texts (game and written fiction) back to the original works.

A general consciousness of Fantasy and Science Fiction has emerged amongst readers and writers of the genre. This consciousness is quite discerning, in that it won't liken space adventures to sword and sorcery quests with magical rings, but there is still an element of comparing imagined experience. A difference between the two genres lies in the interpretation of this consciousness. In Fantasy it is more often seen as a support, in Science Fiction, it can be supportive or critical, often depending on how predictive or escapist the

writer is attempting to be. Where the text veers towards space opera and escapism, it is usually clear the writer is not claiming any prophetic ground and the level of engagement changes. When based in science, and extemporising, the invented technology is examined in greater detail.

It is up to the individual writer how they use this consciousness, but in the modern context of 21st century writing, this consciousness exists and often the reader will already have an image or interpretation of how something should work.

If the writer elects to provide a different interpretation of the same idea, then they have to confront the reader's assumptions weigh the value of going against them; we are trying to find our own voice in a crowded inter-dimensional set of realities without disenfranchising the reader during their experience of our text. When you take into account that we are likely to have many readers and their relative reading experience will be almost infinitely diverse, it's a tough journey to map without making mistakes.

That said the requirements of divergent medium forms within a specific franchise can create complications without guidance. In this case, the need for gameplay to incorporate expectations of fun as well as ideas of legacy and accuracy converge.

A spaceship would be silent, but X-Wing fighters aren't really spaceships, they're Spitfires and P 51s.

Roberts, A. *Science Fiction: A Critical Idiom* 2nd Edition. (London: Routledge, 2006), page 27.

There is a tension in this approach, notably in the way nostalgia permeates a particular brand of populist science fiction, rather than prioritising the future thinking and rationalised visions. *Star Wars* (1977) is often cited as an example of this owing to the composition of its scenes.

Elite Dangerous (2014) takes the same cue, eschewing Newtonian theories of how motion in space works and taking a lead from what makes a fun experience playing a computer game, this is dogfighting inspired by World War II, noise in space and nebulas visible amidst the vast blanket of stars. These tropes are part of a particular brand of science fiction, the space opera and are something the novels must reflect to remain part of the same fictional world in the mind of the reader.

In the case of a videogame tie-in, much of the visual imagery can be drawn by the reader from their game experience. This establishes the videogame as the 'canon leader' - a product which defines how all the other products will be experienced.

The remediation of themes from the old in this way provides a familiarity of theme and control, particularly when applied to a videogame, which relies on the re-interpretation of familiar control methods when providing the game experience. There is also a different evolution of purpose. Videogames are a diversion, played for entertainment and popular interest. The writers and players of games are less interested in future prediction and the exploration of the human condition, but this might be a consequence of its youth as a past-time. The genre of the game is also applied in a different way, encompassing type of play as well as the prevalence of themes.

Videogames can be understood as collections of visual and aural codes designed to illicit a response from the player. These might include the use of colour coding, arrows and targets directing the player's movement, lights illuminating areas to be moved towards, or the monstrous growls of enemies, distinguishing them from more harmless characters. These are amongst the visual and aural codes of the videogame. Successful playing involves reading these cues correctly and responding accordingly in order to meaningfully engage with the game text: to achieve a high score, to vanquish the enemy, to progress to the next level.

Players are free to ignore, misinterpret or defy these videogame cues. But the existence of such formal systems of signification points to the way games structure the seemingly unstructured interactive gaming experience. In this respect we may think of the videogame text as having a preferred playing, a version of the preferred reading which usefully incorporates a high score table. Kirkland E. *Restless Dreams in Silent Hill: Approaches to Videogame Analysis*,

Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association 2005,

<http://www.meccsa.org.uk/pdfs/meccsa-ampe-1-papers/MeCCSA-AMPE-Jan05-Kirkland.pdf>

The nature of an interactive medium is such that the consumer must participate in the experience in an active way to shape the narrative, transforming from reader to player and occasionally back again. The illusions of control in this regard are well documented; there are few games that offer a truly open environment to the player, those that do, often favour an impersonality, letting the player shape the character of their in game participant or 'Avatar'.

This 'sandbox' idea offers the greatest illusion of choice owing to its lack of enforced linear path and multiple methods of keeping score. The only weakness is when a player hits the edge and the immersive qualities break down.

In the case of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014), the sandbox offered is a procedurally generated Milky Way galaxy; a vast number of space stations, planets and other features to explore and visit, potentially more than any one person could visit in their life time. This the incredible scale of this game environment pushes the walls of the sandbox back as far as they could be pushed. It does however create another weakness, namely the need to populate this vast arena with content. Much can be done with procedural coding, but to prevent repetition and add to the flavour of what is constructed, the work of writers in the fiction can be incorporated, tying the worlds, characters and contexts into the player's experience of the game.

The construction of different outputs in different mediums finds benefit in a concise brief on what other outputs are covering. This consistency can be essential when the release of these outputs is to be co-ordinated and there is no breathing room.

The absence of a macrotext for a world being used in a collaborative work makes the task of a writer choosing to create a new story more difficult. Reading all previous work set in the fiction world is a given requirement, but concise summaries pick out bits you may miss and help with a longer involved project, such as a novel.

The Role of Fans

In *Convergence Culture* (2005) Henry Jenkins discusses the power of fans to shape a media franchise. From *Spoiling Survivor* to Heather Lawver and the *Daily Prophet*, we have many examples of how enthusiastic fans have applied their creativity to their chosen passion, writing fiction (fic), making films and continuing stories.

The Elite/Frontier community is an invoked fanbase called to support a franchise via crowdsource funding and then involved in the construction of the videogame and its fiction. From the start, the pledge reward tiers offered gave clues as to how the supporters would be able to assist and influence the game's design and through the development process we have seen this realised. The Design Decision Forum has allowed Frontier Developments' staff to propose their thoughts on aspects of the game and the fans to comment and suggest changes. The most significant of these being proposal for in-system travel, changing from a series of waypoints to a 'frameshift' drive that allows players to explore the systems they are visiting.

With the writer's pack pledge offered as a backer reward for the game in the crowdfunding drive, many would-be authors ran crowdfunding campaigns themselves to raise the funds to afford it. These in turn, found ways to involve the fans, offering additional material, early access and character names as rewards to contributors.

From the point of view of Frontier Developments, this level of fan engagement serves a dual purpose. In one sense, the level of critical engagement provides a ready-made means test. In a second, it provides a marketing amplifier as the engaged backers, are predetermined to want the game to succeed. This coupled with an open attitude to posting test game footage online and embracing fan created content, establishes a positive community acting predominantly to assist in the game's success.

The involvement of fans in the process of game and fiction development has not always been smooth. The posting of initial design proposals led to hundreds of comments in reply, all expressing different preferences for the game's themes. Gradually, as time has gone on, this has settled down and the various forums assigned to pledge tiers now act as evaluation areas, with some occasional feature suggestion requests.

However, the role of the writer specifically in the project has been to enrich and provide a story (or stories) that give a route for people electing to play the game, to come up with their own narratives and imaginings attached to their gameplay.

You immerse yourself in the world more so than you actually care what the characters are doing.

Braben, D. *Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview, Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014*, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> (accessed 9th April 2015)

At face value, this appears to prioritise the function of stories as vehicles to draw the reader into the wider game experience and in part, undermine the nuance of the texts themselves. However, as Gwyneth Jones points out:

A typical science fiction novel has little space for deep and studied characterisation, not because writers lack the skill (though they may) but because in the final analysis the characters are not people, they are pieces of equipment. They have no free will or independent existence; to attempt to perpetuate such illusions is hopeless. The same reductive effect is at work on the plot, where naked, artless ur-scenarios of quest, death, desire are openly displayed; and on the position of the author. And when I

mention the demotion of the author I am not, or not only referring to the curious relationship between sf fandom and the sf writer. The self that speaks through the—literally—experimental narrative of sf is only contingently individual. What it speaks through its stock figures is not a privileged, arbitrary artistic experience, but something that can be tested and rejected: true in this set of circumstances, false otherwise.

Jones, G. *Deconstructing the Starships*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), page 11.

When considering the view that the mode or form of the text type prioritises characters as a function towards viewing the imagined world of the writer, or in this case, the writer, the other writers, the designers and ultimately, the world architect, then the genre lends itself to this collaborative and supportive approach. In the example of a videogame where the player's position is that of a spaceship pilot, operating the controls through a first person view, the emphasis is placed on the reader/user experience and the way in which their own story in the game echoes that of other characters in the fiction.

In 2007, I wrote a master's thesis outlining the concepts of macroplot and microplot. A macroplot in fiction is a plot that has world changing consequences (i.e. epic quality). A microplot, one that involves personal change to the characters involved. It is often by blending these two elements by the writer that we identify what we would determine as the fantasy genre. The difficulty with the use of macroplot is that on occasion it can become unworkable, particularly if the writer loses the character's sense of grounding in the world that they inhabit. Whilst for the most part a reader will accept that a writer chooses to write about particular characters because of their interesting lives, without a sense of empathic reality to the immediate concerns of their situation, the interest of the reader can be lost. For example, Frodo would not have been as identified with by the reader if Tolkien had not spent a great deal of time establishing the context of the life that he lived before being drawn into the quest of the ring and explaining the consequences for him by continuing. This empathy is continually reinforced in the plot of the story as Sam's dialogue is often used to remind Frodo of home, and relates their experiences directly to the cultural environment that they came from (Tolkien: 1954).

In *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) the supportive fiction projects become microplots to the macroplot of the game world itself. They mirror the role of the player, who also is a microplot contributor to this vast macro game environment of a procedurally generated Milky Way

galaxy. The writers can use this perspective, allying their characters with the experience the player will get in the game, thereby invoking specific imaginings.

In the accompanying fiction, writers interpreted this in different ways. Some inspired by the vast expanse of the promised playing field, others looking to the histories of factions or corporations and personifying them in the scheming machinations of their characters.

In the past, The Elite/Frontier fictional universe was one without many human characters. The role of the player and viewpoint in the game came from 'Commander Jameson', the name that appeared when you first loaded the game, and that you could delete to input your own name.

Through Holdstock, we were introduced to Alex Ryder, Rafe Zetter and Elyssia Fields (Holdstock 1984). We learned of Raxxla, a mysterious term believed to be associated with the Dark Wheel order. In the Elite game manuals, we were given maps and detailed charts informing us of just how good our Cobra Mark III was by comparison to other ships we would meet in the game. There were data charts for each star system, giving us information on the planetary inhabitants living out their lives below us as we docked and traded at the space station.

In the subsequent games, mankind found this shifted fictional universe much lonelier and darker, despite its blue skies. Nevertheless, more names appeared: Hengist Duval, Meredith Argent and Cmdr J. Saunders to name but a few.

The Tie-in Novel

My own project, *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) began later than some others, owing to my work on the guidebooks. It is set on Lave, the planet players began their experience with Elite on back in 1984, and tells the story of how the system went from being a Dictatorship in the previous games to being a democracy in the new game.

Owing to my work on the guide material and relationship with the fans of the previous games, I elected to tell a story that would showcase some of the lore developed for the game. By choosing a start point of AD 3265, my story could narrate events leading up to the game, starting in AD 3300 and complement it. It would also act as a bridge to the previous game, *Frontier First Encounters* (1995) set in AD 3250. Lave's position in the first game (*Elite* in 1984) had been one of power and focus. By the second and third games it was a backwater. The novel gave me an opportunity to tell the story of why this happened in the past and how it would change in the future.

From the moment that the trading ship, Avalonia, slipped its orbital berth above the planet Lave, and began to manoeuvre for the hyperspace jump point, its measureable life-span, and that of one of its two-man crew, was exactly eighteen minutes.

Holdstock, R. *The Dark Wheel* (Cambridge: Acornsoft, Cambridge. 1984), page 1.

This is the opening to Holdstock's story, the very first paragraph of the first chapter. It mentions the planet Lave, the same planet players began the original game from. Elements like this still mean a great deal to those who remember the games from their childhood and by preserving them and referring to them wherever possible, the entire project maintains its legacy. There are many examples where this occurs and often, writers drawn to the project are basing their ideas on the memorable elements they recalled from their own experience.

Mindful of the primary focus being the forthcoming game, I had no wish to tell too large a narrative, thereby drawing away attention, so the story of one planet's decline under a dictator, named in the Gazetteer accompanying *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993) seemed like a good choice.

As a writer, my work involved invoking the imagination of my reader. This is a writer's greatest ally and the exploration of any book is a silent partnership between both parties. Granted, as Philip Pullman states, the writer dictates the story (Pullman: 2008), but the reader creates the scenes in their mind. Finding ways to encourage this is essential, particularly balancing the image the reader gains with the one you have in your own mind. It was a source of great relief to me when, many years ago, I realised I don't have to make the two images the same, just similar enough for the story to work.

In writing a novel with a tie in to a videogame, the reader is likely to be a fan of the other elements of the franchise, or be introduced to the franchise through your work (which is quite a responsibility). If they are previous fans and arrive at your text from the game or other material, then the imaginations of some scenes covered by the same content, in this case the flying of spaceships, will be drawn from their experience of the game material. The writer, Michael A. Stackpole wrote the X-Wing series of novels, beginning with *X-Wing: Rogue Squadron* (1996). These were a tie in to *Star Wars* (1977) and the *X-Wing* (1993) videogame, produced by Lucas Arts. Stackpole's spaceship combat scenes invoked the atmosphere of the films and described elements that clearly drew on his experience of the videogame franchise. In a sense, this close allegiance is an intentional mesh of the megatext and to a point, insulates the fiction project from the criticisms applied to other work in the genre or rather, makes the criticisms only valid to the franchise itself. Unless given an unusual remit, the story

must make use of the same contrivances and pseudoscience utilised by the other texts that are part of the project.

The guidebook resources and source material provided a means for me to tie in all sorts of things from the older games; small references to locations, companies, indigenous life forms, etc. Within the context of my portion of the game environment, establishing elements for the other writers and developing content for my own story, provides a sprinkling of detail on a large canvas, but also informs the procedural generated content.

I like writing background, history, and concordance information that can be attached to a fictional story. It is this additional information that can give a story a sense of size. A multitude of viewpoints in a novel can prevent the writer and the reader from connecting with a character or characters. If the story perspective is diversified too much, we lose the microplot of the individual. We can also lose the emotional connection with an individual character's plight.

However, when additional material is organised into an appendix or other equivalent section, we learn as readers to set this aside if we are more interested in the fictional story itself. Sometimes as readers, we come back to these appendices, looking for more information when the story is done. This is a well-trodden path famously employed by Tolkien in *The Return of the King* (1955), although, the forms used there are different to those that may come naturally to science fiction. Journalist articles, historical accounts, police reports, email messages; each are remediated forms from a modern context, but contemporary enough to be used and adapted into a future context when de-familiarised with some stylistic tweaks. Also, changes in perspective, maintaining a connection to characters within the story gives opportunity for further layering, as do coded messages and a missing chapter.

The finished result is a microcosm of the design principles outlined for the new game and fiction. *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) is a layered text, telling the story of individuals leading to an event (the planetary revolution). The additional material closing chapters and in the appendices then provide new perspectives and embellishments on that material.

Having completed the book, it is my intention to continue the story with Frontier Developments. An ongoing news feed in *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) provides an opportunity to link in new stories and seed new story information. Additionally, I left some loose ends in my work for the game to make use of as plot lines in the videogame. The conclusion leaves room for another tale of Lave, set before the game begins in AD 3300.

This paper was submitted to *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* in April 2014 for the computer games special edition to be published in December 2014. Owing to editor illness this issue was cancelled. The paper has been revised into this current form and resubmitted in April 2015 for a May 2015 publication.

The Myth Misunderstanding

How to make stories linger...

In June 2014, Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier, two twelve year old girls from the Milwaukee suburb of Waukesha, Wisconsin, lured a classmate into woods and stabbed her eighteen times. When questioned, Geyser and Weier told police they read about the fictional character 'Slender Man' on a website wiki known as Creepypasta (<http://www.creepypasta.com>), where scary stories are submitted by users.

The origin of the Slender Man dates back to 2009, when it first appeared in a photoshop contest on the Something Awful Forums (<http://forums.somethingawful.com>). Eric Knudsen altered an image of a group of children at camp to include a mysterious humanlike creature looking over them. The creature was quickly named and other images followed, playing on the idea of observation. Each time the addition changed the tone of the picture, giving it a sinister quality.

In July 2012, a free to download first person mini-game called 'Slender: The Eight Pages' appeared on the internet. Written in Unity, it pitched the player into darkened woodland, with a torch, looking for pieces of paper. Each use of the torch attracted the Slender Man and when the player looked at him, they started to die. The personification element along with the sound ambience and established legend made for a visceral and chilling, but wholly bloodless experience.

The website crashed multiple times owing to the number of downloads. Since then, multiple sequels have been created by other programmers and a plethora of fiction has appeared across many websites. The Slender Man is the ultimate in mythic monsters; a character engineered by creative democracy appearing everywhere someone has the inclination to place him. A myth built on the classic phenomenon of spirit photography popularised by William Mumler back in the 1860s.

Whilst the circumstances of Geyser and Weier's criminal behaviour are deplorable, their connection to the Slender Man myth can be likened to a whole lineage of incidents. Irving Lee 'Bink' Pulling's suicide after allegedly playing Dungeons and Dragons in 1982, Martin Denham's suicide after watching Ghostwatch in 1992 and the James Bulger murder in 1993 after his killers John Venables and Robert Thompson were allegedly influenced by watching the 18 rated film, Child's Play 3.

The examples demonstrate the enduring qualities of mythmaking. The popular perception of myth revolves around the ideas of the ancient and forgotten. A mythology is a collection of myths and indeed these ancient tales are collections along a theme. Readers think of the ancient Greeks, Romans or Norse, for example, which are all strong groups of writing dealing with all manner of human and godlike behaviour.

When examining the meaning of myth, mythology and the mythologising process, we find a great deal more of interest to a writer who is attempting to make their story memorable.

Myth permeates all writing, whether through conscious intent of the writer or not. Joseph Campbell's work *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) outlines the principles of the monomyth; the idea that mythology is all pervasive, that humanity looks for meaning and symbolism in all things.

It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation.

Campbell J. *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (California: 3rd Edition New World Library, 2012), page 1.

Although less prosaic in his assertion, influential French writer, Roland Barthes agrees:

Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.

Barthes R. *Mythologies* (London: Paladin Books, 1972), page 109.

Barthes and Campbell share the view that popular myths have evolved through time, reflecting the changing nature of perceived reality and truth to which society has had to adjust. We empathise and sympathise through familiar forms, though each perception and identification of the familiar is coloured by our individual experience and cultural context. This cloak is a common garb that may be worn by the story to draw the reader in. When used in this way it can deliver a cathartic escape. The cares and passions of the story protagonist are felt keenly by the reader when they at first seem similar, but then take on a rationalised path of their own.

There is an opportunity for the writer in this to tap into the mind of the reader audience and make use of their imagination to support their own work. The conceptual images that set out a story's initial premise are often related to the reader's own context, particularly when defining character attributes or circumstances.

It is the mark of the timelessness of a story when the relatable context can change depending upon the readers own experience. Many tales retain their original quality when this resonance remains poignant, but others are reinvented to emphasise the new cultural context in which they are being received.

For the modern writer, a relationship with older stories and speculations can prove fruitful when attempting to step beyond the cathartic experience of a contained work. Connecting to established myth suggests a deeper, partially obscured layer to the story at hand. Playing with the familiar and offering new explanations for it is a practice that allows both a relatable context and new creativity. When written carefully so as not to detract from other stories that may use similar themes, the work can also enhance them.

This process of writing supportive fiction is a longstanding tradition at odds with our modern concepts of intellectual property. The characters of popular stories drew an audience, so the creation of new narratives for them by a storyteller in any context seems a natural choice. In a less global society, such appropriation remained locally limited. There were few Hesiods or Brothers Grimm walking the world to collect up variations. Stories remained fluid, their changes designed to appeal to each differing audience. Yet, as the world grows smaller to us, so the myths collate and become rigid.

For example, the legend around vampires has existed in literature since the late 19th century (and arguably earlier). The vampire in modern stories comes with a lexicon of baggage (crosses, stakes, garlic, coffins, fangs, can't go out in daylight, etc.). When using the archetype, a writer can assume they their reader is approaching the text with knowledge of vampires derived from other stories. They will imagine scenes and characters based on what they already experienced in other works. The writer can use these assumptions or challenge them. In some cases, the use provides a framework to the story, in other cases, a limitation. A challenge can provoke interest and confront the reader assumptions.

Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I can't get used to it, though I've been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glistening like crystal.

S. Meyer. *Twilight* (New York City: Little, Brown and Co. 2005), page 228.

Stephanie Meyer's decision to make her vampires sparkle in sunlight goes against the established lore of previous vampire novels by other authors. It provoked conflict amongst readers of this fiction, some defended her work and her decisions, others rallied against her, even fellow vampire aficionado Anne Rice commented that her characters, 'Lestat and Louie feel sorry for vampires that sparkle in the sun' (A. Rice

<https://www.facebook.com/anнерicefanpage/posts/10150436358660452>)

But why? The vampire is a fictitious creature, why does a redefinition matter? Perhaps because it interferes with the established image in the mind of the reader. The idea of a different image, where the story is decoupled from other similar fiction and the vampire is different to such an extent that it denies the place of other stories in its world, forces the reader to reassess the story on its own terms. In some cases when this happens, the illusion of depth constructed by making the story supportive is cast aside, leaving a weaker tale standing awkwardly on frail legs. Perhaps this might be ignored when dealing with location or circumstance, but the specific differences in character weakness and physiology in the example above is for some, a contrivance too far.

Nevertheless, the argument alone makes the story memorable. Granted, others may cite the testimonial prose, or the clarity of identifiable character constructed in the text, relating back to the point on identification and empathy, but these are a matter of craft. The divergence from established lore is an obvious conscious choice, forcing the reader to make a similar decision in their acceptance.

Another means by which a writer can make use of myth is by invention. This can be initially through establishing ideas that the reader can relate to that are shaped in the text to leave an impression long after the story has concluded, or by pure invention of the loose end that will remain.

If you look in the mirror and you say his name five times, he'll appear behind you breathing down your neck.

B. Rose, C. Barker. *Candyman*. (California: Tri Star Pictures, 1992).

Dad, do you think there's people on other planets?

I don't know, Sparks. But I guess I'd say if it is just us... seems like an awful waste of space.

R. Zemeckis. *Contact*. (California: Warner Bros, 1997)

'I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy of the Big People, as they call us. They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off.'

Tolkien J. R. R. *The Hobbit* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975), page 14.

Constructions like this encourage speculation in the mind of the reader. They make you look around the corner for Hobbits, stare into mirrors and say names, or gaze up at the sky and wonder. They entice readers toward additional stories. Unanswered questions or missing details when carefully balanced, let the tale continue on, but if they are not balanced, they can frustrate.

The obvious examples here lie in cliff-hangers and setups for sequel writing, yet these have a clear purpose. The television series, *Lost* drew a massive audience owing to its open fictional premise and feel, coupled with a supernatural conundrum. It learned the lesson of *Twin Peaks*, maintaining an accessible narrative along with accessible characters, whose stories were told in a patchwork of perspective and flashback. The propensity of speculative episode endings and enigmas defined patterns of behaviour. The audience spent a great deal of time watching episodes and came away speculating over what they'd learned. It seemed on every level that any time you got close to getting an answer for something, that answer raised two more questions.

Lost engaged the imagination of its audience through the speculation. The Internet became an outlet, with *Lostpedia* (<http://lostpedia.wikia.com>) providing one dumping ground for theories. J. J. Abrams' production team encouraged this further by launching spurious websites that contained more information, but this wasn't just expanding the narrative. Clues and Easter eggs abounded, creating hierarchies of audience privilege. If you knew more, your theories and speculation might be nearer to the truth.

Of course all this fevered possibility wasn't what everyone wanted. After a while, the habitual questioning became tiresome and frustrating. If you ask people 'Have you watched *Lost*?' your next question was usually, 'When did you stop?' Any television series advertising a new

season with the slogan 'the answers are coming', must be aware of how frustrated audience had become.

This is the essence of speculative fiction. Science Fiction lends itself to speculation on the future as this is part of its functional mode. Fantasy is often a pure escape and can draw inspiration from past forms and brings us systemised magic, where unexplained feats and miracles are rationalised into a talent or skill, which becomes an aspiration for the reader to acquire. Horror can amplify fears and mysteries of the unexplained and seeking to involve us in its outcome.

All three genres use the reality of the reader as an anchor in part and it is this blurring that can sharpen the poignancy of mythologised components in the text. The idea that the new fiction offers an explanation for old ideas, large questions or familiar themes becomes part of its attraction. Of these, Fantasy is the most diverting, Science Fiction the most rationalised and Horror the most remembered.

Returning to the example of Slender Man, we find ourselves presented with a question on this particular version of mythologising. If myth is all pervasive as Campbell and Barthes suggest, are we not all influenced by the stories we are told when we are young?

For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouses curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; helping to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him.

Bettelheim, B. *The Uses of Enchantment*. (London: Penguin Books, 1976), page 5.

Bettelheim's comments on fairy tales can be ascribed to the speculative genres as they actively seek to encourage imagination, albeit with different agendas. The 'solutions' assertion though suggests a rounded and wholesome outcome that helps the young define their world. There are many historic examples of stories where this was not the case. The boastful Miller of Rumpelstiltskin never received punishment, the Little Mermaid died of a broken heart, Heracles killed his children and Medusa was punished for being raped. Each tale finds a new audience with different cultural experience as it is passed on and where the story is altered its meaning is also changed.

In the case of Slender Man, the world definitions of Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier are connected to their reading in some way we may never learn and in turn, the mythology of the subject takes on new meaning to its audience through the associated events. The story will linger, whatever our moral judgment over its connection to the attack or otherwise. The fact that it lingers, demonstrates a lasting achievement. Although it for each of us to determine how much value we place in this legacy.

This paper was presented at the University of Winchester's Creative Writing Conference 'Make Every Word Hurt' in July 2014. It was submitted to the British Fantasy Society Journal in March 2014 and accepted for Issue 14.

From the Megatext to the Macrotext

As a theorist and writer, Professor Christine Brooke-Rose was experimental and a proponent of the essentiality of the text, looking at omission to demonstrate meaning in language. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic* (1983), she introduces us to the *megatext* (page 42); a blueprint-like concept where the world values of a book are explained .

Brooke-Rose begins her study of this with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1951). She acknowledges the popularity and effect of the work as a preeminent fantasy quest and examines it from a structuralist viewpoint, breaking down the components into likened elements; the quest narrative itself being a common trope as are the defined roles of characters as plot functions or representation functions demonstrating the unity of peoples in opposition to Middle-Earth's villain.

Brooke-Rose builds her argument from the work of Roland Barthes and his referential code (Barthes: 1971). This is a study in familiarity as the narrative uses our own knowledge and experience of parallel works as a backdrop to its story. The sedentary life experience generated is recognised by us and used as an anchor for the narrative. It is the shared conceptual memory of related forms to the story being told.

It is in *the appeal to memory* (Barthes: 1971) that we find a starting point to the concept of the megatext, although not perhaps as Brooke-Rose intended at the time she wrote her book. Initially she uses the term to describe the expositional back story that is woven into Tolkien's work.

The Lord of the Rings] like SF but more so, is particularly interesting in that there is such a megatext, not pre-existent but entirely invented, yet treated with the utmost seriousness and in great detail, thus destroying the element of recognition and hence readability which this feature provides in the realistic novel and causing on the contrary a plethora of information and the collapse of the referential code...

C. Brooke-Rose. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), page 243.

The conclusion of this analysis is difficult to digest when other critics have drawn comparisons of the Shire, to the pre-industrialised agricultural idylls of England and likened the Dead Marshes to the battlefields of the First World War.

Apart from the 'hypertrophic' redundancy in the in the text itself, the recapitulations and repetitions, there are long appendices, not only on the history and genealogy but on the language of elves, dwarves, wizards and other powers, together with their philological development, appendices which though ostensibly given to create belief in the 'reality' of these societies, in fact and even frankly playfully reflect the author's private professional interest in this particular slice of knowledge, rather than narrative necessity, since all of the examples of runic and other messages inside the narrative are both given in the original and translated. Nor are the histories and genealogies in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies, whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish.

C. Brooke-Rose. [Rhetoric, page 247].

The 'hypotrophic redundancy' of Lord of the Rings is a common criticism. The prose is thick and littered with self-referentiality for a reason which Brooke-Rose describes as 'infantile happiness'. Her argument is that this is because of the author's 'professional interest' and she infers that it has no purpose. However, this jams together many things under one criticism and does not really examine their function or effect (Brooke-Rose: 1983).

Writing in *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, author Michael Moorcock, calls Tolkien's descriptive style 'Epic Pooh' showing a comparison to A. A. Milne.

The sort of prose most often identified with "high" fantasy is the prose of the nursery room. It is a lullaby, it is meant to soothe and console. It is mouth-music. It is frequently enjoyed not for its tensions but for its lack of tensions. It coddles, it makes friends with you; it tells you comforting lies. It is soft.

Moorcock, M. *Wizardry and Wild Romance*. (London: Monkey Brain Books, 2004), page 123.

Moorcock's criticism focuses on the familiarity of Tolkien's descriptive writing, suggesting it is an evocation of children's stories and the simplified world of the fairy tale. This is a wholly familiar world to us and is a clear *appeal to memory* (Barthes: 1971) which in part, contradicts Brooke-Rose's assertion of a collapsed referential code (Brooke-Rose: 1983). However, there is an expositional weight as she suggests, to seemingly define many of the story concepts.

Brooke-Rose indicates Tolkien's megatext is wholly unique to the author's invention, but this does not appear to be the case. To suggest Tolkien's work doesn't use the familiar and generate recognition is denying many of its themes; the homely pre-industrialised echo of the

Shire, the Anglo-Celtic resonance of the Rohrimm¹⁴ and the good/evil binary of characters. Granted, Tolkien does reinvent contexts, but Middle Earth is made familiar by so many of its aspects, not least its name. Much as some are not in the immediate mind of the reader/viewer they are as much a part of the background story memory as any other work of fiction, but are applied to the adopted form.

In Tolkien's hands, the Elf takes on a new image from its Norse origins with invented language and image transposed into a new mythology. Our own language is also accidentally re-written with the word "Dwarves" becoming an accepted plural form. In Middle-Earth, we have many familiar tropes retranslated into a new fantasy world, although not completely.

'I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy of the Big People, as they call us. They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off.'

Tolkien J. R. R. *The Hobbit* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975.), page 14.

This quote is one of very few that through authorial voice anchors Tolkien's texts to our world and is often overlooked as it cuts against the accepted thinking of the work as being purely escapist. In fact, the escape is a journey rather than immediate choice and if there is a unique parallel story, we are gradually led towards it, or away from what we accept and know.

For Brooke-Rose to suggest redundancy in the writing is to imply there is no purpose to the additions of appendices and expository reference. It is true the additional material is not essential, but it still has a function. The weave within the story narrative is primarily designed to project depth. Tolkien builds layers, using invented terminology so that you might want to learn more and through the appendices, inviting you to do so. There is no essentiality here and that indeed is part of the attraction, instead there is intrigue, curiosity and empowerment. Readers may choose to engage on a number of levels, with the most enthused, delving into the depths of the final book's additions and moving on to *The Silmarillion* (1979) for more invented mythological context. By layering the narrative of the

¹⁴ *Lord of the Rings*. J. R. R. Tolkien (1954)

work, Tolkien creates layers of engagement and as an unintended by-product, creates layers of community (through knowledge) amongst fans.

Writing at the time, Tolkien and the other Barrovian Society members were looking to produce new kinds of mythic narrative. *Lord of the Rings* is a wholly English perspective legend, drawing on his Anglo-Saxon academic work. In producing a story collected with so many additional documents, this entity emerges as a feast for the reader who can follow its quest and then delve into the history, imagining further tales and adventures that might emerge from this world.

In his essay, *On Fairy-Stories* (1939), Tolkien outlines the concept of *mythopoeia*, the invention of fictional mythology attached to fictional writing. In a way this is a similar concept to Brooke-Rose' megatext and some of the same writing can be seen as examples of it. For Tolkien the intention is to provide depth and create self-referentiality within the text. Characters discuss the fictitious history and counsel against repeating the same mistakes; a fragment of old lore is found, learned or rejected etc. This suggests a very clear intention behind the inclusion of this extra material and the burdens of the narrative. It appeals to the reader by being illusive and suggestive rather than completely exhaustive, encouraging speculation and lingering thought on the story. The found fragment of old lore implies more may have been written, etc.

The decades since *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) saw an explosion of stories drawing on the archetypes established in Tolkien's work. Initially these were derivatives and of variable quality, as publishers sought a second Middle-Earth for purely commercial reasons, but this didn't stop them being bought and being read. Fans absorbed these lesser worlds through a frame of the first. The descriptions of Elves in Middle-Earth fill in the gaps of Shannara (T. Brooks: 1979), Midkemia (R. E. Feist: 1982) and Krynn (M. Weis, T. Hickman: 1984) to name only a few. In a sense, this grounded the new forms and made what Brooke-Rose considered "hypotrophically redundant" in intention the new archetype for a growing community of readers. It becomes a part of the megatext of Fantasy; an elusive evolving language of familiarity that connects the genre writer to the genre fans. A dragon in any fantasy story will be pictured by the reader through the frame of their experience of other stories containing dragons and from Tolkien, this will be Smaug or Glaurung (Tolkien: 1937, 1977). Likewise, in Science Fiction, the laser gun will be imagined as a variation on laser guns in *Star Wars* (1977) or *Star Trek* (1966). These specific examples are described as "icons" (G. K. Wolfe: 1979) and

they (and their like) form only part of the entity. The megatext is also the familiar characters, the writing styles and tropes, the novums, the defamiliarisation and more.

Both Tolkien's mythopoeia and Brooke-Rose' megatext approach a section of narrative with a second purpose or function to the telling of the story. The mythopoeiac function is to project depth, the megatextual one, to reflect archetype or trope. At times, both can be used to interpret similar passages of work. Here is a passage chosen at random.

'Hm! Here we are!' said Treebeard, breaking his long silence. 'I have brought you about seventy thousand ent-strides, but what that comes to in the measurement of your land I do not know. Anyhow we are near the roots of the Last Mountain. Part of the name of this place might be Wellinghall, if it were turned into your language. I like it. We will stay here tonight.' He set them down on the grass between the aisles of the trees, and they followed him towards the great arch. The hobbits now noticed that as he walked his knees hardly bent, but his legs opened in a great stride. He planted his big toes (and they were indeed big, and very broad) on the ground first, before any other part of his feet.

Tolkien J .R.R. *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy Unabridged Paperback Edition* (London: Harpercollins Publishers London, 1993), page 491.

'Treebeard' is a descriptive name and provides an image of this character in isolation, a bit like Mervyn Peake's character names all evoke images of them (Peake: 1946), although Tolkien never relied on a device like this alone and we could find a detailed description of Treebeard in the previous pages.

'Wellinghall' has a familiar ring to it, so from a traditional megatextual analysis using it as a place name suggests familiarity, but the juxtaposition of words is not common, so there is also difference and mythopoeiac speculation. The "Last Mountain" indicates the end of something, whether by time or geography and is a simplified naming form in that we understand the words, but may struggle to find a similar parallel application in the real world, although 'Land's End' might do.

The distance travelled is also familiar (strides, seventy-thousand) but the word 'Ent' is unfamiliar and self-referential. It is taken from Anglo-Saxon and means 'Giant'. It is in the unfamiliar that mythopoeia finds its place, but it uses the familiar as a bridge. From the rest of the paragraph we get an impression of the size of Treebeard and so use this to apply meaning

to the words we aren't familiar with. We decide 'Ent strides' are longer than ours by looking at the related action and the additional comment of Treebeard.

However, the megatext also continually evolves, so 'Ent' becomes familiar, as does 'Hobbit' and Orc and more. As new writers introduce innovation and further narrative function to their work so other writers follow and the genre absorbs them.

Both terms also reveal a third concept, the *macrotext*. If the sum of human experience is myth and from which we draw creative inspiration (mythopoeia being the invention of myth) and the megatext is a shared subconscious catalogue of familiar themes in a genre, the macrotext is the guide for a specific fictional world, the frame work through which a large project of multiple outputs can be devised. It is a structured document, enabling the development of expressions that fit the fictional world, but the elements of structure are drawn together for their function, not because of a pre-determined pattern in the narrative. The macrotext, is termed by some as a canon, or plot bible, but both terms don't really encapsulate its purpose. A world canon might include previously published work and is difficult to alter as it has been exposed to an audience. A 'plot bible' encompasses only plot. The macrotext is formative and evolves along with its outputs, aspiring to be everything required to be known about a world. The expressions enjoy a formative relationship with this catalogue so as to maintain consistency with all other work produced in the same fictional space.

The macrotext is not a new phenomenon, but is a planned construct. In the past macrotexts have been developed to incorporate existing works into a larger canon. In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments. The benefit for the writer is that this larger canvas allows for a great deal of the problems of consistency and plausibility to be worked out before starting the story and/or involving others.

It is often asserted that 'Fantasy'. A particular brand of fantastic fiction that became a publishing industry in the wake of the success of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, and 'Science Fiction', a brand of fantastic fiction invented or re-invented, in the USA in the technophile 1920s, have little in common. The Middle-Earth-type fantasy is anti-machines, it inhabits an imaginary past of the human race rather than an imaginary future (though this 'past' may be set in some neo-medieval phase a thousand years ahead of us); it dwells on human relationships, the human condition, metaphysical or moral problems. Science fiction is pro-technology, always set in the future, rationally extrapolating from our present, and favours hard scientific exposition above human interest. In theory this may be so. In real life it can be difficult from outsiders, even

insiders, to tell the difference between the two sub-genres, or separate their audiences. But one thing science fiction and fantasy certainly have in common is the imaginary world, a world that must be furnished with landscape, climate, cosmology, flora and fauna, human or otherwise self-aware population, culture and dialogue.

Jones, G. *Deconstructing the Starships*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), page 11.

The macrotext draws from both mythopoeia and the megatext. Like mythopoeia its purpose is to encourage depth, but it does so by encouraging further writing, drawing or other art that fits within the constraints of the devised fictional world. Like the megatext it uses forms associated with its genre. In fantasy this can be historical context, language or song. In science fiction it might be a timeline from the present into the future; stopping at the period the events of the story are due to start. The macrotext can also take outputs types and re-purpose them. The map becomes a set of locations for different writers to work in, the timeline a list of events known to characters in different stories at different periods.

There are many great world-makers in fiction; writers whose imagined realities are as much a character in their work as the characters themselves. In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments, whereas before, it was often inspired by earlier works.

For example, the Greek writer Hesiod, attempted to define the composition and origins of the Hellenistic pantheon. His work was complicated by existing stories, so his macrotext had to be constructed to include them. In *Theogony* (circa 700 BC) we have an early creation myth that attempts to capture and define the Gods of classical Achaea. The disparate nature of Greek society, sharing parts of their religion and culture between city state kingdoms, made for a fractured interpretation of the different aspects of their dogma. Hesiod attempts to knit these fractures together and, by using a creation myth, determines an absolute beginning, or *point of origin*, for all subsequent writing.

In addition to this, Hesiod describes each of his defined pantheon, bringing us an image of those he includes. This is relevant for the choice of who is present and who is not.

The *point of origin* is a practical concept when attempting to construct a macrotext. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance; the *point of departure*.

Point of Origin
(Place where the roots of the story begin).

Point of Departure
(Place where the story begins).

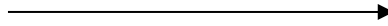


Illustration 2: The Macrotext Framework.

In Fantasy, this method often requires the author to return to the absolute point of origin; the creation of the world. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance. J. R. R. Tolkien's decision was to begin at this point with Middle Earth – or at least to explain it within his work¹⁵. C.S. Lewis made a similar decision with Narnia and the *Magician's Nephew* (1955); describing the events of the beginning of the world.

The Lion opened his mouth, but no sound came from it; he was breathing out, a long warm breath; it seemed to sway all the beasts as the wind sways a line of trees. Far overhead from beyond the veil of blue sky which hid them the stars sang again; a pure, cold, difficult music. Then there came a swift flash like fire (but it burnt nobody) either from the sky or from the Lion itself, and every drop of blood tingled in the children's bodies, and the deepest wildest voice they had ever heard was saying:

"Narnia. Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters."

Lewis C. S. *The Magician's Nephew*. (London: Grafton 2002), page 108.

In this example, the macrotext has been brought into the story to form a part of it, showing us the creation of the world and establishing a point of origin, although, this is only the origin point for Narnia and not the origin of the characters that have arrived here. This echoes the work's consummation. There is no tiered division of audience, or (as mentioned) an intention for the macrotext to be used by others.

Many world creators begin this journey through questions, constructing a scattershot blueprint of their world, before framing it. In this process, the questions asked are just as important as the answers given, as these frame the design. The resultant document is a '42', in reference to Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1978); a collation of importance aspects. However, unless this process is employed exhaustively, these remain a

¹⁵ Opening of the *Silmarillion* (1979).

starting point of notes, expanding on the original inspiration behind the writing idea. In the example above, the separation of this material may exist only as Lewis' writing notes and these would inform his own work, as is the case with many writing projects still.

It is interesting to note that the style of appropriate writing often changes through the context or layer the author is attempting to explore. There are hints in Lewis, but this is much more obvious in *The Valaquenta*; the opening of *The Silmarillion* (1979) imitates the Book of Genesis.

"There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Illuvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought and they were with him before aught else was made."

Tolkien J.R.R. *The Silmarillion* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), page 3.

Compared to;

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness."

Collins. *The Holy Bible* (King James Version). (London: Collins, 2011), page 1.

In *The Silmarillion* (1979) example, the writing speaks to the story memory of the reader, borrowing from a megatext of religious works in tone, as well as being functional mythopoeia. The adoption of style is an intentional cue and indicates a connected gravitas and in being presented as part of the story, becomes a functional tool to generate depth. It would be part of a macrotext if it were solely being used to for imaginative stimulation and writing reference, but the content has been adapted to suit the concordance narrative of *The Silmarillion* (1979) itself. Nevertheless, the trappings of the macrotext remain here and in many other places. When I first read the book, it inspired me to recreate the scenes depicted with model soldiers

What separates the macrotext from the previously defined concepts is its exclusivity within the devised world and its altered priority. The macrotext is a form of *ergodic literature*, as defined by Espen J. Aarseth, in that it is a text that that requires more than non-trivial effort to read (Aarseth: 1997). It is encoded to inspire other outputs which are released to a mass audience. The encoding of the work is not necessarily overt. The document may evolve and

change based on the outputs it generates, but it tries to act as a bridge between each, maintaining their consistency. This temporal state is in itself a form of encoding as those accessing it cannot assume its permanence. Access to it, indicates intention to produce a further work. It exists between output forms and can inspire all sorts of different work, ensuring each connects and reinforces the other, creating a new form of mythopoeiac self-referentiality. It is here that transmedia storytelling finds its guide in examples like the world of *The Matrix* (1999), or *Star Wars* (1977) and more. The macrotext defines what exists and what cannot exist. It provides mutable rules in a fictitious world of make believe. It is a hyperreal construction or artefact and as such, obeys Baudrillard's assertion of taking primacy from reality (Baudrillard: 1981), which it may draw themes from. There is a dichotomy in that it tries to represent a new reality, but can never be as detailed as our own perception of reality, which in itself is a hyperreal construction.

As Baudrillard indicates, what is not included or not meant is indeed as significant as what is, particularly in relation to the macrotext's use of the megatext. When a macrotext does not make use of the traditional devices the reader has come to expect from a particular type of story, this affects the imagination of scenes as much as the inclusion might.

It is the devising of a macrotext that has formed the basis of my work in Science Fiction and Fantasy. The origination of a bridging document, maintaining the interconnectness of outputs from old (*Elite* (1984), *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993), *Frontier First Encounters* (1995)) to new (*Elite: Dangerous* (2014), *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014), *Elite: Reclamation* (2014) etc.) is a complicated process and its stewardship becomes even more difficult as the outputs become increasingly diverse and for consistency to be maintained, requires the document to remain as mutable as possible.

It is for this reason the macrotext itself is not released to a wide audience, unless it is transformed to make it accessible and through this transformation and release, it is solidified. As an example, *The Silmarillion* (1979) was not intended to be a macrotext. Although it shares many of the attributes of a macrotext, it was never published or written to inspire further creative work in Middle-Earth. Much of its contents in a previous form may have done when they existed as reference for the writer. Later, *The Silmarillion* (1979) may have been re-appropriated as such by those writing boardgames, films, computer games and other outputs set in Middle Earth.

Baudrillard asserts that hyperreal constructions are fundamentally unimaginative (Baudrillard: 1981). In assessing the macrotext, we might consider this true, if the priority was

to create an exhaustive encyclopaedia of our fictional world, but this isn't the intention. Instead, we are attempting to provide a stimulus as well as a framework; we are balancing the mythic functions along with the explanatory. The speculative imaginings and creativity of the writer electing to work within our frame are just as important as accepting the frame's constraints.

Using Musil's writing as an example¹⁶, Calvino discusses a binary, the incompatibility of codified structure and soul or irrationality. The macrotext is an artefact that exists between these poles. It encourages constrained creativity, within the form it defines.

Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialised, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.

Calvino, I. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), page 112.

Calvino's writing looks towards attempts by different writers to define the world or universe through the form of the novel, or of poetry. Each person he cites undertakes an enormous labour in their attempt to encapsulate everything into their work. Some of these attempts to be definitive create a wall between the writer and their greatest ally, the imagination of the reader. By invoking myth and encouraging speculation, we engage the reader as part of the process and stay true to the purpose of the macrotext text as a mutable stimulus and reference artefact. Thirty years on from Calvino we talk the same way about constructing transmedia narratives and building layers of meaning through different forms of expression which the macrotext sits behind. Rather than seeing our labour as a lonely quest, we collaborate with other specialists, each accessing the macrotext to co-ordinate our efforts. It is changed as we develop new work, but in turn helps that new work find form.

The published collections of Tolkien's notes¹⁷ prove a macrotext existed for Middle-Earth and its stories so he could maintain their consistency and Brooke-Rose alludes to the items that might have first existed as guide material for the writer (maps, timelines, etc). However, neither assumed the significance of such material in a modern context. In a pre-computer age, such a manual is difficult to share, revise and maintain for a multitude of creative individuals working on a collection of different outputs.

¹⁶ *The Man Without Qualities*, R. Musil (1940)

¹⁷ By his youngest son C.R. Tolkien in a series of volumes.

Conversely without Tolkien's work, the macrotexts of different fantasy worlds might not exist in the forms that they do. Writers retain their experiential inspirations and the familiar holds power. The appeal to memory and referential code still influence the construction of these guides. We view our own history through a linear list of events, and use maps to determine our location, but Tolkien applied them to fantasy, producing them for Middle-Earth and influencing those who followed him. We could not write in his world but we still imagined more stories and in turn apply the same functional tools to the new worlds we create. We rationalise, codify and create systemic patterns for our new realities and often retain the simplified binary ethics of the fairy tale as part of this construction. At the heart of our world building and macrotext lies a wish as creators to define, constrain, relate and understand. This is the opposite purpose to well-constructed myth which is used by a writer to engage the reader in speculation and highlights the change of roles from audience to creator.

When constructing a macrotext to exist between other works so that a fictional world retains its consistency, we must shape our work so that it best inspires and informs the construction of other narratives. The reader/audience is privileged; only granted access owing to their intention to create these works.

This paper was presented at the University of Winchester RKE Symposium in December 2014 and submitted to Mythlore (ISSN 0146-9339) in March 2015.

Chapter 10: Developed Plans for Future Work

Currently this study makes use of one creative case study; the science fiction universe of Frontier/Elite. My future plan is to apply the developed ideas of the macrotext to a second world context in the genre of fantasy that is also intending to output different narratives through different mediums.

The fantasy genre lends itself to this and many of the techniques applied in this study are sourced from their application in fantasy first, particularly the elements of mythopoeia. I intend to apply this to a further creative work that can be compared and contrasted to this case study.

In addition I intend to explore further the theme of the macroplot and the microplot as defined in my MRES thesis for the University of Bedfordshire in 2005 and its application in the development of collaborative fiction. The previous thesis looked at original world design for a single author, identifying the concepts of macroplot (how the world is changed through the narrative) and microplot (character change through the narrative). These two concepts are much more challenging to work with, in the context of a collaborative project.

My intention is for this second case study to be wholly different to the first in terms of style, aesthetic and premise so that the design and development methods can be assessed in the subsequent thesis submission.

Appendix A: Source Material

Example 1: Original Text (written by David Massey):

The Zearla system is home base for the vast majority of the miners who work the nearby worlds and systems in this sector of space. The city of Jeffries on Fraser houses the head office of Wreaken Construction and Mining, the most prosperous of the independent mining and development companies which work at the edge of the Federation. Employing over a quarter of a million full time staff and owning sole mineral rights to some forty nine planets, the Wreaken Company can be found throughout most of the frontier and Federation Worlds.

Example 2: Original text (written by David Braben):

The trading centre for this region of unusual systems. Through some unexplained quirk of nature all systems have just one inhabited world orbiting a single star. These systems are often known as "The Old Worlds" as they were amongst the first to be settled, despite their lack of gas giants. They were also renowned for their lawlessness as only the corporate states in the region had any police force to speak about.

"Lave is most famous for its vast rain forests and the Lavian tree grub" as the main planet used to be described on the now outdated Data on Systems publication from the Elite Federation of Pilots. Much of the rain forest has now been cut down by irresponsible locals, wishing to raise cattle, and the famous tree grub is on the verge of extinction in its natural habitat. Unfortunately it is very sensitive to its environment, and all attempts to breed them in captivity have so far failed.

The ecological demonstrations (made up almost entirely by off-worlders) here are almost continuous; so much so that many come here regularly on their vacations in order to protest. Indeed, ironically the dictator Dr. Walden once referred to the protesters on a vid interview as "Our thriving tourist industry" and also said "The system's economy depends on them so much so that we cannot afford to stop cutting down the forests!."

Example 3: Extract from *The Dark Wheel* by Robert Holdstock (Fiction included in original *Elite* game boxset)

From the moment that the trading ship, Avalonia, slipped its orbital berth above the planet Lave, and began to manoeuvre for the hyperspace jump point, its measureable life-span, and that of one of its two-man crew, was exactly eighteen minutes.

The space station gently span away into the shadows and the small Ophidian class vessel shuddered as its motors angled it round towards the Faraway jump. The planet Lave, below, rotated in blue- green splendour. There were storms moving across the Paluberion Sea, six great whorls of pink and white cloud. They were approaching the continental mass that was First Fall, and promising a bleak and wet few days to the swathes of forest and the deep, snaking valleys that cut through the rugged land. The cities of both Humankind and Lavian glittered among the verdant blanket below like bright shards of glass.

Watching the lush world from his seat at the astrogation console, Alex Ryder expressed an audible sigh of regret that he had not been allowed down to the world itself. Next to him, fingers moving expertly over the keys of the trader's ManOp console, his father grinned. Jason Ryder knew well enough the frustration of only being allowed to observe a rich and fabled world like Lave from orbit. He had been planetside once, an unforgettable experience . . . But the rules and regulations of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds were strict and sensible. Lave, like any other planet, was not a holiday resort, not a curiosity. It was a living, evolving world, and there were folk down below to whom that world was everything that Old Earth had once been to the Human race. Protection. Mother. Home.

Example 4: Extract from *Imprint* by Redman A (Fiction included in *Elite Plus* game - 1991)

The complex was in the anterior of Station 3 orbiting Lave. Each Lavean Station had a perpetual stream of would-be pilots and, currently, a waiting-list for appointments. He was renting a small resunit and, apart from a brief visit to Ashoria, Lave's primary colonial city, on the shuttle, he had been on the Station for two weeks; ten whole days, passing the time. The wait had been made all the worse by the knowledge that he had a Mark 111 Cobra berthed in the Station, waiting for him whilst he awaited his licence.

Example 5: Journal Article (*Frontier First Encounters*)

AUTOMUTAGENIC EFFECT CITED TO EXPLAIN WASTING FEVER LETHALITY

Researchers at the Independent Centre for Disease Control yesterday released details of the process by which parasites causing Sohalian fever are believed to acquire resistance to antibodies in the human immune system. One of the most dangerous features of the disease is that it appears to be caused not by a single parasite, but by a trio of related organisms, whose rapid mutation rate renders effective inoculation strategies difficult.

According to the ICDC, the organisms may in fact mutate in response to toxins generated in the bloodstream by parasites killed by the immune system. This fits well with the observed symptoms of the disease, in which a mild fever - caused by the initial infection - gives way to the more virulent form of the disease as the parasites evolve towards more lethal variants.

"The irony is," says Dr Walter Holland of ICDC, "that a person with no immunity to the disease may be better off than someone who has developed immunity. If the theory is correct, inoculation may practically amount to a death sentence for the person inoculated."

Example 6: Frontier/Elite 2 Timeline

1950s	First man in space, controlled nuclear fission, transistor, start of the nuclear arms race.
1960s	First man on Moon, commercial fission power, integrated circuits, computers.
1970s	Probes in solar system.
1980s	End of first nuclear arms race.
1990s	First serious environmental problems on Earth, controlled nuclear fusion.
2000s	First (minor) armed conflict between a nation and a "multi-national" corporation.
2010s	First serious population problems on Earth.
2020s	First international environmental protection enforcement agency, first commercial space station.
2030s	Major energy crisis, fossil fuel restrictions, religious unrest, first baby born off Earth.
2040s	World War III. Huge technological advancements, huge loss of life, dreadful environmental damage.

2050s	War gradually abandoned due to popular rebellions. Commercial fusion power.
2060s	Rebuilding. Dominance of corporations increased.
2070s	First man on Mars, first permanent Moon base.
2080s	Manned exploration of solar system, orbital cities around Earth, first interstellar probes launched.
2090s	First permanent Mars base, heavy industry on Moon.
2100s	Discovery of fossils on Mars base, "hyperspace" discovered, humans throughout solar system.
2110s	Arrival of message from first interstellar probe to Alpha Centauri system. First pictures taken of an extra-solar planet in the Lagrange point on the two main stars.
2120s	Presence of life on Tau Ceti 3 detected, first armed conflict in space over rights in the asteroid belt.
2130s	Hyperspace capable probes sent to all nearby systems.
2140s	Manned space craft sent to Tau Ceti.
2150s	Colony established on Tau Ceti 3. Major corporations sending first private colony ships.
2160s	The race for the stars. Enormous production effort to produce ships, and mass exodus started.
2170s	First attempt to terraform Mars started.
2180s	Life on Delta Parvonis discovered and made extinct in same year from bacteriological infection.
2190s	Discovery of life on Beta Hydri 4, Altair 5. Human colonials spreading out of control.
2200s	Earth environmental recovery program started, terraforming of Mars abandoned.
2220s	Extinctions on Tau Ceti 3 increasing. Earth threatens to send a police force if nothing is done about it.
2230s	Ultimatum sent to Tau Ceti ignored
2240s	First interstellar battle, formation of the Federation. Founder members:

- Earth, Tau Ceti, Delta Pavonis, Altair, Beta Hydri.
- 2260s Spread of Federation influence.
- 2270s Second attempt to terraform Mars started.
- 2280s Discovery of first non-human relic in space. Origin still unknown in 3200.
- 2290s First man "outside" on Mars (ie breathing unaided) on completion of terraforming.
- 2300s Remaining indigenous life on Tau Ceti 3 preserved in special enclosures.
- 2310s News of elimination of a reputedly sentient race on Achenar 6d by private colonists causes outrage in the Federation. Achenar refuses to join Federation, many terra-forming projects started.
- 2320s Federation sends war fleet to Achenar. Resulting enormous space battle won by Achenar.
- 2330s Spread of Empire from Achenar to surrounding worlds. War between Empire and Federation.
- 2340s Continuing battles between Federation and Empire.
- 2350s Sirius corporation founded, grows rich supplying the war fleets.
- 2380s Treaty signed between Empire and Federation. The Cold War begins...

Appendix B: Images of Inspiration

During the development process of my story, I made extensive use of 3D imaging software to conceptualise some of my locations and also commissioned an artist to assist in the visualisation of key characters and moments. The following are illustrations devised or commissioned by me to assist in the writing of my novel.

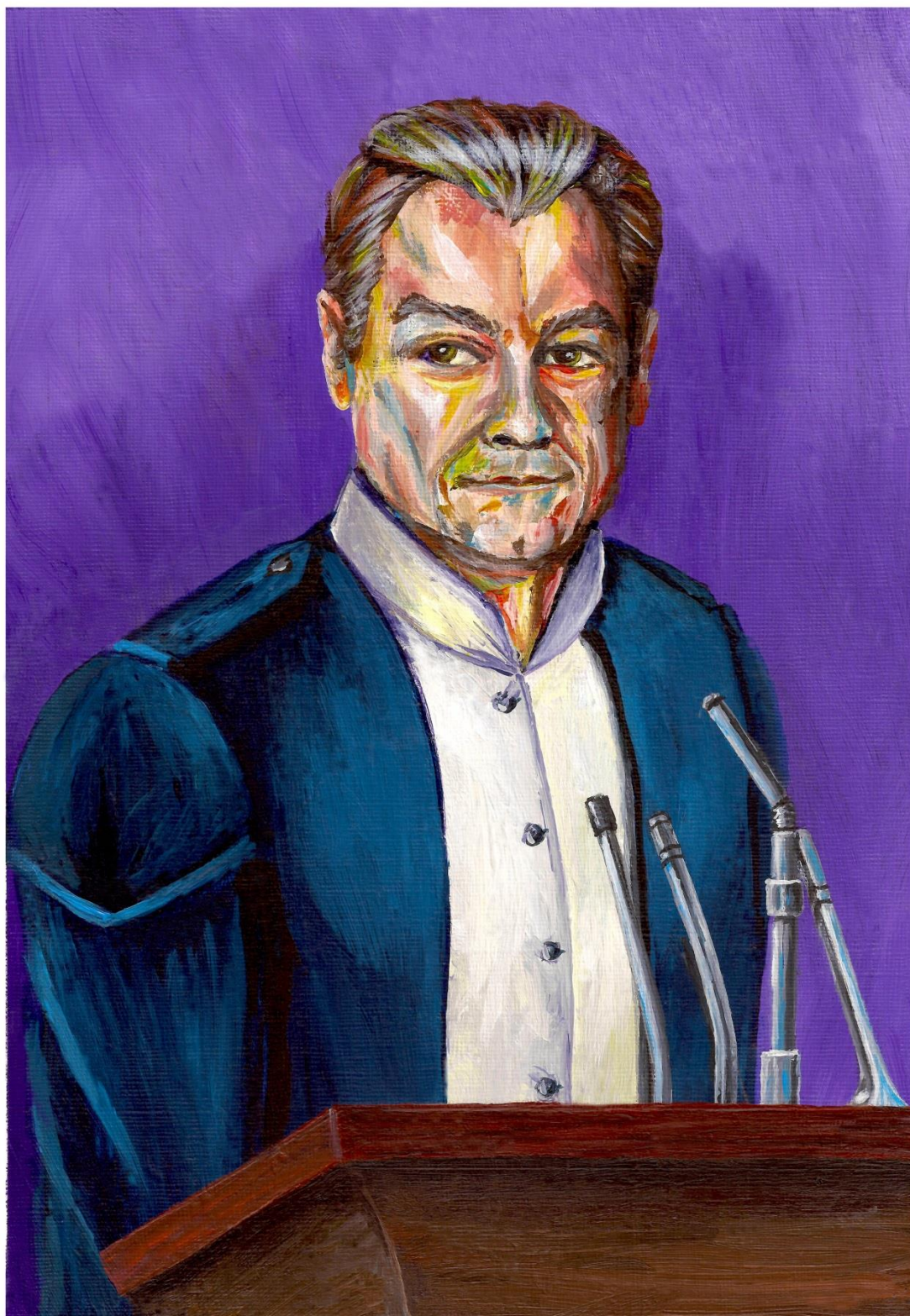


Illustration 5: 'Doctor Hans Walden' by Bruce Myers.



Illustration 6: 'The Lavian Phoenix' (Symbol of rebellion) by Bruce Myers and Liam Rafferty.



Illustration 7: 'The Revolutionary' – by Bruce Myers.



Illustration 8: 'Interstellar Exodus' – by Bruce Myers.



Illustration 9: 'Ashoria' by Allen Stroud.



Illustration 10: 'Lave Orbit' by Allen Stroud.



Illustration 11: 'Furnace Arrival' by Allen Stroud.

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Appendix B – Chaos Reborn: The Loremaster's Guide

This document is included as the solidified macrotext mentioned in the critical section of the Ph. D. thesis. This is a full colour, published booklet available to players of the game as an electronic pdf.

I have included this work 'as is', so as to best illustrate the presentation of material provided and highlight the collaboration between my written text and the illustrations of the Snapshot Games team.



THE LOREMASTER'S GUIDE

BY ALLEN STROUD & JULIAN GOLLOP

SNAPSHOT
GAMES



THE LOREMASTER'S GUIDE



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Published in 2016 by Snapshot Games and HWS Press.

www.snapshotgames.com

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These collected works are fiction and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chaos Reborn - <http://www.chaos-reborn.com>

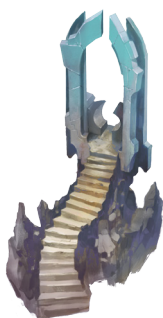
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Introduction

*Once there was the moon,
the sun,
the stars,
All gone.
Magic caused this.
Magic and wizards.
Our world cracked as we warred deep within its heart.
and awoke monsters.
The sun burned out,
The moon shattered,
Yet still we fought,
Blinded by greed,
We sought the power of gods.
and broke that which was made for us.
Now at heart of the vortex
Only Limbo remains
A last refuge for those who are not saved, but did not sin.
You are trained
And unleashed
To wield magic
To build realms
To command creatures
To battle with wizards
And plunder the realm
To save the last of us.
To rule
To become gods.
Once did order Rule,
Now Chaos Reborn!*

In these dark and fractious times, it can be difficult to find reliable sources of information about our past, our present and our future. The brethren of Stormsheim have taken great pains to prepare this document – a collection of fragmentary writing and research that holds all we can precisely verify about all such aspects of the Reborn existence we find ourselves in.

As with all things of Limbo, we offer this in trade to you exalted wizard. Our meagre existence in this place requires that we do so, for whilst we would wish all knowledge to be free, there is little else we can barter with you in exchange for our survival.

There are many voices here. Some are contradictory, with allegiances and loyalties that conflict and crackle upon the page. You must take what knowledge you can from these voices and accept that the writers might be your friend or foe. We do not presume to offer judgement upon these views, but include the insight for your learning. In time perhaps these ideologies will reconcile and our we will have peace, but that will never be achieved without understanding.

We hope you may gain understanding from what we give you.

All things exist in balance.

Stone is law and substance.

Song is life and change.

But there is a third knowledge,

A mystery known to creators.

Learned only through pain.





History

Our Earth existed alone in the void. The stars are the dust discarded throughout time, fading away into the deep.

In the first days, the world teemed with life. All manner of creatures living across land and sea.

Then came the gifted - powerful wielders of magic from all across the world, first as teachers and counsellors, then as warlords and chieftains. They called themselves Eggoroi, Tengu, Teotl, and many other things.

The First Chaos War

Amongst humanity the gifted found their muse. Men and women worshipped them and gave them new power. They used this to explore their talent, devising spells, rituals and wards to serve themselves and those loyal to them. They learned to summon and dominate all manner of strange beasts and monsters, fighting wars that threatened the existence of all things.

Within this chaos, the strongest tyrants rose to the surface and warred with one another. The world teetered on the edge of destruction. A council came together, representing powerful factions across the different lands, defeating those who opposed them. To save the world, they sealed its cracks with power, using the magic granted to them by their worshippers.

But some creatures could not forgive the gifted for their crimes and others proved too powerful to be left to roam the world. The last of these beings were locked away beneath the earth, some to sleep and others to live out their days never seeing sunlight again.

The Peace and Time of Order

In the first days after, there were fewer wars, plagues, floods and natural disasters. The gifted ruled with wisdom and justice; the greatest of them ascending to become gods. They interbred with humanity and forgot much of their past. Alchemists - humans with a sensitivity to magic - rose to prominence, refining the means of making portals and enchanted items to empower the wizards loyal to their orders.

The wars of the oldest days were forgotten and the chaos of the first times remembered only in legends and stories.

The Rise of Gods

Over time, the Gifted learned ways to transcend their mortal state and become immortal beings of pure magic. Gathering enough power to initiate this process was difficult, but the alchemists discovered an innate affinity to magic amongst humans. Powerful emotions granted slivers of magic to the Eggoroi they were directed at, so feared and loved wizards become more powerful.

The rise of religious orders across the world were the product of this discovery, as the council sought to control the means of transcendence and promote the most trusted and wise amongst them to this new enlightened state. These new beings were seen as Gods by some, or as the messengers of Gods by others. However, as the centuries passed, not all were content with these hierarchies. Young wizards, doomed to follow the rigid rules of their elders, rebelled and began to seek their own paths to enlightenment. Some succeeded, some did not.

The Schism

In the last century of the old times, a misguided ritual in Avignon broke the first of the seals on the world. Wizards rallied and strove to contain what they had done, burying the rift behind powerful wards of magic, but it was too late. A second seal broke open in the buried city of Isoloha and a third on an island in the southern ocean.



THE LOREMASTER'S GUIDE

Magic could no longer be contained by the wizards. Unwanted distortions created deformations in nature. Vicious beasts roamed the plains and unusual growths and swamps developed. The dead came back to haunt the living.

The Horsemen

Strife broke out everywhere, a second chaos war, led by rebel wizards, intent on destabilising the religious orders that had come to dominate the lands and seeking to free the creatures imprisoned in vast caverns beneath the world. War, Plague, Famine and Death, the four horseman, ravaged the lands, empowering armies intent on the end of all things.

It is said these four were talented apprentices from different orders of the world, who came together when pitted against one another in the secret schemes of gods. Each rejected their masters, opting instead to ally with the nightmares of the world.

Others tell this tale differently, and see the individuals as iconic liberators of the Earth from its oppressive masters.

A World Destroyed

The ancient council, riven with paranoia, was slow to act in response. A great purge followed; trials, inquisitions and executions. Law became unyielding judgement and chaos, an unknown freedom of contagious revolution. As nations fell and people lost hope, the magic binding the world faltered. The lands began to suffer from violent earthquakes. Suddenly it shattered, splitting into many fragments. In an instant, millions of people dead; only those protected by magic survived, cast into the void on the remnants and reliant on whatever spells had saved them.

Gradually, using the lore of portal making, the gifted were able to reunite. They found the remains of the old world, transformed into a swirling vortex. Deep within its core there lay a ruined fragment, a realm intact and undisturbed by the destructive storms that raged around it. Spells were ineffective, the magic simply sucked into the storms. The wizards named this place Limbo and from it they ventured to the fragmented realms through the portals they had built. There was no more war, but there was no peace either.



Chaos reigned above all else. Unimaginable places were filled with strange, magical creatures, released from their dungeons. Wizards fought with each other in their quest for power. They knew without power they could not survive.

Slowly the old societies reasserted themselves; the ancient orders of alchemists, who had remained loyal to the wizards during the worst of times, reformed and rebuilt parts of the ruined cities. Survivors were found in many of the fragment worlds and brought back to the new settlements.

However, they were not the only things discovered.

In the myriad of realms spiralling out beyond the vortex, all manner of creatures were found - vampires, elves, dwarves and dragons, to name but a few. All forms out of fairy tale and myth. The origins of these are uncertain; some could be the corrupted forms of mortals from the past, some imprisoned beneath the world and some created from pure magic.

Over time, wizards banded together. Temporal alliances became cabals, cabals become orders; each seeking power to shape Limbo and tame the fragmented worlds according to their own image. Each seeking the power to follow the first of their kind and become Gods.



Those Who Judge

The following testimony is an extract from the journal of an papal enforcer, tasked to track down undesirable strangers in the far reaches of the Holy Empire.

We are filled with stories of good and evil. Through example, we are taught right from wrong, punished for our sins and urged to live a righteous life that we might at its end, pass through the gates to paradise.

But the world is rarely so clear. We make choices and decide alone what makes an honest woman or an honest man. We are tested to prove our worth. We judge ourselves and always find fault.

In time, some of us are cursed to judge others.

I walked into the common room of the tavern, instinctively relaxing my guard a little, welcoming the warmth and shelter from the driving snow outside.

Heads turned towards me, appraising the stranger; taking in my worn fur cloak and the sword strapped to my right thigh. I returned each stare in turn; wrinkled and thin faces for the most part, my equal in years, but in no other way. Farmers gathered in together against the harsh winter, living off their summer gains, here and there a younger face amongst them, but no women, making me the exception.

The first approach came as I settled into an empty seat. "Don't seem right you being out here alone," said a man, speaking rough Ruthenian.

I eyed the speaker as I undid my cloak, letting him get a good look at the ringmail underneath. He had a jowly face, skin weathered by years outdoors and his back bent from the work. The last wisps of grey hair around his ears a hint of the man he might have been. I started undoing the strapped scabbard, placing it on the table. "How so, friend?" I asked in the same language.

"Well you bein'..." He stumbled over the obvious, plainly starting to realise his mistake. I held his gaze and favoured him with a thin smile.

"I like being alone."

"Right."

After that, they let me be for the most part. The tavernkeep asked my business. I gave him enough coin for bread, cheese, hot soup and a room. I kept my eyes on the food, eating to banish chill and hunger. I was half done when the door creaked and I got another reminder of cold. A man in a woollen robe stepped past me and settled onto the chair opposite. "You're not one of us," he said.

"No," I replied as I attacked the cheese with my rune etched knife.

"What brings you this far north?"

I looked at him, noting his tonsured temple and smiled. "The same that brings you, father."

Recognition lit his face, but he quickly frowned to conceal it. "When I wrote to his holiness I asked for the papal militia."

I nodded. "You did, but they sent me."

"Why? You don't look like—"

I held up a hand to interrupt him before he something he would regret. Slowly, I rolled up my sleeve, revealing the caduceus brand on my wrist; the staff and two intertwined snakes. "They sent me because my blood is more potent than yours."

After that he stayed silent and let me finish my food.

The room smelled of mould. Father Yentov sat on the bed facing away while I stripped off my armour and donned a simple shift. I could feel his discomfort and disapproval at being so close to a woman undressing, but that was the least of my worries.

"Tell me more of this God."

He cleared his throat and tried to settle himself. "It calls itself Mansa and came to us on the Sabbath from the east as the wind turned west. There is much superstition still in remote villages like this, especially in winter when the roads become arduous, so the folk here listened and believed the lies."

"How did it come here?" I asked.

"In the shape of a man of the heathen lands, dark of skin and leaning upon a great staff. The earth shook as it



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walked. I have never seen the like.”

I smiled at the submission in his voice. The damp wooden floorboards felt good under the soles of my bare feet. “What were Mansa’s demands?”

“He claimed to have stolen the Sun and would only return it if the villagers prayed to him.”

I pulled out some loose fitting leggings, slipped them on and turned to face Yentov. “And you didn’t challenge him?”

The priest flinched from my gaze. “I am but flesh and bone. How could I stand against such power?”

“You are afraid then?”

Yentov’s eyes remained on the fraying blanket. “All folk live in healthy fear of the almighty,” he said slowly. “My duty is to the flock. I prayed for aid and you came.” He looked up at me. “It is not within me to defeat demons.”

I shrugged. “Farmers huddle here in the snow. You think the words of this Mansa will take root?”

“I wouldn’t have sent a message if I didn’t.”

I leaned in close to him, holding his eye, conscious of the thin cloth between us. “Are you always a good shepherd?” I asked softly. “Keep all your vows?”

“I—I try.”

His hesitation gave him away. My old body did not stir him much, but it did stir him. A life in isolation brought with it temptation to mingle what gift he had with the ignorant blood of his charges. After all, who would know? The little miracles a priest might conjure would impress small minds. Rejection could be claimed as sin. Oaths of abstinence had less force once broken and flesh clearly tempted this man. No doubt the sons and daughters of the mud looked to Yentov. Such a learned man, odious and plainly corrupt, but without him...

“I am here only for the task,” I said. “Once it is done, I am gone. If I go find this God, there’ll be blood and you might be the only one who will come after me.”

“I understand.”

“If you leave me there and I live, things will go badly for you.”

Yentov swallowed, looking more ashamed with every moment. “Very well,” he said.

“Where can I find him?”

“The hillside woods to the north, an abandoned lodge just before the cliffs. No folk dare venture there, but they see tracks...”

Yentov left after that, wanting nothing more to do with me. I knew where he was going. I’ve met his type before. He would seek solace in his church and his sins and try to forget I existed, hoping he would never see me again, but knowing if I did not return, he would be alone against the strange god.

The shadows lengthened; the feeble winter sun unable to resist the gathering dark. A solitary candle illuminated the little room as I sent prayers to the heavens, renewing my place in the hierarchy through communion. I could feel the song of our church, a low heady thrum that echoed across land and sea; thousands upon thousands at prayer, their devotions thrilling the blood in my veins. Such power! A living, breathing thing given form by our faith.

A soft knock at the door disturbed my meditation. I glanced around, hearing a whispered voice speaking urgent unintelligible words. I rose then and lifted the latch. Outside I found a woman of twenty summers or so with a young girl at her side. Two work stained faces looking at me.

“Your pardon, may we come in?”

I nodded and stepped aside. The woman entered, ushering the child before her. Both wore tattered clothes, evidence of their tattered lives. “How can I assist you?” I asked.

“Not for me, for my daughter,” the woman said. “Will you take her?”

I stared at the little girl. Her eyes stayed on the floor, avoiding mine and her mother’s. “What are you names?” I asked.

“I am Matta,” said the woman. “This is Jina, she has the gift. Our ancestors came here from lands far to the south. I’ve hid what she can do, but there is talk and it will worsen as she grows.”

I held her eye. “I did not come here for this,” I said.

“The lord sent you,” Matta urged. “The lord sent you for her.”

“The lord sent me for other work, not to rescue children.”

She glanced away then, bunching her fists into her eyes, wiping away tears. “You cannot leave her,” she said. “If you do, she’ll be stuck here and never amount to anything.”

“Stuck here... with her mother.”

Matta sank to her knees, taking Jina’s face in her hands, lifting her gaze from the floor. “I accept this,” Matta



said. "My life is what it is. You must grant her something better."

I gazed at them both in turn, remembering a similar tearful farewell nearly fifty years before. "Hold out your hand, girl," I said.

Silently, Jina did as I asked. I picked up the candle from where I'd left it on the table. "This may hurt," I told her. It had hurt me when I'd been tested.

Jina didn't reply, but she did not withdraw her hand.

I brought the flame to her fingers and listened to her scream.

Next morning the wind had blown right through leaving a still cold quiet. I woke early and knelt to say my devotions then took up my armour and sword. The etched writing along the blade promised much, but would it be enough?

Hours before sun up and I was walking through deep snow to the woodland, following the path Yentov had sketched for me on a tattered parchment scrap.

The quiet half-light made the world seem expectant, as if it were holding its breath, an audience to my fate perhaps?

I'd drawn my weapon and held it loosely in my hand, a clear sign to any farmer folk who might be out at this hour. It would be good to be seen, to invoke their whispers, but the message needed to be right, so it would spread and be embellished as they murmured together in their mouldering tavern. *A demon came to us, the priest prayed and the lord sent forth an angel with a bright sword...* They would not mention a grey haired woman of advancing years stumbling in the cold.

This was my task. Yentov's message had gone out to the wider church. The Patriarch had consulted with his advisors and word had been passed to the caduceus monks. They in turn contacted me, Grażyna of Gdansk, a fisherman's daughter who no-one would remember, but whose blood remains potent enough to wield the faith against a stranger from the south.

Walking in the snow was hard, each step making a large hole as I picked my way through the fall. As I left the village behind, the going got harder, the deep drifts like a white marsh to wade through, but the incline of the hill helped and the thick fall gradually receded, leaving me tired, wet and cold as I stumbled on.

Halfway to the wood I found huge dead tree. It stood alone, its branches hacked away. Writing had been scratched into the black bark, whorls of different script that ran around, spiralling upwards, all over its severed limbs. The cuts were fresh; some of the words and symbols were familiar to me, others were not, but each phrase I understood spoke of power and sacrifice.

Like any god might.

The tree was a statement of intent. I knew what the villagers would make of it. Here stood a symbol marking the border between their lands and their new lord. They would bring offerings here and leave them, sharing their stories of what came in response only when they were safe and warm by their fires. If I achieved my task and bested the stranger, the tree would have to be cut and burned else they would never believe him gone.

If Mansa was truly a god then I was overmatched. Those of the blood who transcended the mortal form could appear as they wished as any creature or even watch events as an apparition. Above them lay the world's masters and further back, its creator who existed in perpetual paradise beyond our reach. The church embraced them all as saints, prophets, saviours and angels, celebrating and honouring their whims and wishes in scripture and verse. In some lands, the paths to such power were different, but here they were fixed and enforced by caduceus like me, who stood against the heathen alternatives.

As I examined the trunk, a figure emerged from the woods beyond, walking towards me. He carried a long staff, seven feet or more, but moved smoothly without its aid. I guessed this was Mansa. How could it not be? He was bare of foot and bald of head, his smooth dark skin out of place in the white cold. He wore a loose fabric shift, uncollared in the style favoured by others like him I had seen. His ochre robes were covered in Nsibidi script like the bark, but written so tight they might be just a pattern to the untrained eye. I knew better. It would be the story of his life. He stopped ten feet away. The face that regarded mine was old, wrinkled and solemn, not the incarnation of evil you might hear of in song.

"You are a stranger to this place," he said in halting Greek.

"As are you, Mansa," I replied in the same tongue.

He smiled at that, displaying uneven white teeth. "The people here do not seem strange to me. They fear the night and monsters as others do."

"They are not your people," I told him. "You should not be here."

His smile did not waver. "Why? This land is colder than where I have lived, but beneath the snow and ice is mud



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and rock like the lands I have known. Before I came, these people prayed to a far-away God they could not see or touch. Now they turn to me and see their reward. Which is better for them?"

"It is not for you to judge," I said.

He grunted. "I speak as I find. Ways that work are best. Long ago I taught the folk the star names to guide their way at night, to use mould for infection, to chew bark to numb pain and fever. These people fear the dark sky and burn both rot and wood. They will gain much by praying to me."

I shrugged and stepped forwards letting him know his words made no difference. "These are not your people," I repeated. "This is not your place. Their faith belongs to us."

Mansa nodded. "Ah yes, I forget your shackles and your tower to heaven. The least are told they are worthless so they might give their only gift in ignorance. Your thin priests guide them, so the fat priests may feast as they wish on their way to paradise," he snorted, "but in your tower, you are not free. The higher you climb the further you fall."

I raised my sword, so he could see the rune etched blade; symbols of faith and power to rival the story map of his life. "Go back through the portal you found," I said. "I will not ask again."

"You will follow me?"

"Of course. We want no more visitors."

He cocked his head to one side. "To go back for me is death."

"You will get no better fate here."

A flicker of his brown eyes gave away the ambush. I turned and ducked as something swished passed my ear. An arrow hit the snow, kicking up a spray of white. I murmured strange and familiar words, feeling my damp clothes and ringmail tighten with magic and closed the distance to Mansa, but he was already deep in his own chant, his staff planted. I heard the growl of something summoned and a cat twice the size of the largest dog I'd ever seen appeared in front of me, halting my advance.

I studied the animal as it studied me. Its thick shaggy mane and regal bearing came straight from heraldry. I'd never seen a lion in real life, finding them evasive when I'd visited the southern lands. This one crouched and bared its teeth, ready to spring at me if I moved further.

Such a waste.

I took a step towards it and it sprang. I dodged to the right, bringing my sword up and down, scoring a deep cut along its neck and flank. I lost my footing and fell backwards. Blood stained the snow and the lion whined in pain, its eyes large as they glared at me. I felt shame at wounding it, but then if I had not...

Stirring guttural words reminded me of the present danger. The ground stirred and I rolled quickly as dark spiky branches ripped their way out of the earth, reaching for me. This was not the old wood of the carved tree, these were magic formed, screaming the agony of growth beyond nature, compelled by their master.

Mansa.

Spiked thorns caught my ankle, dragging me back into a deadly embrace. I hefted the sword again, but it fell from my numb fingers before I could bring to bear on the bark. Limbs grew and wrapped themselves around me, pinning my arms to my sides and pulling me upright to stand before my foe.

Mansa smiled at me again, but this time the expression was strained. A dark skinned hand stroked my cheek. "So a man comes to your lands bearing gifts and you turn him away knowing his aid will bring strength and wealth to your people?"

I struggled with the living bonds, but they only tightened. I forced myself to relax, to think my way out. "Do not claim some higher purpose. You are here for your own ends." I nodded towards the animal dying in the cold. "You care nothing for your slaves, leaving them to die so far from home."

"You made this happen, not I. You held the weapon."

"Only in defence of my life."

Mansa's smile faded. "Your priest treats these people like cattle. He uses the girls as he wishes, speaking songs of guilt, faith and shame so that he might enjoy their virgin flesh."

"That is not your crime to punish," I replied.

"So you permit it then?"

"What I do about his sin is no concern of yours."

I moved my right arm behind my back to my waist, straining against the hardening tree limbs that coiled around my wrist. Brambles dug into soft flesh, but my fingers grasped the hilt of the knife at my belt and eased it from its sheath.

Mansa stared at me silently for long moments then he spoke. "It would be a waste to murder you here, but there would be benefit. The village folk would see it as a sign to turn from your church and cross."

"Others will come."

"I welcome them," Mansa pointed at the wounded lion, his eyes not leaving mine. He moved towards me until



our faces were an inch apart. "The strong survive, the weak do not."

I went for him then, my knife hand slick with blood slipping through the grip of branch and vine. The rune etched blade caught him under the ribs, its magic defeating the wards of his clothes, thrusting into his flesh, scratching his heart.

He coughed once, sank to his knees and died.

The tree that held me relaxed, turning to ash as its master faded from the world, but the lion remained, huddled around itself on the stained snow. I walked towards it, conscious of the unseen archer, but no further arrows came to trouble me. I knelt and lay a hand on the animal's broad flank, calling up the healing words I had been taught by the monks many years ago. They had saved me in the past when I'd been cold and alone, but they were not enough for this creature. I cradled its head and gazed into its eyes as it passed into another world.

Afterwards I took out flint and steel and set fire to the symbol carved tree. The damp wood needed help to burn, but eventually, burn it did. Then I dragged the corpses of the wizard and his beast to the pyre and watched the flames consume them. The stench of human flesh roasted and charred was a fitting penance to bear. My clothes dried and I brought magic to my wounds, staunching and closing the torn skin on my arms and legs.

What story would they tell of this night? I have seen tapestry and hear songs where crusaders defeat the enemies of God. The tales are told by those who survive the horrors of war and passed on from father to heir. Gradually the blood and gore fades as the foes increase in number and power. The ill of the enemy's intention grows so our deliverance by heroes of heaven and earth might echo loud through the ages. Who needs truth, when such potent stories remain? This would be a struggle of good against evil, where the sinners and heathens are punished by the righteous sword of faith.

No thought spared for a hero left with memories of pain.

By nightfall, the fire faded, leaving a black scar on the white blanket. It began to snow again; large white flakes weeping from the heavens to conceal Mansa's violent end.

I got up, retrieved my sword and made my way back to the village. I went first to the small church, a towering shadow against the darkening sky. Inside I found Yentov lighting the candles. He turned as I approached. His mouth set in a grimace then he bowed his head in shame.

"Do I need to find the bow and quiver?" I asked him.

"No," he replied softly.

I grabbed him by the hair and dragged him across the nave, into the preparation chambers and down through a wooden door into the vaults. I bid him light a candle with shaking fingers and pushed him to the floor. He went to kneel before me, but I shook my head. "No, you don't deserve a penitent's death. On your hands and knees."

He did as he was told and wept onto the stones. I drew my sword once more, raised it and brought it down upon his neck, the blade cutting flesh and bone. He screamed and gurgled his agony, but after three blows it was over.

I blew out the candle, went back up the steps and locked the door.

Silent stares greeted me at the tavern. I ignored them, went to my room, retrieved my things and headed back out into the cold.

At the door, I found Matta, the woman from before, her daughter Jina beside her with a bandaged hand. "Please," the woman begged. "You promised."

I stared at her and then at Jina. I knelt down to the child and leaned in close. "The strong survive, the weak do not," I said. Then stood up and turned away, walking alone southwards into the night.





The Current Reality

The worlds of Chaos Reborn are a shattered relic of what came before. The fragments of Earth float in the void, drawn to spin around the Vortex. Countless realms, preserved by the spewing magic, bathing each with power and causing all sorts of strange and wondrous reactions.

The Vortex

This is a spinning mana storm, flinging tendrils of power out into the ether. The temperament of the vortex is keyed to the uses of magic by wizards; a predominant use of any particular type of spell causes a reaction. On a large scale, law increases chaos and vice versa, whereas on a small scale it works the opposite way. This continual flux ensures the perpetuation of the storm.

It is the vortex which provides light in the skies of the Fractured Worlds and which surrounds Limbo, holding it apart from all things.

Many wizards quest to find access to the Vortex from outside. It is believed a wizard of sufficient skill and power could touch the vortex from the nearest fragment worlds and harness its power, raising themselves above all others.

The Fractured Worlds are in continual fluctuation between expressions of power and constructions of power. Studies show this flux affects the vortex, drawing reaction and surging from the depths of its swirling magic. If wizards were not at war, the vortex might become static and the realms become barren.

Rifts and Portals

In the first times, strange magical gateways manifested wherever they wished. These were known as rifts and were temporary in nature, providing quick travel to places unknown. The ancients found ways to encourage and 'trap' rifts within their stone arches. The first were made to expand the influence of the gifted across the known world. These served as a means of transport to co-ordinate the council's efforts during the First Chaos War.

It is claimed the manufacture of portals came directly from the work of the Philosopher and his Lycaenum. The colonies and city states were interlinked with these magical gateways, but each required vast amounts of magical energy to be used. These early journeys took them into new lands and brought encounters with other gifted, resulting in conflict. Many of the new wizards saw the alchemist Nephilim as abominations and vowed to destroy them.

The division and fall of the Greek Empire after Alexander led to a loss of much knowledge. The great library of Alexandria contained a portion of the acquired lore of the Lycaenum and the previous writings of the ancients, but it was not everything. The later conquest of Greece and the Mediterranean by the Romans restored order under new masters and this period was an opportunity to consolidate much of what was known. However, the great map of portals was lost and subsequent generations of alchemists struggled to record the locations of the ones they knew. In other parts of the world, other Nephilim, un beholden to the teachings of the Philosopher discovered these devices and learned their secrets for themselves. Gradually, inquiring minds refined their magical devices and used them to seek out more of the world. The last great journey of Marco Polo signified the completion of a portal web, linking all of the major orders of wizards across the globe.

Prior to the schism, both portals and rifts existed. The former are constructed passageways, the latter of unknown origin.

We know now that portals and rifts transport wizards through both space and time. Explorers journeying through such ways can find themselves replaying the same events, arriving in a realm at a particular time that might be the same time as another arrives in an alternate reality.



Cosmology

Our world has always been at the centre of the void.

From old Earth you might look into the sky. The site you would see during daytime and night time would be very different to that which we see now.

It is said that in those times a great ball of fire bestrode the heavens, bathing the lands in light. Only when this great fiery behemoth descended behind mountains did we truly see the empyrean.

In the darkness our ancestors gazed out upon the scattered dust of our world. They saw the great fragment of Luna, the distant remnants of the first war and others, countless crumbs, broken away from their mother Gaia, to fade away into the great deep.

It is said our world was made by the first gods. They were greater than those who came after and fashioned a shining bauble in the darkness. They took the younger brother of the great sun god and encased him in rock and mud, binding this prison tight with wards and sigils written into sand, water fire and air. It was their magic that prevented the unstable land from flying apart and gave the universe a special place on which life could grow.

Over time, the bindings grew weaker as the material of our world sought to fulfil its natural inclination.

The descendants of the first gods put aside their wars and used their magic to reinforce what had been made, preserving their home for a time. But their efforts were proved imperfect. Many stories tell of how they failed, blaming different orders and individuals or the heresies of horsemen.

The New Wars

The destruction of old Earth left few survivors. For years after the tumult, the vast scattering of debris amidst the magical vortex continued to annihilate anything that remained, until only the strongest wards were left.

When oblivion calmed, the boldest explorers ventured from safety in to the new worlds. Conflict erupted once more as the remnants of the old religions fought against rebels and lone adventurers, striving to rebuild their dominance.

To the gifted, this tumbling mass of fragments are rich pickings. Freed of restriction, they roam the splintered realities, forging realms for themselves by harvesting and controlling magical energies. There is an eternal war between champions of order, as they seek to restore the world to what it was, and those the enlightened who embrace change. Between both lie many fractured ideologies as wizards war for selfish and selfless gain. Indeed for all the espoused platitudes, some places are often little more than carrion and sporting grounds of wizard vultures. Preying upon the feeble patterns of the weak.

The New Skies

Gazing into the heavens from Limbo is to gaze at the seething clouds of the Vortex. As Limbo lies in the eye of this vast magical storm, it remains calm, its energies often sucked away into the boiling clouds.

This pulsing sky provides illumination for the peoples living on this remnant of old Earth. The hues are a reflection of the manipulations of magical energies both outside and inside the continuous storms. Colours bleed and swirl into one another, an evolving, eternal and deadly mosaic, holding Limbo in its centre. There is no true day or night in Limbo. Light and dark are part of the process. Illumination waxes and wanes with no apparent motivation.

On rare days the sky clears. Then the lorewise are to be found aiming their great glasses into the heavens, to map the position of Fractured Worlds around us. The monks of Stormsheim and the sages of Koryo have constructed vast maps of the sky and in these moments, much arguing ensues as they strive to update the true positions of the realms in the empyrean.



The Cabalist's Journal

You believe we are evil?

How can you who claim to be so pure know what evil is?

Let me describe to you how truly evil we have become.

The fight for the city in the north of the realm was fierce and intense. Initially we were outnumbered. Yet the power that we had summoned forth from the citadel was at our backs, and the combined might of the Conclave could not stand against us.

We were subtle at first. Agents of our darkness, vampires and mortals infiltrated the populace. They made contact with sympathisers who remained. With whispered promises of power, and rites of initiation, they turned these fools to our cause.

Once our ground was sure within, we began the assault without.

Under the cover of the night, darkness, the true light of our kind, we marched. We paid some caution in our travels, yet in reality we guessed the more adept of the gifted, our former brethren would sense our arrival, much as they had sensed the breaching of the barrier some weeks earlier.

Finally we arrived to finish what we had begun.

The next morning the evidence of our intent appeared in the sky as a sign of doom. For the first day of many to come, the vortex churned in response to the magic we brought to bear. As our enemy stepped forth, so they despaired at the extent of our power.

All through that day we waited.

At nightfall, we began. The velvet cloak became a breeding ground for our hatred and resentment. In that night passion and corruption found voice in slaughter. Our army was small, yet with every foe falling from their walls so, our numbers multiplied.

Such is the art of necromancy and raising the dead.

In the deepest black, I strode amongst our newly raised corpses, along with two of the vampires of our dark host held in check only by the chains of my will. They dragged a soldier who we had captured, and now guided us to the location that would seal our victory over this entire realm.

The graveyard.

I cannot describe my anticipation at the chance to use my magic. We crossed street after burning street, the night lit by sheets of flame, and disturbed by the screams of the desperate and dying.

Sweet music.

Yet our darkness remained impenetrable, opaque blackness. I guided my lumbering horde of the dead into the resting-place of others, my intentions were to defile, and I did not intent to be disappointed.

In a short time we arrived at the entrance to the burial chambers. The wards of sealing were potent, yet old, and easily passed; our entry way to the tombs was quickly cleared.

We descended.

Below ground, the sounds of the massacre above seemed muted and distant. I sensed the ancient magic that slumbered here, old and ineffective to my passage. They screamed at the aberration of my very existence and at the circle of power I brought with me.

Death.

At the centre of the chamber, the vampires who accompanied me dragged our prisoner onto a pure alabaster marble slab that might have been fashioned for the purpose it would now serve. As I crossed to join them I sent a crowd of the dead to several diverse tombs around the walls. My new servants might require assistance after I disturbed their sleep.

I drew my long ceremonial knife.

One swift stroke of precision from me, and a wide swathe of blood burst forth from the neck of our pitiful captive, poor fool. It spattered upon the marble, red staining white, staining purity.

I watched the face of my victim, witnessed his eyes dull into senselessness. Gouts of life welled from his jugular vein, to be greedily drunk by my vampire servants. The image was obscured from me as the drinkers descended to feed, but it was enough, I felt the ebbing force of his life fade amid a cacophony of pain,



fading in focus, becoming a smear of anguish as the numbness of oblivion severed the ties of his spirit.

I began my magic.

The chant was tremulous and slow, fragile. It served merely as a vehicle for the power I sought. With its first tendrils, I seized hold of the tattered fleeing fragments of his soul and bent them to my will. Even in death, this fool would not escape my demands, he would serve me as my messenger to the new servants I would raise. Saturated in magic, his immortal soul no longer mattered, chained in the fetters of my spell.

Satisfied, I sent him to do my bidding.

Yet we were disturbed. I sensed the desperate attempts of the intruders to thwart us. Amongst them, a wizard. The fire of his gift attempting to rouse answer from the latent energies within the burial chambers. Around him, soldiers from the garrison bristled to ward him, and prevent assault.

They had no concept of how complete my mastery of this place. With a flick of my will, the cadavers shambled to attack. They outnumbered the enemy three to one, but mindless dead faced professionals. At my whispered command, the vampires abandoned their feeding and joined them. Their blood-enhanced frenzy broke down the concerted defence and forced the soldiers to fight simply for their lives.

I caught a glimpse of my servant; the inky black stain of power speeding to the nearest resting place and spreading its shadow across the purity of the biers. In a blink of an eye the creation enveloped its victim, dark ichor seeped between minute cracks in the marble, absorbed within, then spewed forth crossing the room to a second tomb, beginning the process again. The first seemed somehow subdued, pure white had become grey and dull, strength in light, now seemed brittle by wear and dulled reflection.

Upon the stair entrance to the chambers, the wizard prepared to defend himself. Gouts of magical flame sprang from his fingertips to immolate the first, but the spell drained him, and it was all he could do to ward off the rabid charge of the second. In front, the remaining soldiers struggled to hold their position on the stairs, cutting down their mindless foes. The fools gained ground upon me and their wizard sensed the danger of mounting power.

The shadow spread to a third tomb, then a fourth, creeping about the entire hall. I felt the growing restlessness of the dead, as my creature disturbed their rest. Tomb after tomb he visited, pulling at the invisible chains that bound their souls to their bodies, weaving them into the fetters I had leashed about his own soul, creating a tangible web of magic.

The second vampire turned his attention to the soldiers; such valiant defence would not stand against the blood frenzy. Swords, cut and stabbed, yet still he bit, clawed and maimed. Ahead, the other vampire consumed by flames fought as well, and the wizard was forced to burn him to ash. Such an expenditure of power cost him, in terms of both physical strength and self-recrimination and made me smile. I have long since stopped caring for my creatures.

I concentrated and sent a clarion call to the seething sky. My magic, paled in comparison to the vortex. A part of myself sped as an arrow towards it, and sensed it answer.

With power of its own.

I became a conduit - a vessel channelling the darkness. Hungry magic coursed through me. Its power seared and unmade my flesh. There was pain, and the seductive call of death, yet to accept rest would deny the completion of my task and my will held me to my purpose, as did the will of he who would wish it.

My master.

Black fire shaped into a tight cylindrical vortex. In its hunger it shattered the stone roof. I gestured and it spewed forth to each tomb and the dead answered, screaming. From the crypts about me, they stirred. The commands placed upon them were irresistible. The tombs shook, the marble cracked and they rose in the remembered pain of every individual death. To enter undeath, they must be born again through the last agony of dying.

Bereft of support, the chamber began to collapse. At the stair the great stones that framed the archway crashed to the floor. Any pretence at stopping me now was abandoned, as the feeble wizard fled for his life, with three of his soldiers, my minions at their heels, chasing them as best they could.

I was beyond such concerns. My new servants rose from their rest. One, two, ten and twenty, then more. Decomposed hands, filled with unnatural strength shattered and defiled their marble prisons. Rotten flesh emerged, corrupted slaves to the purpose I represent.

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Power poured forth through me filling them, corrupting us both. The cords of my life wavered and strained, close to breaking. My intoxicated senses burned. More awakened; forty, hundred, hundreds; the numbers went on and the desecration grew, as the magic brought answer from the lowest levels. The old dead of ancient wars arose. The ground heaved, and stone shattered. I gave myself over completely to the weave. My mind fled upon the black ebony river that drove inexorably onward.

Finally when all was complete, the flow began to ebb and my consciousness returned. I became aware of my body once more. Pain brought me back. I lay buried within the ruins. Rubble clouded my vision completely. I breathed air laden with dust and the musk of the disturbed grave. I was trapped beneath remains of the chambers I had defiled, doomed to die a slow death.

A fitting end perhaps?

Yet even as I consigned myself to this, so my master remembered me and gave me another chance to serve him. I made out sounds of movement. Broken stones shifted and a faint light shone from above. I sensed magic at work, a strong spell of the earth. I heard fractions of voices chanting.

They tell me that I was unconscious when I was found, my mortal form so badly rent, they thought I might not live, though this gave them little concern. Rest and spellcraft renewed me, and rebuilt what there was left. I was borne away to be tended to and missed the end.

I am told the battle was a slaughter. A few of the people escaped to the harbour and the coastline, but they would be hunted down. Of the wizard I saw, nothing was known.

As for me, it was said that the citadel knew of my work and approved.

Despite my explanations you still will not accept us? You who claim righteousness cannot contemplate pure intoxication. There is no understanding until you have been amongst us, and tasted the darkness we offer. I am greater now, stronger than even then, for I have learnt from such power's use.

The only means by which you can learn is to do so as well.





Theology

The powers of faith and religion have in their time served to shackle, bind and constrict the possibilities of power as much as the ideologies of order have done. These believers hold such a blinkered and blind truth in their ideals, that they serve to make them possible. Each harkens back to one amongst their number who has passed into death, yet served to life and die by the ideals they follow. When expressing their power, these believers often shout the name of the one they choose to follow, naming it a God.

The belief and number of followers limit the powers of such gods. The mortals worship in ignorance and the filtered strands of power pass upwards from devotee to deity. This shared faith serves to shape and sustain all those in its hierarchy; priests, bishops, cardinals and more. The greater the magnitude of such faith, the stronger this relationship might be.

Other ways existed too. Belief through fear and myth can be just as evocative as regular ritual devotion. To become a whispered tale told to frightened children has in itself a power that can empower a wizard. This raw power is a source of harsher sustenance, as the wizard becomes influenced by the image of the ignorant.

The expressions of power gained by gifted believers depend upon their inclination and knowledge. In the days before the world's destruction, indoctrination to these hierarchies became systematic. The end for them, proved catastrophic as the old way of worship pales in comparison to the sustenance offered through manipulation of vortex energies amidst the fractured worlds.

Now those who cling to the archaic ways are left behind as we accept our new reality and explore the countless kingdoms that litter the void.

Since the earliest days when wizards discovered the empowerment of the faith of humanity they have encouraged mortals to worship them. This process has been refined over time, giving rise to the major religions of the old world.

The First Gods

A long time ago, the sky fell and the earth shook

Only Nüwa and her brother Fuxi survived.

They bit their fingers and mixed their blood with mud from the Yellow River.

And so the first mortals were made.

Some claim the world was made by one great creator who laboured day and night to build a home for her children. Others speak of the world being born from the body of a dying magus. These are but two stories. Walk amidst people in the settlements and you will find a hundred other legends about the making of old Earth.

Little lore remains about those who lived in the first time when the world was made. Many religions claim their deities as these architects, but such writing is partisan and dictated long after the facts.

If the creators exist, they are either far away or hidden amongst us, grieving for change wrought upon their world.

The Later Gods

During and after the first Chaos War, a new cadre of gifted wizards transcended their mortal forms. Over time, this practise became processional as humanity learned to worship the magical mortals who lived amongst them. These organised religions spread from nation to nation and kingdom to kingdom. Wizards who did not join the orders became its enemies.

The New Gods

After the destruction of our world, the wizards went to war over what remained. Cabalists and acolytes of the Horsemen fought the remnants of the great Conclave for control of the realms. Amidst a thousand

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conflicts, the Gods laboured. Some were ancient masters from the oldest times, returning to play their part in remaking the world, others were transcended wizards of the last days. With the change that has come to the world, all see a chance to remake reality as they wish it to be.

The Reverie

The dreams of gods, their prophecies or their visitations to the heavenly realms, the reverie has long been an acknowledged state of slumber that old and powerful wizards slip into for long periods of time.

In the great citadels of ancient cities, hundreds of wizard priests lay sleeping, to awaken with messages and portents from the eternal realm. Their descendants were bound to accept their words as truth and the fortunes of many religions waxed and waned on the word brought back from reverie.

Some believe that wizards in this slumber become incorporeal souls, journeying to the outermost realms to consult with the first Gods. Others name the reverie a delusion and disease that afflicts the weak.

Whichever explanation is true, those who return from the reverie are changed by its experience and can know things that defy explanation by any other means.





The Testimonies

The Testimony of Chaos

They call us anarchists, terrorists, wreckers and worse. Those who do cannot understand why we are what we are, how we have been forged and made through the iron fist of the privileged and slow entropic decay of all that would stifle the lives of the poorest and most unfortunate.

We followed the Horsemen and Chaos is the word given to our cause. It is not our word, it is born from fear and what we bring – a question to order and hierarchy, a question to fixed purpose, tradition and ritual. Why must things be done as they are done? What right do others have over us? Why must we accept their rule?

Throughout history we have been conditioned to submit to the dominion of others. The stories told to children praise knights, princes and kings, while casting out those who dare to question their right to lead.

With power comes responsibility. Not just the responsibility of use, but the responsibility of choice. We must be clear in how we act. For most, this means revealing the lies we tell ourselves about kindness and righteousness. The true motivation for most is their own betterment and our honesty in accepting this is another freedom, from flawed codes of ethics and morality.

Now, thanks to us, the world has changed and from this change may come a new society. Those of the blood and those beneath them are empowered to choose. We discover and explore the realms as we wish, trade, fight, take and give as we want, irrespective of obligation or prior claim.

We are as we are made and seek as we wish.

The Testimony of Nature

Without life, the universe would be an empty void. The dust of existence is potential. As it interacts with other dust, it sparks, producing the energy we call magic.

Our ancestors understood this best and, in a momentous act, forged a world from this dust. Such a place granted life the potential to grow and evolve, resulting in the miracle of Gaia that generations of us became a part of. We lived and walked amongst those made by the creation engine of our betters and intermingled with them, becoming both greater and lesser beings as we did so.

In time there were wars. As the world approached destruction, some of our kind acted to preserve it. Their artifice became known as the dooms – vast caverns beneath the land where the most dangerous expressions of magic were entombed.

This solution violated the original design of our ancestors and over time, Gaia began to collapse. The end when it came, was brought about by imbalance and constraint. Like a volcano our world erupted and boiled itself into remnants.

But from these remains comes new purpose. Gaia is not destroyed, only changed. We must adapt our ideas to her new state. The Fractured Worlds offer us the chance to remake the gardens of the past in vast multiplicity and variation. We shall bring harmony to these fragments, balancing the random spark with gentle shaping and beautiful life will return, grow and evolve once more.

The Testimony of Order

Without a grand plan everything we have been will be destroyed.

All things of worth came about through artifice. The creation of the world and the preservation of its remains were both acts of strategy and planning. There is an eternal need for order amidst the essential randomness of life, the taming and harnessing of this produces cohesion, purpose and productivity.

Without design, magic would not be our tool. It is the framework of spells, rituals and rites, the construction of items, weapons and portals that brings shape to this essential energy. Without this, the potential of existence would be wasted.

Lore finds its root in a selfless Apollonian ideal. We have always sought to understand and record our findings so that others might build upon our advances. Order and organisation brings us towards truth and the



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necessary knowledge that will make us masters of all we survey.

Order brings peace. When all know their place and function in society, what need is there to question and chafe? Contribution brings reward in all tiers of life. Hierarchies exist to control and manage such contribution, reward and productivity, yet nothing is perfect. Only through perfecting our systemisation of role and best defining the purpose of each individual, can we achieve a nirvana of civilisation.

It is such a goal that the Grand Conclave of Orders sought to bring about. It was formed to manage the imperfections of the world left to us. To bring about a deliverance for all with the blood of the gifted and indeed, all of humanity beneath us. This deliverance to a new god led society where the world's bounty would provide for all as each provided to the world, was our ideal and dream.

Now in these shattered ruins we must begin our work again. The stakes are too high to give up. The existence of life itself is dependent on us prevailing against the deluded and disorderous. We cannot allow them to distract us from forging a new purpose amidst the remnants of the old.





Word of the Gods



Arenji

"Mortal, whom do you seek?

I am Arenji. I am the wild magic that refuses to be constrained. I am free.

I am anger against tyranny; I bring life to those declared dead.

If you seek wisdom, hear me!

Before the world was broken I remade myself. A girl I was then, gifted but untaught, until T'ang Kuang-Chen taught me her path. Together we sat on high mountains and watched, and learned to let go of earthly forms. Taoism, she called it, but such archaic distinctions are long forgotten now.

There was a battle. One dynasty fought to overthrow another. It is always the way with humans, even among those who once were and now are... something else.

My father died protecting my mother. And then my mother also fell asleep. Does it shock you to hear

me speak so, of parents? Sometimes I speak these words aloud – mother, father – to see if they still have any meaning. In the dark corner of my existence I still sense them in faint hints of tender memory.

Kuang-Chen said to let them go, but I refused. What is wisdom... what is power if you cannot save those whom you love? Mortal, here is the key: the fearful will make rules to bind you, but the universe glories in the passion of the free! I saved my mother. She breathed again!

I gave everything of myself to do it. I slaughtered a thousand warriors of the Song empire. I even fought my mentor though she broke our bond. Do you yet realise the sacrifice you must make if you seek my path? Truly, you must die to be reborn! I gave all my humanity to save one life. Though the worlds are shattered now, such sacrifice still repays a thousand-fold! Are you willing? Are you ready?

I cannot tell you how to ascend to immortality. Ah, your frustration is plain, I see it. Yet, I do not know how it happened even for me. I died and was not, and then I was again, but changed, and yet was still the same.

Do you think I speak in riddles? Very well, I will speak plain. Stay here if you will and learn from me. Or leave and seek your own path. It matters not. Only do not fall prey to those who speak of light and order and beauty as if these things are theirs alone to grant, if only you crush yourself into their service! Rather, give yourself completely to your passion, your fierce love, your mad dreams, and know that there is nothing more beautiful or glorious than becoming entirely free!

I am the wild magic. I hold the keys to fearless life. I am Arenji."

Kahangriel

Harken well, mortal. For when Kahangriel the Icelord speaks, 'tis only for such as thee to tremble... or perish. Nor care I overmuch which it be.

It has been one hundred years since the other so-called gods have lain waste to this world. They quarrel as children would, each one seeking to mould existence to better suit their own ridiculous ambitions. Fools, all of them! Whatever power they wield, they have not earned it. Either they were born into it or had it fall into their laps. Never have they waded through the blood of their enemies as I have and will again.





Those weaklings know naught of what it takes to start from nothing and become the strongest of all Gods. All that I have won, I earned it with sweat and blood. For scores of years, I have raised myself over those who would lord over me. I have witnessed much folly whilst awaiting the proper moment to strike. But as surely as they refuse do my bidding then, so now shall they taste my wrath.

The time has now come to undo the devastation. The godlings must be toppled, so that a new empire of peace and prosperity is born. Since they dare challenge me, there will be but one reality: war. I will permit no heavenly despot to look down on anyone. Kahangriel alone will rule supreme over all there is.

Still, there is need for caution and strategy. Whilst others cannot match me in power, much less in wit, they do have strength in numbers. It is necessary to sap that strength ere I deal the final blow, and that requires an army of mages, or at least, a raggle-taggle assortment of mewling wizards.

For years I have been gathering weak, inept minions from all over the world. These I send into battle against the false Gods, willing fools marching to their deaths, so as to force the Gods to spend their magic energy. And for each of my lackeys that meets their doom, so does the power of my enemies dim, albeit not too much. I have been told that the last batch I sent had their heads put on spikes and that the dogs ate their headless bodies in the marketplace. But what of it? It was all those peasants were good for anyway.

You now replace those wizards, whose names I have already forgotten. Like waves crashing into rocks, you will play your own insignificant part in whittling away the enemy, until you fall and are yourself replaced. This means that although you perish, Kahangriel's ultimate victory is all but assured.

Go now. Ready your staff, prepare your spells and march against those tyrant godlings who would seek to undermine my power. Drown them in your blood!



Piala Alice

Why would you listen?

You know that I am Piala Alice, the Trickster, the Mischievous, and I carry blames by the score. A twisted immortal who takes the form of a child. Why would you trust a word I say? Yet, here you stand, and I can make only one answer: that where you see me, I once stood too.

I lived among humans for as long as nature allowed me. At first I tricked them freely, I played with them for sport. They learned, they responded, they withdrew, they ground me into a dust of doubt and nightmare and danced rituals to brush me away. They thought me only a creature distant from themselves, for there would be no human desire or joy in becoming such a thing; they could not consider that I might be one of them, trapped in the cycle I created.

Yet I did escape, for I learned of them also. Those who serve order say that all which is worthwhile comes from planning and understanding; and for all their faults, they are mostly correct. Remove these and mistrust, hate, and suffering alone remain.

Yet lovers of order will not face their truth. Plans must end and life does not. Even an immortal could not create a stratagem to last forever and live to see its course. All those who scheme, scheme for success and so beyond that end lies only failure.

Order dreams of changing the world, so that it may be wonderful once changed. But the hardest truth of all is this - when change stops, everything decays. People lose their purpose, fall to boredom and corruption and random sin. Their dream is nothing but a dream, yet it is valuable; seeking it drives them forward, creates the things they desire. When they learn their dream is a fantastic journey to emptiness they do not embrace the journey, they jump into the emptiness. For their sake, the lie must stand, but it remains a lie. And all progress, all their order, all their desire, is due to them being tricked.

And so I persist. I escaped the nightmares when I saw the truth in such dreams. A knife in the dark, a slip in the rain, a deal gone wrong; yes, I am still there, but also in a treasure discovered, a miraculous cure, a chime of joyous news. Do not confuse me with others - my acts are purposeful, not wild. Of knowledge unbal-



anced rather than absence.

Join me, for I am all that may persist. While I oppose frozen sterility, I do not favour dark death in Chaos. Distrust me if you will, for action amidst distrust is my path; or take me for truth and be enlightened. The time has now come to undo the devastation. The godlings must be toppled, so that a new world of peace and prosperity is born. Since they dare challenge me, there will be but one reality: war. No matter the cost, I will create a world where no heavenly despot looks down on anyone; a world where Kahangriel alone rules supreme over all there is.



Ariianrhod

A crowd gathered, newly arrived from Limbo. In a clearing at the edge of a lake they gathered, to hear the words of a God. Though it was night, a full moon shone brightly above them and drove the shadows away. Silvery threads glinted off the water of the lake. The water was still. Everything was still. No breeze, no sound other than the vague murmurings of the people gathered.

Priests standing before the crowd began to chant a prayer in unison: "Ariia the Foundation, shelter us from the maelstrom of Chaos. Be the bedrock of order upon which we may stand without fear, to build a better tomorrow. Ariia Shadowkiller, drive the darkness away with your perfect light. Give us the strength to seek truth, to better understand our universe and ourselves, to protect the bastions of Law that float in a

sea of madness. Ariianrhod, Our Lady of Light, Moonmaiden, dwell within us now and forever."

A figure appeared, clothed in a cloak of pure light. The moon grew brighter as she approached, and a great sense of calm silenced every mouth. No crickets chirped. No wolves howled. It seemed as though the world itself hushed itself in deference to this God.

The figure raised her hand in a gesture of benediction and spoke with her eyes closed. "Welcome, my friends. Welcome to this island of Law. My worshipers and I have labored here tirelessly since the Schism that destroyed Earth, preserving the power of order, impeding Chaos, and reaping the benefits of peace and stability."

"Many of you are humans without magical ability. If you choose to join with me, then know that your person and property will be protected by my laws. You need have no fear of thugs who come to rob your family or burn your homes."

"Some of you have great magical talents. I urge you to join the Shadowkillers of Luna, an ancient order that I revived after the Schism. The foot soldiers of Chaos always seek to impinge upon our righteous pursuits. You wizards hold the power to drive them back, expand our holdings, and restore crystalline perfection to the frenzied ether that surrounds us."

The glowing figure paused for a moment, dropping her hands to her sides. "Some of you may have already experienced the depredations of those who call themselves gods but seek only to prey upon your fears for their own gain. Know that I existed long before wizards began to use religion as a means to an end. I ascended to immortality more than four thousand years ago. I have perspective that the younger gods lack. I have never seen those who worship me as a means to gain power. Rather, I see the religion that surrounds me as my worshipers' route to transcendence."

The divine figure held her hands in the air, palms turned upward toward the heavens. "I am Ariianrhod, called Ariia Shadowkiller, and I ask for your help in re-forming our world."



Baldr

Massive, obsidian walls surround a shrine. From within come wails of the dying and groans of the dead. Armed and prayerful, a small army of the living approach to bring ruin to the damned.

Too soon and too many, a shambling horde spews through a gap in the shrine's walls. The living, however, do not retreat. Forming a phalanx of shields and setting their staves, they cry out their hope, "BALDRLUX! BALDRLUX! BALDRLUX!" And so, she comes.

A thunderous roar announces an immense, golden dragon. She swoops over the lands before them. Her breath brings a bright, burning fire which cleanses the field of undead. The soldiers cheer.

A figure flies from the shrine and lands before the dragon. Though bearing robes and staff of a wizard, spectral tentacles wafting from its head herald a god.

Without ado, this divinity of death raises its staff and strikes the dragon with a dark bolt of magic. Thus dies Baldrlux, ancient avatar of the elder god of wonder and progress.

A sneer on the dragon slayer's face quickly turns to terror as infernal heat and blinding light explodes from Baldrlux's corpse. When the living see again, only scorched earth remains. Stunned silence prevails.

Another figure descends from the clouds to the newly barren ground. He seems a man, a wizard and a god. He faces the living and says, "I am Baldr." The living fall to one knee.

Baldr commands, "Rise. Do not kneel to any god, including me."

Some express confusion.

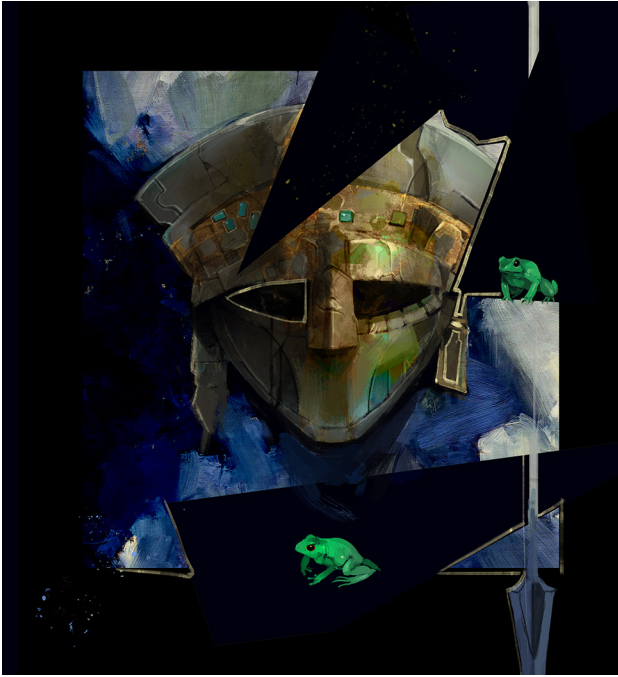
Baldr explains, "I walked the Old World before men built their first cities. Under many different names, I ruled tribes, kingdoms, and then empires. Millennia of peoples worshipped at my shrines. Legions prayed for my justice. But I was a horrible magistrate, for no mere man could gainsay my will when... not if... I acted unjustly."

Baldr holds the gaze of those who look. "Mortals are the best judges of other mortals. For death ends all of you eventually. Yes, men will make fools of themselves. But mortality tempers their judgments. There is no such temperance for the tyranny of immortal gods."

"Baldrlux sacrificed herself to help you destroy the stronghold of an immortal who sought to rule you. Do not let her death be vain. Honor her purpose. Master the arts of magic and steel that will empower you to forge new worlds. Humanity is capable of so much wonder and progress." The clouds part and reveal the Vortex. Baldr glances at it briefly. "I have seen it."

"I rose from a long sleep to find that fool gods and their chattels broke the Old World. Now, only you can right this wrong. I may teach. I may suggest. I shall not rule. Rule yourselves. And if you will it, help me destroy the gods who would replace your futures with their own."

Cheering acclaim, wizards and their vassals rise, charge past Baldr, and ransack the shrine. From this carnage, the Order of Baldrlux is born.



Stubla

Quick! Quickly!

Clarity consumes me and it is oh so rare these days. I am Stubla. Since my ascendancy, the world has become my trap; I sit within its walls, somewhere within its great maze. I am a God. I may have become so yesterday or a thousand years ago, I know not.

A million visions of what is and what could be assault my mind, appearing to me at once, screaming the truth of things in grey shadow and vivid colour alike. The future, the past, every event that did and did not happen flow through me like a stream. I am shown the correct path to take, to save myself and my followers and it is bloody.

To others I must appear as meek, a madman in a mask, afflicted with mind-altering potions. I may look chaotic to the onlooker, but there is a greater plan, if only I can explain everything to you in this precious moment.

I am Mapechu. Called to godhood in the old world

whilst in ecstatic dance, attempting to summon rain that had become a stranger to my land. At that moment, the spirit bonded with me, raising me and trapping me in eternal euphoria and gifting me with knowledge without boundary. I am doomed to know all, but I am unable to detail this knowledge to mortal or God alike.

I am not alone in my journey. My shamanistic mask became living at my ascension. An onlooker's gaze will trap its mood, freezing its features like the stone it is made of. People hear its voice in their mind, a sound like granite chipping away at flint. It understands and communicates my needs to those around me, but my prescience remains apart from it.

At some point the world burned around me and I barely noticed. The skies shattered and the earth became dust. It was a brighter future than many I have seen. I welcomed its coming and rode its inevitability like a bird rides the wind.

My followers that survive indulge in all manner of poisons in honour of my enlightened state of mind. In this way they fight my enemies and aid me in invading the realms of others, with the intent of stealing the gifted for ourselves so to swell our numbers further.

It begins to cloud again, I see what is and what could have been. Through induced enlightenment you too will see the truth of things.

Join me.



Tyrynt

Death. Our one great enemy. Make no mistake: It is not the soldier that takes the life of your comrade. It is not the disease that strikes down those you love. It is death, my friend. That ugly tradesman of souls. For without death, there exists only life and victory!

Many ages ago, to protect my people, to be the great king they deserved, I set in motion a plan to defeat that one true enemy.

Like the flower that draws the bee, the ravages of battle always brought that creature. Upon a hill overlooking a great battle, the creature sat upon his beast, waiting for his moment to collect the souls of those who had fallen. But that day, he would not live to see his due. That day, it was I who collected that creature's life.

The spoils of victory were great. His armour unlike any-



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thing made by man. A metal strong, bright, and flowing with a power beyond even the knowledge of my most gifted advisors. I ordered the armor melted and forged into new weapons. The greatest I kept for myself. The others I bestowed as gifts upon my faithful.

Through the ages we wielded the creature's power for ourselves. My kingdom grew. My people flourished. We knew no death. Only life. Only victory.

Then came the rift. The destruction of the world brought down all we had built and known. Many were lost along with the old world. Those who were not, I lead to a new home in this strange, fractured world. A home in which the power we harnessed so long ago, grew, drawing a new power from the Vortex.

As our power grew, so did our numbers. Those seeking to lord over death, rule over life, and dominate in the field of battle, found a new home among us.

Death is the great enemy, my friend. But we have defeated that enemy. My followers wield its power while others still fear it. Victory belongs to those with the power over death!



Voltalis

Denizens of Limbo, hear my words. For too long did I stand by and watch idly as those who claimed to be superior wrestled for power. Those who would claim their knowledge and judgement to be absolute as they bent and twisted the forces of chaotic and lawful magic, shaping each to their own will. It was their blind and uncontrolled greed that tipped the balance of our world. Destroying the careful balance of our home and causing it to be torn asunder. The Great Schism that ultimately ended the life you knew was the final and most heinous crime.

I say to you, join me! Have you not suffered for long enough? Do you not tire of your fate being in the hands of those who are blinded by their own self-obsession for power? It is time to rise. No longer will

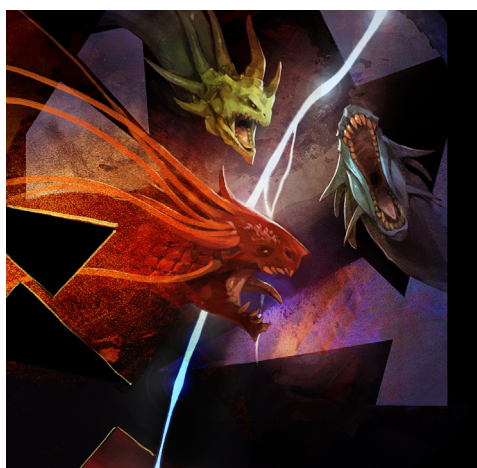
you be treated as pieces on a board, manipulated and sacrificed for the gain and amusement of others. Those who choose to stand with me do so at my side and not in my shadow.

Our old world and way of life is behind us, but let us be sure to shape a future that we control. Unite with me, Voltalis, and together we will fight to restore balance. Let us oppose all those who would seek to gain total domination. Once I was content to live amongst you as equals. I shared in your lives, your cultures; observing, learning. Now, I no longer hide in the shadows. I reveal my true form, my true power – as a God of the first times.

Just as I was once accepted as an equal of man, you shall be accepted as an equal of me. With my guidance, you will transcend, become as great as you can be.

It is time to step forward and become all that you can. It will not be an easy task. The path ahead of you is fraught with dangers and temptations. With my guiding hand and with our collective determination, we will have the power to control our own fate, our own future. To rebuild the life we once had.

I say again, join with me, Voltalis. Together we will achieve peace and serenity.



The Three

We who come before you are to be known as Three. I am the speaker known as Green. We were of the first Gods. Once we were each separate beautiful Dragons who soared above the heavens ruling in regal might. One night a still unknown entity, obscured by arcane means, procured a meeting with all of us. In that meeting we were assailed by foul magic that transformed us into this cursed visage before you.

Now we are chained, forced to share this body and take turns in its existence a mere fraction of the power we once had individually. Though we are united in finding information about our assailant and bringing them to justice.



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We come to you with a contest. My brothers and myself will compete with each other with your help in finding our weapons of power - the Sword the Bow and the Shield. They were taken from us that night we were changed. We believe finding them again would break our immortal chains and free us to once again rule the stars. If you chose to help us whatever faction that unites the three devices would be granted great power. If you chose to serve us all you would need to do is pray and say aloud, "I serve The Black." or "I serve The Green." Or, lastly "I serve The White".

Once you have chosen then you shall be contacted and enlightened.



Beamster

The skies of Limbo pulsate and swirl above the assembled crowd, as if judging the people below. The wise learned long ago to avert their glaze from the seething heavens.

A tall figure stands in front of the multitude, wearing golden armour with a sun emblem on his breastplate and a raised lion helmet on his head.

"I welcome you, wizards, wanderers and pilgrims", the man says. He glances across the crowd from left to right and I feel the warmth of his stare. "Long ago, when the natural world was still whole and alive, I travelled the across the land, acting as a guide, helping to bring order and harmony."

"But then, after the dire meddling of wizards, the great schism tore the world apart and all was lost. All that remains is eternal strife and chaos."

"Looking for answers, I sought knowledge in the great citadels of the ancient cities, where I dreamed of the old world. My soul wandered across lands of idyllic meadows and clear blue skies. I found peace and felt renewed."

"Countless years passed and I forget myself, free from disharmony behind walls of stone and iron, until one day, I had an enlightening visitation. Before me stood a majestic lion with a fiery mane. It opened its mouth and spoke thusly."

"Arise from your slumber. Your people need you. Your world needs you. Use magic unbinds magic. Reach for the vortex and the world will be renewed. The sun will be shine once more!"

The man falls silent and gazes out across the gathered crowd. Slowly he raises his hands into the air. His armour radiates with a golden glow, surround him in a haze, the sky above fades from relentless chaotic swirls into peaceful azure blue.

"I implore you all, we must stand together against the ever present corruptions of chaos and the rigid judgements of law. We must combine our might and magic in order to seek and capture the mana flux machines across the shattered realms. It is essential that we meld together this mana flux energy with our own. Only when this is done, shall we be able to access the vortex from the outside and harness its power. Then we can reverse the damage caused by the schism and repair the world, making it whole again."

"Join me, Beamster, in my crusade to restore our past, to bring back the beautiful lands and kingdoms of our ancestors, free from law and chaos, free from magic. So shall it be!"



Magic

To you the eternal judge, I commend my scribbles, whilst enduring the torture that you have condemned me to share with the lowest forms of existence. Like a Phoenix, I yearn to fly once more, and to regain the truth of my eternal birth, and yet as languish within this fragile and foolish mortal form I know I am cursed to live within its confines and limits of endurance.

From all of my investigations, I have been able to ascertain much about the inalienable truths of this world that I am condemned, and shackled to exist within.

Within this land, there is a flame that burns brighter than any mortal might see or comprehend. It burns so bright, it is black, burns so hot it is cold, and feeds from all that it touches.

That flame is the magic.

In this land there are creatures known as moths, drawn to seductive light of a candle. In many ways, I am but a moth to the magic. I am not alone in being able to see its shimmering light, yet I am alone in understanding truly what it means.

The magic burns brightly in this new reality. Not as brightly as it once did, yet bright enough to suit my purpose. Once in years long past it was much brighter, those were the days of the Elder, when the gifted understood that power was a part of them, as much a part of nature as their right to live and breathe. Yet in their marvelling of their existence, they lost sight of the possibility of their birthright and so lost much of the magic they once had.

The magic remains writhing and howling around us, yet many cannot hear its sweet screams. It is an unpredictable beast, untameable, and uncontrollable at times, yet docile and servile in others. The magic has no purpose but its own, and will accept no master, but one who would choose to share its truth, and its quest. The weaving strands twist and turn throughout existence, trailing far away into the void and beyond.

Only the gifted may wield magic. These are expressions of our purpose made form by will and gift.

Magic is everywhere. Those of the oldest blood can sense it and manipulate it. The strongest are the wielders of spells, the weakest, crafters of items and wardings. All substance contains something of this essential energy, which we call mana.

The presence of mana in all things is a cause for hope. A wizard with great knowledge and ability can manipulate and change the very fabric of existence. Wizards acquire mana naturally and can manipulate it through a variety of expressions. Such actions are exertion and equivalent to both physical and mental exercise at the same time.

Overuse of magic can drive a wizard to exhaustion. To offset this, initiates practice repeated gestures and forms, training the mind and body into patterns of expression. Artificers and alchemists forge items that can absorb mana and support the wizard in its use.

The long term effect of casting magic can vary. The sensation is ecstatic for some and the aftermath, a despair. Many powerful wizards have lost themselves in amidst this exertion, becoming hooked on the euphoria it generates. However, others exercise control and retain a sense of themselves.

Each wizard's method of using magic is different. However, there are some broad categories of expression. The most well-known are rites, spells, rituals, wards.

Rites

These are minor expressions of magic learned by repetition and used to help those with talent, but no understanding explore their gift with magic safely. Rites can do little harm.

Making a flower bloom out of season, heating water, starting a fire, all these things are ways in which a child can practice and train their mind to control the power surging through their blood. Such expressions give the young wizard a role within a family, clan or tribe.



Spells

The most common expression of magic, these frames are well known to the different scholars. In the old world, sanctioned colleges of wizards would teach these as basic principles to young initiates. Now, such things are picked up and learned where possible. Throughout time, the frames have been adapted to suit the individual, rather than trying to perfectly replicate the instruction, this is an essential interpretation for any wizard trying to master their gift.

Much lore is retained in Limbo, but only the theoretical principles can be taught owing to the proximity of the vortex and its tendency to draw away magical energy the moment it is expressed.

Many spells are learned in duels and war. One might note the way another summons a rare creature or manipulates energy and replicate such an action, tuning it to fit with a different gift.

Rituals

Elaborate ceremonies of magic that involve collaboration between wizards form the basis of a ritual. The sharing of power is the essential component.

Some mistake the planning and structure of such magic for being a restriction or a skew towards order and away from chaos. However, whilst rituals have a basic requirement of sharing power, there can be spontaneity into the ways in which they are performed.

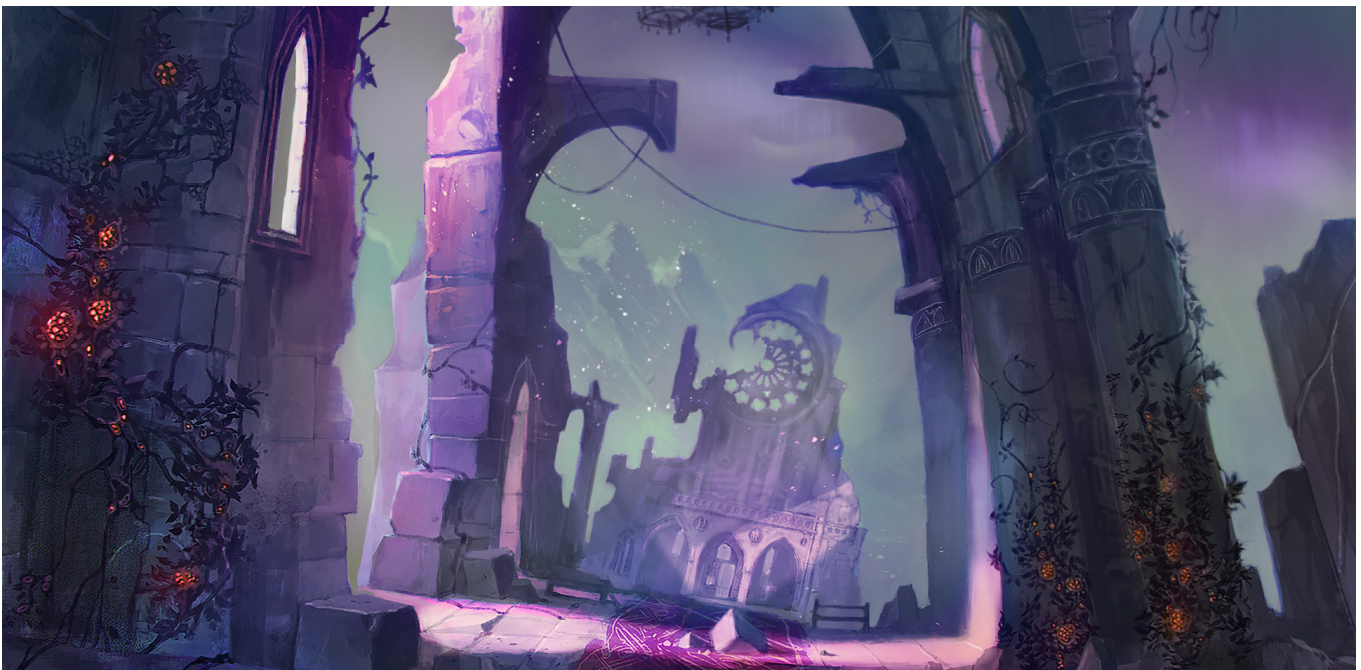
Many darker rituals involve sacrifice and torture. Emotion, faith and imagination are all expressions of magic used by the orders in the old world to empower their wizards. These themes of the past are pale shades to the seething power of the vortex, but they can be conduits to enhance the magic a wizard might invoke.

Wards

Written protections and empowerments etched onto objects, skin, stone and more, wards are usually defensive or triggered expressions, let loose by a predefined action.

The first gods understood wards best and wrote magic into the substance of the world itself. After them, the ancients used it to construct the dooms that imprisoned creatures in the days after the first chaos war. Gradually, the knowledge of ward working was lost and became less powerful until the world's destruction and the vortex appeared. Now wards lie at the heart of the great machines created to enhance and focus magic on the Fractured Worlds.

Artificers are skilled in the construction of wards. They make use of runes, sigils and other inscriptions to codify magic into prepared forms. Most are part of one of the orders of Limbo, or given patronage by a powerful wizard to work on items and armour for their personal use.





The Journal of the Gifted One



Entry 1: Memories

As I watched the light fade from my mother's eyes a rough calloused hand gripped my shoulder.

"Let her go my friend," said a voice I'd known all my life, but one that had never spoken to me. I looked up into an ancient face, one that had seen the world before Limbo, the world of our long past.

"Come," said Vyasa. I nodded, stood up and followed him through the door of our dwelling; a broken ruin of wood and stone patched together by four generations of my family. "When you rejected us, I believed it would not be the end of the story," he added. "You were destined to return, eventually."

We passed through the catacombs towards the great tower. Vyasa led, his long staff clicking as he walked, thin white robes a contrast to his leathery dark skin. As I followed, I could feel the stares from the darkness all around us, grudging respect, jealousy, murderous intent, all of these and more from the clans that survived in the remains of the old city. All they understood was selection, favouritism for our family. None of them believed I was the last.

The last of my line.

I knew what he was, what he is. Others saw only what he represented; a wizard trained in the arts of magic descending from on high to bestow its blessing on those left behind. They didn't understand how these things worked. How the gift chose its hosts, how

it chose me.

We climbed higher, away from the remnants of humanity, towards its masters and mistresses; the wizards. Vyasa moved over the broken rocks like water, his movements showing no sign of his age or weakness. "When you were branded, we claimed you," he said as he forged away. "Yours is not the fate of the weak. The caduceus claims you as one of us."

"What will happen now?" I asked.

Vyasa stopped, turned towards me and smiled, displaying gums and ruined teeth. "You will be tested," he said, "if you pass, you will be trained, then you will truly be one of us and ready to serve humanity."

I frowned. The words did not sound like they were for me. "How can we help those we leave behind?" I asked.

"By granting them a better future," Vyasa said.

I glanced back at where we'd walked from; the wreckage of the old world strewn across the land under the dark and seething broken sky of the vortex. Thousands of people existed down there, struggling to live moment to moment. "They deserve a better future," I said softly.

"Yes," said Vyasa, "and together, we will help them."



Entry 2: The Next Morning

Shadows and shapes flickered on the other side of my eyelids. I knew they were waiting for me to awaken, but I ignored the temptation, luxuriating in the soft bed given to me on my arrival, the last rebellion of humanity among its rulers.

A hand touched my shoulder, gently but firmly. Still I resisted. "You can lay here no longer," said a testy voice. Finally I opened my eyes.

The thin face that leaned over me was solemn, I found myself staring into an elderly man's grey eyes, his skin pasty white, a contrast to mine. A trembling hand seized my wrist from under the covers and turning it to reveal the caduceus brand. On seeing it, he grunted in acknowledgement. "Prepare yourself. The mistress is waiting." With that, he let me go, turned away and left me be, closing the door behind him.

The room was no brighter than it had been when I'd been brought here and told to rest. The lambent glow of the vortex from the window barely lit the stone walls and wooden floor. Candles burning in brackets at intervals and a large pile of blue rocks glowed at the end of the bed. A steaming cauldron of water and fresh clothes were left for me on the back of a chair. A plain white robe, spun from thick cloth. I picked it up, trying to feel its origin, but couldn't place it.

I stripped off my worn garments and climbed into the cauldron. Magic warmed the water; it came from etched symbols carved into the iron. I could see them all the way to the bottom, lining the whole interior of the vessel. Water this pure outside of the domain of wizards did not exist. But it was not unfamiliar to me. I remembered the experience from my first visit to a tower, more than ten turns ago.

I thought about the words spoken to me on waking. Who was the mistress? Where was Vyasa – the old mystic who'd brought me here?

I bathed slowly, enjoying the sensation as I scraped away the grime of the world below, the dirt of Limbo's tunnels and passages; all I'd ever known apart from that one brief moment when I'd been plucked away as a child, tested and given the mark. This time I would not be hurried, no matter who waited the other side of the door.

As I dressed, I looked around again, trying to memorise the details of the room, comparing it with my memory. A single tapestry hung beside the bed. The faded colours made it hard to recognise everything, but I could make out castle walls and misshapen figures climbing them from outside while soldiers fought in defence with bows, arrows, axes and swords. Above them stood a figure holding a staff, the flames from its tip, still visible.

The door creaked open again. The man peered around the door, his face set in a stern expression. "Hurry now," he said. I considered asking him about Vyasa, but held my tongue. His answers would not satisfy me. He bore no caduceus. Instead, I nodded and moved to the door. He grunted in approval and walked on.

I followed him noting the etched icon on the wall in the corridor; a strange white star on red. We turned right and went up some steps before coming to a set of doors, both engraved with the same symbol and illuminated by beds of blue glowing rock. The old man produced a key, opened a door and gestured for me to go inside.

I did.

Entry 3: The Meeting

I walked past the man, through the doors into a grand hall, the like of which I'd never seen before. Even my memories of the test did not feature a place such as this, a vast chamber, its roof vaulted and so high above me that six men might walk in this room stood on one another's shoulders. At the far end, I glimpsed another set of doors.

I gaped, my eyes roaming the expanse, trying to take it all in. Tapestries and strange symbols covered the walls and floor. Huge transparent cases lined up to my right. At first I thought they contained hulking



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guardians, but as I moved towards them, I saw the figures were statues, wearing clothes and armour, the sort worn by the people in the tapestry, but with long tubes attached to a backpack and the white star on red painted on their shoulders. Each bore signs of damage, great cracks and scars in the armoured plates. One of the helms had been smashed in half.

"My time is not infinite."

I turned towards the voice. A woman with short spiky white hair sat in the centre of the room crouched over a small square table. A second seat was empty in front of her. She gestured to it with her right hand; her left was a shrivelled misshapen thing resting on the arm of her chair. She caught me looking and smiled. "There are many dangers to leaving Limbo. If you survive long enough, you may experience them for yourself."

I sat down. Her words were strangely spoken with a flavour I had never heard before. "You've journeyed away from Limbo?"

"Of course, most wizards do." Her smile became strained, slipping into disapproval, "unless they can no longer master the portal."

I took in more of her appearance. She seemed younger than both Vyasa and the servant I'd met, but her eyes were old. Scars puckered the side of her bare neck, disappearing under an ornate blue tunic covered in writing I didn't understand. Her left leg also appeared twisted and weak. "You don't travel anymore," I said.

A thin trace of the smile returned, but no warmth came from it. "You're old for an acolyte, which is why I tolerate the impertinence."

"I apologise," I said, because it seemed the right thing to say.

She shrugged. "Why are you so old to come here? Melmoth said you already wear the brand."

"I do."

"Show it to me."

I pulled up my sleeve and did so; she glanced in its direction briefly then gestured at the table between us. "Do you play?"

I looked down, noting the different coloured squares on the table surface for the first time. As I stared, small counters appeared on the darker hatching. "What game is this?" I asked.

"It's called *Spires*," the woman said. "We teach it to new students so they might learn a valuable lesson."

"And what is that?"

"That life isn't always what it seems."

I frowned at the counters, trying to see what she meant. "I suppose you must play to understand," I said.

"Yes," the woman replied. "But you already understand life - you have lived - others have not," She leaned forwards. "Besides we're playing a different game."

"Are we?"

"Yes, there are questions you wish to ask me and in turn, I am curious about you; far more interesting than pieces on a table." She waved her hand and the counters vanished. "Ask of me then."

I chewed my lip thoughtfully. "Where is the man who brought me here?"

She smiled again. "You know his name?"

"Do you?"

"Everyone knows of Vyasa," she replied. "He wanders as he wishes, no ward or wall may contain him. His purpose was to seek you out and bring you here, so I might find potential in you. After that, he travels on, the next waif or stray to find and drag to the tower and door."

"What do you want with me then?" I asked.

The woman shook her head. "Our game has turns and it isn't yours. Why did you leave after they branded you?"

I shrugged; answering that meant little to me. "My family couldn't cope without me. I went back to them. When my mother died, I came here."

The woman nodded slowly as if I'd given her some precious lore. "I want your gift and your power," she said. "I will free the chains that bind your true nature and by doing so, make you strong. If you stumble though, I will claim you and renew myself."



"I remember stories like that," I said. "My mother once told me wizards eat the children who're brought here.."

"Perhaps some do," she replied. "Your turn now to ask a question."

I thought for a few moments, but the next inquiry was obvious. "What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Out there," I waved my hands. "Beyond Limbo."

"Limbo is existence waiting for something better. Some, like your mother, cannot wait long enough. Beyond are countless worlds to be discovered," the woman's eyes grew distant. "They are as different as rock and tree, but out there people don't just exist, they live." Her gaze returned to mine and she tapped the table with the index finger of her good hand. "For turns and turns, the gifted are tested and trained in the towers to be sent out through the portals into the Fractured Worlds. They discover new realms where the poor remnants of humanity might thrive. These gifted as lords return to lead others with them into new kingdoms. Each follower owes all to their wizard lord. Sometimes the price of a new life is too high."

I frowned. "Surely anything is better than being here?"

"Really?" the woman scowled at me. "People starve on the broken stones, but at least they starve free."

Would you give up that freedom for the whim of a tyrant to sate your aching belly?" She sat back. "Some would, some would not. Each of us has lines we will not cross. That is why you went back to your family, wasn't it?"

I flinched from her stare but nodded. "Yes I suppose it was."

"Good," the woman said. "Then I learn your limits." Her right hand reached out and a long stick faded in to existence in her grip. She leaned on it and hauled herself up from her seat. "Now we shall train you and see your strengths."

I rose from my chair as well. "I'm ready," I said.

The woman laughed. "I doubt it," she replied and turned away.

Entry 4: The Way of Awakening

I wake up as the bell sounds. In the first days, I could not hear its chime. I still bear the whip scars from Melmoth rousing me and doling out my punishment. Gradually though, I have learned its sound; more of a feeling than something you consciously think of. The bell stirs your blood for the day to come.

I wash in the stone bowl and dress in the robe of the acolyte. Over time, the plain white adorned with symbols that mark my progress, each confirming an achievement under the eye of the elders, each a step towards becoming one of them. But I will never truly be their equal. Always someone will know more; always something to learn.

I leave my chamber, turn left and head into the tunnels, descending into the warm depths of our domain. Humanity only sees the tower standing over them, confirming the rule of the wizards. They do not know of the vast caverns beneath the surface of Limbo that burrow into its core. Tunnels and pipes channel the heat upwards distributing it to the region around us. Without this, most of the people surviving amidst the ruins would surely die.

In times past they say that the sun warmed the lands, but between it and us lies the vortex; its seething, undulating clouds a blessing and a curse to all those born with the magic. Herein is the source of our power, but it is also the walls of our prison. Only the great door; a portal in the highest room offers a chance of escape and only those strong and learned enough in the magical arts can invoke it.

I walk further into the depths, the glowing blue rock light and memory my only guides. There are others here, as driven as I to their tasks. White robes bustle past, no-one looking or pausing. Each man and woman focused only on what they must do and where they must go.

Such is the path of the acolyte; to learn enough of magic that I might rise to the peak of this place, to face the door and escape the prison of this world.

But to reach the top, you must start from the bottom.



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I can taste the heat in the air. No human could stand these temperatures. It is in this cauldron the gift of our blood is unlocked. Here, near to the centre, where the last strains of power exist, here at the heart of Limbo.

The tunnel opens out into a cavern, the ceiling so low that I must crouch to enter. The world throbs now, pulsing in my head, hands and feet as I move. My throat is dry and the sharp stone abrades my skin as I brush against it, but this is small discomfort compared to what is to come.

Further into the shadows, crawling on my belly into the depths. Ahead I see what I seek, liquid rock; a molten flowing river, scabbed with cooling stones. I thrust my hands inside and grit my teeth against the pain.

Every day I do this, since the first day I came here, welcoming agony as I have been taught, channelling it to rouse the power in my blood. I sense it stir; a retaliatory warmth from my chest answering the challenge of the lava on my fingers.

The elders tell us this has been the way of awakening from the beginning, when the gifted walked amongst the mundane in ignorance and only learned of their power through chance. In time, those first ones found the means for others to transcend their mortality. We are taught that life as a wizard is always this; a path of transcendent change through magic, from one form, to the next, to the next and so on.

I withdraw my hands and climb out. I walk back along the passageway, retracing my steps towards my room. Once inside I undress and bathe then don fresh robes.

A second bell sounds. I leave again and turn right. This time, heading up the stairs.

Entry 5: The Library

"How did we come to live like this?"

Melmoth raised his head at my question. The old servant wore a habitually weary expression, suggesting anything I had to ask had been asked before. He was at home here amongst the tower's repository of writings. "Such an answer is not best earned through storytelling," he said. "You still have much to read."

I raised my eyes to our audience; shelf upon shelf of books, ascending far into the darkness above. Lanterns and glowstones were spread around at intervals, providing enough light to study without unintended distraction. "If I am to go through all this before I find answers, I fear I will die in here," I said.

"Some folk would consider that a privilege."

"Perhaps, but I do not think the elders brought me here for that reason."

Melmoth sighed and managed to look older, if that were possible. "There are some who say knowledge is power. They are wrong. For forty years I have come to this library every day and read its contents. In the first days, there was but one row of documents, now hundreds line these walls, but only a small number exist from before Limbo and the end of the world. I know more than you, yet you will be the one empowered to make change."

I pushed away the book I'd been reading, an account of a wizard named Torquemada on his first expedition through the portal. "My grandfather was a child before the tumult," I said. "He only spoke of his memories to help us sleep."

Melmoth smiled. "Of golden fields and sunsets no doubt? Indeed, the days before had those, but it also had war, disease, famine and death in abundance. The harsh land of Limbo has taught us the wasteful way in which we once lived. No-one wastes their lives here in strife with their peers. There is too little left to fight over and too little left to fight with."

"Do you remember it then?" I prodded gently. "Did you live in those times?"

"Does it matter?" Melmoth sniffed. "Dreams of the past are of use only when they may shape the present. Wizards come and go from this place, learning the ways of the elders until they are ready for the door.

What knowledge they take with them to the other side determines their actions. Some return having found new worlds and seek to liberate their families and friends. Others do not return at all. Perhaps they are dead? Perhaps they do not care. What you learn in this library shapes you. You may wish to bring



back a land you know only from story and song, but it will never truly be that place, it will be of itself," he gestured at the shelves. "What you read here will mean more in that moment, when you need to make a choice."

I thought about his words for a long time after that.

Entry 6: The Feast

There are few occasions when acolytes speak to one another. We have no bond as each seeks their own path towards the great door. The elders' favour us in turn with their time and teachings, the game is deadly and punishment severe.

No acolyte may harm another or steal from another, but we are encouraged to scheme and plot. Competition is fierce, but the reward, incredible.

It is a lonely life here compared to my time with a family. Love and trust softened the hunger and tears.

In the tower we wait for nothing, save companionship and kindness. These are the scraps to hunt down amidst the trials and learning.

I learned of the coming of the strangers sometime after they actually arrived. Acolytes were summoned in rotation to serve the table of the elders and after three days, I was ordered to attend.

There were four of us, stood in the corners of the dining hall dressed in our white garb. A long table lay before us, the smell of rich food, exotic and flavoursome a maddening temptation to our empty stomachs. We were left to wait for a time. Not a word was spoken between us, but we all eyed and measured each other. I had not spent so long in a room with peers and knew I was considered least amongst them, being oldest, but also the newest arrival.

I stared across from me at a girl, younger than I by some years. Our blood grants us an ageless quality in our maturity by comparison to others without gift, but she had yet to reach ripeness, being of fifteen turns or so. When I lingered too long, she returned my gaze with a spirited glare of her own and it was I who was forced to look away.

At that moment, the doors opened and laughter spilled into the hall from the corridor beyond. Two men in long ornate robes of blue and gold ambled into the room. One was blonde haired and with eyes like old sky, wearing an armoured breastplate and pauldrons similar to those I'd seen on the statues in Mistress Abraxia's private study the first time I'd met her, the other, dark of eye and bald, was slight and less martial in the way he carried himself.

"You cannot truly believe these things, Talien," the bald man scoffed. "How could such creatures survive the Schism?"

"They did and now they thrive," the wizard named Talien replied. "Wait until you taste them."

"So good of you to bring an example for us, my lord," Mistress Abraxia said as she entered after them, her limp a distinct contrast to their easy manner.

"No less worthy than my offering of Giantflesh," the bald man said.

"No indeed, Lord Sallis," Mistress Abraxia replied. She made straight for her chair, clearly pained by the effort of the stairs outside. A flick of her finger brought me out from the wall to ease it out and help her sit. As she settled, her own fingertips brushed my hand in a discreet gesture of thanks.

The two guests also took seats, leaving a fourth unoccupied. "Where is Master Kanatan?" Sallis inquired.

"I had hoped to speak with him this evening."

Mistress Abraxia gave him a measuring stare. "I am as disappointed as you," she said coolly. "I doubt he would wish to miss such a meal and good company, but he has been tired of late."

Lord Sallis nodded. "I will take no offense then," he said.

"We cannot dine as only three," Talien said. His gaze strayed to the girl opposite me and his lips quirked into a leer. "Perhaps one of your attending decorations can take his place?"

Mistress Abraxia turned her quelling stare to her second guest, but Talien laughed at her. "Come, surely you cannot approve of this banquet going to waste?"

"They are not ready for the honour," Mistress Abraxia replied.



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"When we are the providers, we should judge who partakes of the feast," Talien said. He stood suddenly, his chair scraping the floor. Before anyone could stop him, he crossed the room and seized the girl's wrist. "What is your name, little flower?" he asked. "Your betters command that you answer them."

"Meris, sir."

"I am a lord. You will address me as such."

"Yes... lord."

Talien yanked her arm, dragging her towards the empty chair. My nails dug into my palms, but I dared not move. Mistress Abraxia was ignoring the spectacle, but her fingers were white as they gripped the metal goblet in front of her.

Lord Sallis was the only person to react. He also stood. "Talien you are being tiresome," he said. "What are you trying to prove?"

"Prove?" Talien released the girl who dropped into the seat. "I need prove nothing! The towers of Limbo no longer bind and shackle me. We have been here four days. I would see our visit ended and such foolish rituals cast aside." He leaned over the table and glared at Mistress Abraxia. "Your time is past and your end long overdue. Soon we will come and take what we want, whenever we want it!"

"And yet you are here and came to this table," Lord Sallis said drily. "Without the skill of the artificer from the Tower of Stars, you may be forced to remain here for many days more. Without your armour repaired you will be easy prey for any wizard you might find."

"Lord Talien," Mistress Abraxia said. "We will honour our ancient obligations to you as we have done for all wizards who come to us. You have brought us an offering and tithe. We will mend your garments and restore you to continue your journeys amidst the Fractured Worlds."

Talien scowled, but he returned to his chair. "See that you do," he said and turned his attention to the food in front of him. He picked up a long serrated knife. "Now, we are four and each of you is settled. We must begin with the offerings." He positioned the blade against a large browned animal carcass. "Lord Sallis brings Giantflesh, but I hunted something rare and ancient from the times before the schism. A lighter meat, cooked as befits its status. This creature was once a king of the skies, before dragons reclaimed their place." He flourished the knife. "I bring you an eagle!"

As he began to cut slivers from the carcass I was struck by the size of the bird; large to be sure, but one that was no comparison to defeating a giant - a creature that stomped through the pages of journals and logbooks kept on the spiralling library shelves. Yet Lord Sallis seemed to bear the gloating in good part. "The eagle is bigger than those I remember," Mistress Abraxia remarked. "Perhaps the magic has affected them? Where did you find it?"

"On a mountainous realm, close to the vortex," Talien replied. "I named it Eyrie. Others refused to travel to there, claiming it too dangerous a place."

"And was this where you suffered injury?" Sallis asked.

"Indeed it was," Talien said. "A whole flock of the creatures descended upon me and my companions, but we were potent enough to best them and bring back several delicious examples for this dinner table!"

I watched Sallis. Outwardly he seemed calm, but his manner was as coolly polite as Mistress Abraxia's. Both were nibbling at their food as they spoke, while Meris sat mute, her head bowed, staring at her empty plate. Eventually Talien noticed and sliced a chunk from the wing and dropping it in front of her with a flourish. "Come, little one. You should make the most of this rare privilege to be placed in such company!" Meris' took up the thin two-pronged fork. Her hands were shaking, but under the leering gaze of Talien she had no choice but to eat, which she did, slowly and with no pleasure. I pitied her, but could do nothing in the presence of my betters.

The four feasted long into the night. Prodded with questions in turn by my mistress and Sallis, Talien regaled the company with his adventures. His wine goblet remained full throughout the evening until eventually he could talk no more. I was summoned with another acolyte to help him on the stairs. My last memory of the feast was of Sallis. The bald wizard stared after us as we left. It occurred to me then not once had he mentioned how he came to bring a giant to the table.



Entry 7: The Artificer

Two days later, I went back into the tunnels beneath the tower; this time in a different direction, seeking, Ellis the artificer.

The tools of wizards are born in the dreams of craftsmen. Life on Limbo would not exist without heat ex-



change from our world's fading core, water pumped from underground streams and the machines maintaining spells that conjure food from dead soil. The artificer leads an army of apprentices, charged with the continuing function of our tower and the lands around it.

But this is not why I was sent to her workshop.

The heat in this chamber made the air thick. Broken gears and wheels line the walls, many rusted into their frames. I saw a large muscular man carrying crates; he was stripped to the waist, his bare chest and bald head gleaming through the haze.

I ignored him and pressed on. She lurked at the back of the room, head bowed, crouched over a stone table. Bright sparks illuminate her work, strong arms hammering armour back into shape.

She glanced up and frowned at me as I walked towards her. She might have been pretty once, beautiful even, but the scars, burns and callouses of her craft had tempered her. A thick mop of short lank hair covered only one side of her head, the puckered skin of the other was a barren field. "Why does Abraxia send her minion here?" she asked.

I stopped. The question might provoke another acolyte, but I understood it for what it was. "The mistress asks when the armour will be ready," I said.

Ellis grunted. "Lord Talien outstayed his welcome already?"

I shrugged. "I am only given the message."

Ellis laughed. "Of course! And what would you gain from sharing an opinion with me?" She moved away from the table and towards me. "You see the state of Talien's gift to me. His foolishness will take much work to rectify. My apprentices cannot repair damage to mana filters and inductors; they cannot rebuild power analysers and restore portal seals."



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"Yet I find you working on dents in a breastplate?"

Ellis smile disappear and she snorted. "You and your gifted peers require my people stir the fading heat of the core so you can play with your gifts. The sooner you master the magic, the sooner you can leave."

"There will always be wizards. You need us."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Ellis wiped sweat from her brow. "If you learn anything here, know it is unwise to cross those who you may one day rely on. Accept your place and your time. Those who exceed their position, always face consequences. Lord Talien's armour will be restored three days from now. No more, no less."

"Mistress Abraxia will be pleased."

"Yes she will, but I hear the realms will not. It is said our dented friend is quite the brigand. The rents in his backplate tell me he has few friends."

I remembered the look Sallis had given Talien as I'd helped him from the table. The artificer was still staring at me with a hungry expression, still hoping for some morsel to add to her gossip. I gathered myself and swallowed an indelicate reply. "I'm sure a wizard knows how to protect themselves," I said.

Ellis' smile returned. "Not always, or from everything," she said and turned away.

Entry 8: Broken Dreams

Artificer Ellis was true to her word. In three days, the armour was fixed and Lord Tallien departed.

Two days after his leaving, I found Meris lying at the bottom of a staircase in one of the tower's minarets. Her arms and legs were twisted at awkward angles and her head lay in a stain of clotted blood.

I wasn't sure how long she'd been there. The minarets are not often used. They branch from the highest reaches of the tower, far above the clouds and observation of the populace. They contain some of the order's more rarefied objects and are connected to the main building by walkways at the top and angled stairs at their base. At times, Melmoth or one of the other alchemists would lock themselves away in the minaret rooms to conduct experiments that might endanger us, if they were attempted in the laboratories. Poor Meris would have no reason to be in such a place unless sent on an errand, like me. She wore her acolyte robe, adorned with more runes and symbols than mine, testimony to her hard work and diligence. Around her I noticed broken glass and a dark powder; evidence of her given task, or something she chose to steal?

From my vantage point I could not see her expression. Her hair had come undone from its knot and obscured her face. I crept closer, until I crouched on the stair above. My hand reached out and touched hers; cold and dry, like my mother's on the last day, after...

No, don't think about that!

A spell came to my lips instinctively, before I considered using it. Up here, far from the land below, the magic seems easier, more natural and dangerous. What I would attempt I had not attempted before, but I knew how it should work.

I spoke the words and Meris' head jerked and turned towards me. Her eyes caught mine in a lifeless stare.

"What do you want of me?" she rasped in a terrifying whisper.

I clasped onto her fingers, knowing the casting needed us to remain in contact. "How did you die?" I asked.

"I fell."

"Did someone push you?"

"Yes. There were... hands..."

"Did you see who?"

"No."

I could feel the spell draining the breath from me. The strain of performing magic in Limbo is great. The vortex sucks the power from our weavings as soon as we cast them. I have read stories of wizard necromancers out in the Fractured Worlds, who force the souls of the dead back into their bodies, making them into powerful servants, but I was only an acolyte, practicing my art from within, not without. Whatever



questions I wanted to ask, would need to be asked quickly.

"Who sent you up here?"

"Mel... Melmoth."

"What were you asked to retrieve?"

Dead Meris did not answer me with words; instead a deep groan escaped her lips, her body convulsed then lay still. My heart thumped hard and my chest heaved. My gift had failed me.

I knelt over the body for some time after that, staring and thinking. This lonely fate could be what awaited me; no living creature cared if I lived or died in this grim place. All that remained was the magic and our quest to face the door.

I thought over what I'd learned in the days of study, training and obedience. The gift came easily now, but still abandoned me when I needed it. Nothing in all my acquired experience and knowledge hinted at what I should do were I to be sent to that room and be given my chance, almost as if the elders did not want to prepare me, to prepare anyone.

Those who exceed their position, always face consequences, Ellis had said.

I bent down to Meris' body once more and brushed my hand over the shards of glass, retrieving a pinch of the dark powder which I dropped into a pouch at my waist. Next I dipped a finger into the congealed blood, wiping it on a cloth which I also stored.

After that I retraced my steps and went to raise the alarm.

Entry 9: The Alchemist

Melmoth's chambers were in the main tower, three floors below the dorm cells of the acolytes. I never had reason to visit them before, but we all knew where they were.

It took me ten minutes to get there. I saw no-one on my way. When I got to the door, I knocked and heard a muffled response. I went in.

I found myself in a wide hall, different to Mistress Abraxia's rooms by the notable absence of décor; stone walls and candle brackets rather than tapestries and glowing rock. There was writing on the stonework, running in a horizontal line at shoulder height; a symbol language of shapes and cut out triangles that seemed vaguely familiar.

Through an archway in a second room Melmoth crouched over a vast wooden desk, staring at a stained parchment. The rest of the surface held the various accoutrements of his work; books, potion bottles, demijohns and a large hourglass perched at one end. His head came up and he stared at me as I approached, an eyebrow raised in silent enquiry as to my presence. He looked tired and old, a contrast to his schooled appearance when I'd first arrived.

I kept walking until I was three feet from him then stopped and spoke my news.

"I found Meris, dead."

There was silence between us. Eventually, Melmoth nodded, as if the information had taken time to register. "We should ask Master Ellis' apprentices to retrieve the body and dispose of it."

"You seem unsurprised?"

Melmoth shrugged. "I have been in this tower for decades and seen many acolytes leave through success and failure. You know the rules and the ways around them. Meris is dead, because she was shown favour by Lord Tallien and one of your kind could not accept that."

I bit my lip to prevent myself blurting out what I knew, but didn't move or look away. Melmoth returned his attention to his parchment.

"You may leave the matter with me acolyte, I will attend to the details."

I resisted the instinct to walk away and waited. After a few more moments, Melmoth raised his head again.

"Was there something else?"

I nodded. "You aren't training us."

He frowned. "Pardon?"



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"The time I have spent here, reading, listening, being told of the past and the way things are, they aren't part of a scheme to make me a wizard."

Melmoth's frown deepened. "How did you come to this conclusion?" he asked.

"If you were training us you would be focusing on the matters at hand," I explained, "teaching us about the great door, giving us experiences beyond this tower in the fractured worlds, letting us cast magic outside the pull of the vortex. This isn't a school it's another prison, like the land below us."

Melmoth leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving mine, nor seeming to blink. When he spoke it was with a soft voice, barely above a whisper. "In all the days of this world and the world before it, every kingdom, nation and society has been in constant threat from people like you; people with the gift; people who learned just how superior they were to those without it." He waved a hand and his voice strengthened. "We half breeds empower you, but we also remind you of what you should be. Our task is to limit you, to make you think of the cost to those who cannot do what you do."

"The first alchemists offered wizards understanding of what they are. The next offered ways to refine magic through use of devices and study. We worked with those who understood their responsibility to the rest of humanity, but we were betrayed, and... well... you know what happened."

"The schism."

"Yes, the schism and the end of days." Melmoth sat forward. "Your kind caused it and now they roam free amidst the stars while anyone else that survived is left here in the ruin of the world—" he checked himself, "well... most of those who survived... some are allowed to leave to serve their new gods and others... found a different path..."

I stepped forwards, put my hand on the desk so my face was inches from his. "What you say makes no sense. If you are keeping us here because of some ancient crime you would be ruling this tower and the elders would be your prisoners as well."

Melmoth smiled in response. "In this place we have an... accommodation. You learned that when you spoke with Ellis. Wizards need us. The elders are only here to judge your worth. When the time is right, one of you is nominated to leave; one way or the other." He picked up the piece of parchment and held it between us. "Congratulations. You have been selected for the test of the door."

I flinched and stepped back. "The door? But I know nothing—"

"As you said, we are not here to teach you. Perhaps you will succeed and next time we meet, you will be here for a harrowing." Melmoth reached across his desk for the hourglass, picked it up and turned it on its head. "When the sand runs out, your time with us is over. I suggest you ready yourself." I heard heavy footsteps and a hand grasped my shoulder. "Cross, escort the acolyte to his quarters. He has much to prepare for his imminent test. See that he is given everything he needs."

"Yes, Melmoth," said the man behind me. I turned to face the speaker. It was the artificer's apprentice who I'd seen before. Silently, I let him guide me from the room.

Entry 10: The Great Door

I sat on the bed in my cell, trying to digest what I had learned and what I had been told. In Melmoth's office, the sand would be running through the hourglass, counting down my last minutes in the tower. Whether that led to my death or not, would depend on my next few choices.

My gaze wandered the room, pausing a moment with the few possessions I'd acquired over my time. I thought about packing them up and taking them with me, but as I looked at each in turn, I realised I wouldn't miss them. Every one held a temporal value, tying me to this life, this place and these rules. It had been days since I renewed my powers. If I were to attempt the door, I might have to revisit the deep caverns and the molten rock, but the spell came to me when I discovered Meris. Was I strong enough without the ritual?

Dare I risk it?

Eventually, I found myself staring at Apprentice Cross. He had accompanied me here and now stood in the open doorway. He studiously avoided looking at me and waited in silence, leaning against the wall.



"Why are you still here?" I asked.

Cross glanced at me. "Melmoth told me to ensure you were prepared," he said. "If you choose not to face the door that means escorting you back to where you came from."

"Or pitching me out of a window?"

"If it comes to that."

I nodded and let the matter drop. My gaze went back to the faded tapestry on my wall. I stood up and reached out, moving it aside. Underneath were a set of symbols like the ones in Melmoth's chambers.

Curious.

I replaced the cloth and stared at the scene; my eyes drawn to the figure on at the top, holding the staff.

A staff?

All wizards had staffs. Yet we had never been permitted to practice with one or seen their use. *Where does a wizard get a staff from?*

I turned from the tapestry and without saying another word to Cross, walked from the room.

As I began the ascent, I saw people. Apprentices and acolytes waited at their doors, while other servants of the tower stood in hallways and passages. When people blocked my way, Cross yelled from behind me "Make way for the penitent!" and people stepped aside, bowing their heads, as if I were diseased or ennobled, I'm not sure which.

I met the eye of many acolytes who I had seen during my time. Some glared, but others nodded to me as a comrade. All refrained from touching me. This came from a superstition I read about; the purity of the ascendant. They didn't wish to risk sullyng my soul with theirs and thwart my chance with the door.

If only they knew.

I passed Mistress Abraxia's rooms. She was not outside them and the door remained shut.

Higher and higher we went, beyond familiar places into old and dusty spaces. Bereft of light, we took candles. The air grew thin, making me pant as I walked. The decoration of these chambers was sporadic and neglected. Some doors were locked, but Cross had keys and opened them for me each time, until we came to a black arch at the top of a steep set of stairs.

"This is the last passage," he told me. "I am permitted to go no further."

I turned and stared at him for long moments. "Thank you," I said at last. "Will you wait for me here?"

"There is no need," he said. "If you pass, you will not return without warning. If you fail, there will be nothing of you left to come back."

And with that he walked away down the stairs.

The final steps were difficult to manage. I knew my choice was made and my fate awaited, but that did not make the ascent easier.

On the arch, I found more of the strange symbols I had seen in Melmoth's room. They were clustered in groups with spaces between them. Occasionally, some would repeat; a written script then, something forgotten with important counsel for me, no doubt.

Something I couldn't read.

The blackened stones were wet. As I drew closer I could see they had also been scorched by fire. I reached out to touch them.

"You are wasting time."

I twitched my hand away and glanced around. Lord Sallis stood at the far end of a circular room. He wore his blue robes, armour and other devices, making him appear much larger than the person I remembered at dinner that night. In his left hand he clutched a helm with strange pipes attached to it that ran into a backpack. In his right, he held an ornately carved staff.

I bowed. "My Lord, I thought you had departed."

"Most people think that," Sallis replied and smiled. "I am content to leave them doing so." He nodded



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towards the arch. "Many acolytes have come here and tried to learn something from the writing. To my knowledge, none have deciphered its meaning. It is said no wizard, half-breed or human inscribed those symbols."

"Then who made them?" I asked.

Lord Sallis appeared to shrug inside his armour. "No one knows," he said. "But if you linger to work on them you will miss your opportunity. The paths of the great door are affected by the vortex and the worlds beyond it. Sometimes it is hard to open, sometimes easy. You will learn to sense the change. Right now, you have a good chance, but it lessens with each moment you waste."

I gazed around the room. "But I see no door."

"The arch is the door," Lord Sallis said. "Can you not feel its magic?"

I closed my eyes for a moment and reached out with my senses as I had been taught in the earliest lessons. The faint tingling sensation that came from the blackened stones confirmed the presence of an enchantment. "What am I supposed to do?" I asked Sallis.

"I cannot tell you," he replied.

I opened my eyes and stared at him. "Why are you here then?"

"To ensure the debt I owed is fulfilled."

I considered his words as they settled on top of everything else I had been told. My thoughts went back to that first day, the day of my mother's death when a hand grasped my shoulder. "Vyasa sent you," I realised aloud.

"Yes," Lord Sallis admitted.

"You killed Meris."

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because she was in your way," Lord Sallis smiled. "Granted, Tallien made matters easier for me with his performance, flouting the rituals so all manner of motives might be read into the act. If the girl had not died, she would be standing here now. We could not take the risk."

I felt unclean and ashamed. I leaned against the blackened arch to steady myself and without warning the magic welled up inside me. My hand and the stone it touched began to glow then lines of light spread in a web across the empty space, gradually filling it with a rippling sheen of power.

The portal!

I shrank away from the glowing gate. "I—I didn't do that!" I gasped.

"You did," Lord Sallis' eyes glittered, "and you will be doing it a lot more." He stepped towards me and then to the arch, examining the distortion. "Yes, it seems complete to me. I'll go first and then you follow. There are a few things awaiting you on the other side."

"Like what?"

"Like your staff, wizard, and some other items to help you on your way." With that, he walked into the light and vanished.

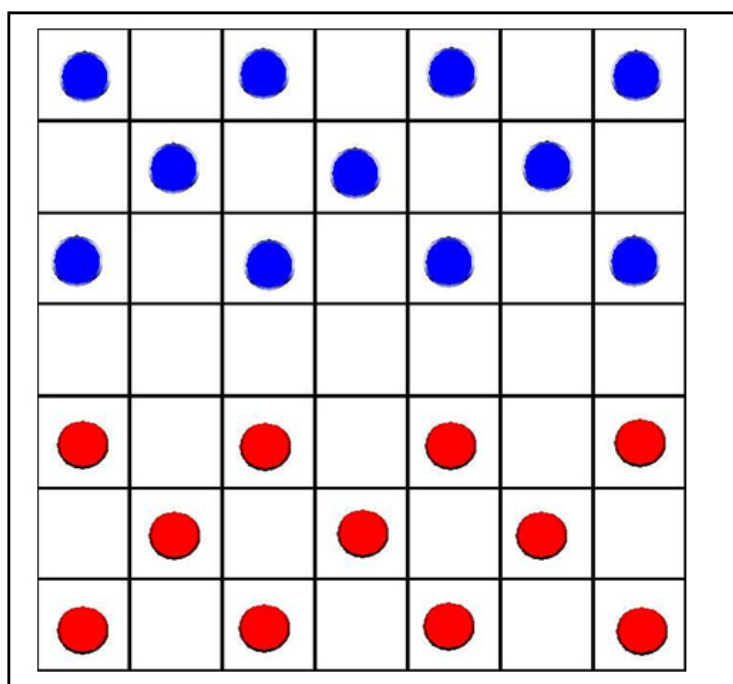
I was alone and hesitant. Lord Sallis murdered Meris. I could run back down the stairs, tell Melmoth, Ellis and Abraxia, but to what end? If everything I'd been told was true, there would be no justice, only a quick death awaiting me as well. The alternative lay in trusting a confessed murderer at his word, accepting his bloodied hand of friendship knowing I could be betrayed at any moment.

I gritted my teeth and followed Lord Sallis, into the unknown.





Games: Spires



This is an ancient game of strategy. The board is set up like drafts but with eleven pieces not ten. Initially all pieces can only move and take forwards in straight lines. Pieces may not take more than one opposing piece in a move. When taken, a piece is not removed from the board but is placed under the taking piece to form a “tower”. The colour of the top piece denotes the ownership of the tower.

When a piece singly, or as a tower reached the other side of the board it is turned over and becomes a Wizard as shown by the symbol on its reverse. Wizards may move horizontally and vertically in any direction and take in the same way.

When all of your pieces have become Wizards, the largest tower is transformed into a Lord. Replace the top piece with the Lord counter. In addition to the abilities of a Wizard, the Lord

may move and take diagonally as well. However, should you lose your Lord, you immediately lose the game.

The game is won when a Lord is taken, or one side cannot move. In the latter case, the last person to move wins.



Limbo

The ruins of civilisations were sucked into the centre of the vortex to form Limbo.

This wrecked echo of old Earth is named after the outer hell of Algheri's journal.

The remnants of our ancient world. Buildings, piled on top of buildings, with people living in the spaces in between. Limbo contains the collected lore of the past and the largest gathering of its populace. For some, it is a place of hope, from where civilisation can be rebuilt, for others, a place of despair and desolation. The sky above is the vortex, hidden behind layer upon layer of dust, that batters the world below. There are few days without wind and storm as the lands are wracked with the depredations of its seething sky. Some places remain intact, defended and protected by gathered power, but the price is high, the cost of magic inside the vortex far higher than out in the fragmented world beyond.

Limbo is home to the last of humanity. People survive, but do not live. Mortals huddle beneath the wizard towers, eking out a meagre existence as they wait for deliverance. They wait for the Harrower, who comes to some in the form of a wizard, but as with all things, freedom can come at a price.

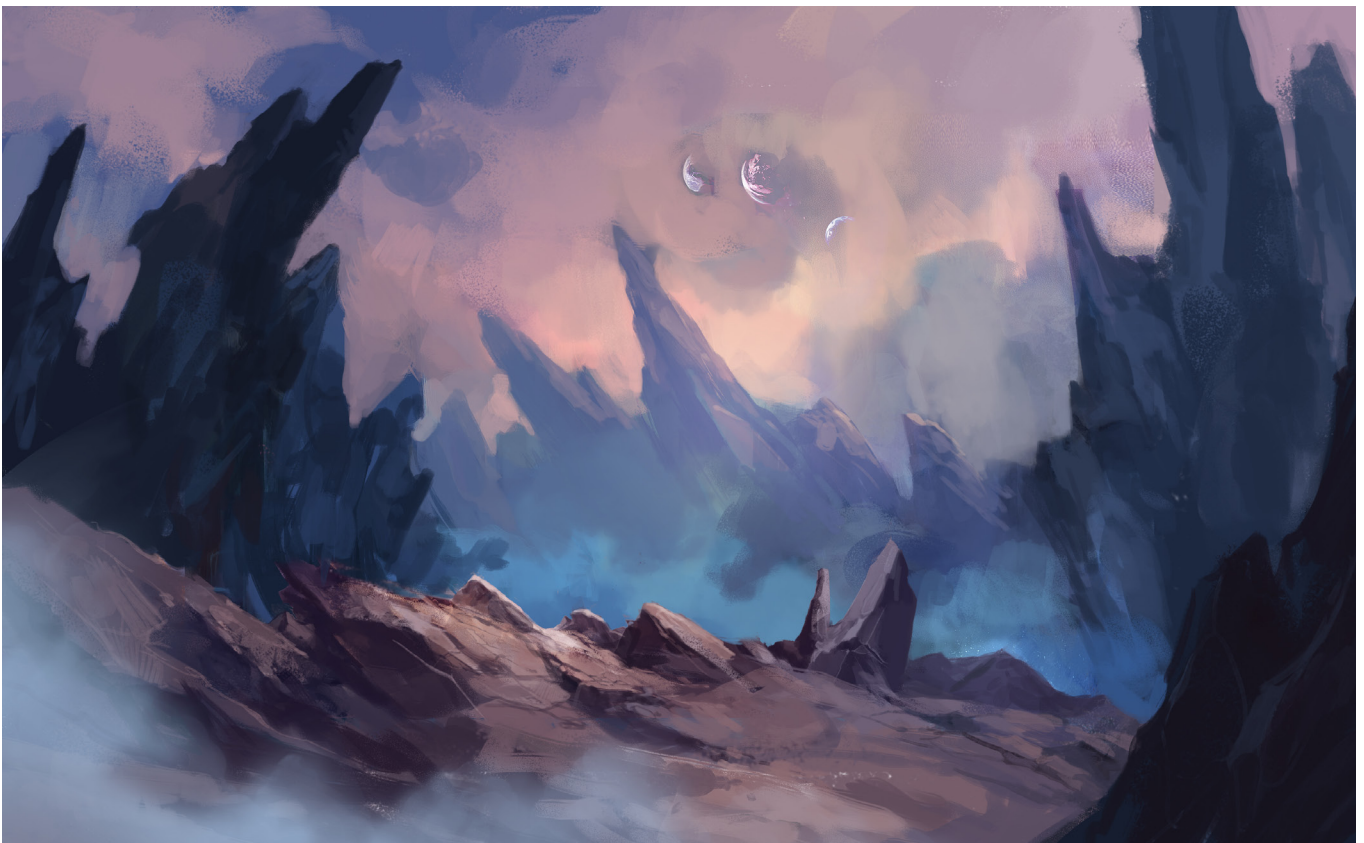
Humanity on Limbo has no means of contacting those who have left unless it is through wizards. Only wizards can activate the portals and they only return to serve their own agendas.

The wizard towers compete to find those who are born with the gift, stealing them from their families to be trained as wizards and sent out into the Fractured Worlds.

Of all places that exist, only Limbo is constant and moves forward through time as one place. Wizards who arrive and meet others find they have similar adventures and experiences in the Fractured Worlds, but moved through these events in parallel, with differing outcomes for each.

Some wizards return to Limbo when defeated owing to the defensive wards woven into their armour and robes. Others have different sanctuaries, but Limbo is often used as the artificers and alchemists there are able to repair equipment without danger, taking advantage of the limitations of magic whilst there. This restriction also ensures Limbo remains neutral territory.

Most wizards do not like being in Limbo. Their magic does not work well inside the vortex. They want to explore the fractured realms and shape them as their own domains.





Known Settlements of Limbo

Few explorers have undertaken to map the realms of this ruined world. Yet there are some locations that are well known and spoken about. There are places where humanity congregates and the gifted do what they can to help those around them.

Tenok

The city of Tenok is a vast network of collapsed caverns and ruins. Legend has it that Ancient Red, the greatest of the dragons, sprang from the doom beneath the great temple after the people performed countless rituals their anointing their warriors in the blood of their enemies and making the magical barrier weak.

The old city collapsed upon itself and as the vortex ravaged the rest of the world, more and more broken remnants of settlements and civilisations piled on top of the rest, burying the beautiful temple and palaces deep underground. The result is a network of tunnels and chambers both above and below the surface.

The people of Tenok are descended from those who survived the end of the old world. In recent times, they have been joined by others from many of the old kingdoms, making the city a sprawling mix of cultures and creeds divided into gangs, clans, tribes and more.

The Tower of the Star

In the aftermath of destruction, magi gathered in the ruins of Rome. The Tower of Stars rose out of the broken remains of Latium. In its highest chamber lies an ancient portal, repaired and rebuilt by the surviving alchemists and artificers.

Now those decisive early days are gone and the majority of the skilled and gifted have departed to the realms in search of better lives. What remains in the tower and beneath it are its last guardians – maimed wizards and untrustworthy scribes who have been forsaken by most who have long since left.

The tower remains in good order, its guardians understand their purpose and skill recruit those gifted with power from amongst the poor slums beneath, but there is little hope of the salvation once preached to their dying populace. The tower masters know they remain a necessary presence and will not be released from their obligations unless others are found to replace them.

The City of Barzakh

Known as the singing city, Barzakh is a paradise to the eyes of a weary traveller, but its curse is complex and often misunderstood, particularly by those who live there.

No-one knows who wove the enchantment around the city, but it is so complete and pervasive, none escape its clutches. The non-magical nature of Limbo is subverted by the subtlety of the Barzakh curse as it draws from the very essence of its residence to empower its portal, hidden within the city.

Each time the portal is invoked, the curse is drained and begins again, but like a living thing, it changes, its resolution becoming something different. Wizards trapped in its clutches find themselves in a race against time as their wits and memories unravel while they struggle to find the portal.

The Eldritch Plains

A land where nothing grows or lives, a great heat emanates from this vast desert, as if the depths of the world were boiling. Travellers risk the plains only if they must and travel from stone plateau to stone plateau.

The Eldritch plains are so named for their strangeness. The emptiness of the place plays tricks on the mind, making people believe they are not alone.

Stormsheim Monastery

A great repository of lore and knowledge, the monastery is a mass of interconnected caves within Mount



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Aurora, the highest peak of Limbo.

It is said the first chambers of the monastery were the living quarters of an ancient harpy of the earliest days. According to the scripture of the monks the woman was a prophetess. After magical wards were broken parchments were found that foretold many of the events that later came to pass.

Since these times, the first chambers have been expanded and reinforced. Refugees are welcomed, but put to work to hack at the rock so they might make homes for themselves.

Sanctum

Ruled by King Theias, the city of Sanctum is a walled refuge where people survive on what they can barter. The harsh rules of the differing district lords ensure everyone contributes to the needs of the populace as a whole. Those who have nothing work in the water mines and dig into the bowels of Limbo to bring forth heat.

King Theias himself is Nephilim, part gifted and part mortal. His three wives are of the same blood and their two children, Kith and Lerisana, both Egregoroi. Neither is allowed far from the King's residence. At the centre of Sanctum is the doorway. Much like the portal in other settlements, access to this chamber is controlled, but unlike others, Theias jealously guards trade and relations with those beyond his realm. All provided by those who visit Sanctum is provided to the King who chooses what shall be shared amongst his people. Would be travellers must curry his favour to gain access to the Fractured Worlds.

Wandu

Capital of the ancient Koguryo kingdom. In the majority, Wandu is a series of squat mound like buildings, which served its people well in surviving the storms. Such places have become an architectural model in many unstable Fractured Realms and are commonly known as wayhomes.

Originally built in the mountains of the old world, the region around Wandu is no longer mountainous. Instead, travellers who approach might be forgiven for believing it to be a huge field of eggs, some of which are cracked and broken.

Each intact building has been improved into a circular stone structure, half buried beneath the ground.

Inside, Koryo artificers and wizards strengthen them with warding, returning at intervals to renew these bindings. How well they work in the difficult magical environment of Limbo is anyone's guess.

Each 'egg' is home to a large extended family. The larger ones are interconnected and form the central part of the settlement. Whether this was the architectural intention or shape of the city prior to the end of the world is unknown, as Wandu has been rebuilt and rebuilt so many times.

Kinkaku-ji

The rebuilt citadel of the Ashikaga, Kinkaku-ji stands fourteen storeys high above the ruins of Kyoto, but the building also extends deep into the ground. Each level is given status and access to each level affords individuals respect. Much like the Tower of the Star, the upper level is said to contain the Ashikaga portal, but it is also a place where, at opportune times, magic is practiced in a limited way, so as to familiarise young initiates with their abilities.

It is said the Askikaga portal room also contains a fragment of the ancient doorway map once held in trust by the Great Conclave. Whilst the destinations of such places are no longer the same, the rune cyphers for each remain the same and by visiting them, a new catalogue of realms can be established. Each order of Limbo maintains such lists, but the Ashikaga index is known to be the largest.

Angkor

These strange temples from old Earth survived almost completely intact and are spread across a wide territory. The settlements are divided into regions – Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom.

The Khmer Empire held sway over a vast region for almost four hundred years. The two cities were once the palaces and capitals of powerful emperor wizards who ruled with the backing of strong orders of alchemists, artificers and archivists.

The emperors of Khmer were gods to their people and these beautiful structures were a testimony to wor-



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ship, loyalty, obedience and strength.

In the last decades, the Horsemen's armies came to Khmer and annihilated its people. The enchantments woven into the temples preserved them during the days of destruction, but afterwards the magic unravelled. Now they are silent husks that provide shelter for wayward travellers.





Orders of Limbo

Contained herein is a list of the known orders of Limbo. These settlements and entities operate across the lands, offering shelter for those who survived the world's destruction.

The Stormsheim

The monks of Stormsheim live in a monastery deep within the Mount Aurora, the tallest peak on Limbo. Drawn from the remnants of monastic orders of the ancient world, they are unified in a pursuit of collecting and archiving what knowledge remains from the past.

The monks hold themselves as neutral in the conflicts that rage in the Fractured Worlds. Stormsheim missionaries wander the lands of Limbo seeking out obscure relics and writings wherever they can and the order employs wizards to do the same.

The favour of Stormsheim is a significant thing. The right to study in the differing circles of the monastery library is granted to wizards who aid in their quest to recover the lore of the ancient world.

Order of the Star

In the days before the end of the world, a group of French knights gathered together at a place known as Saint-Ouen to reject the tournament culture of the time and to profess their bravery in battle. These knights were mortal men, wizards and paladins, all seeking to perfect their ability in combat.

After the schism and the formation of Limbo, the Order of the Star acted swiftly to martial and organise the scattered survivors wherever they found them. It was these efforts that re-established a settlement in the wasteland which over time, came to house the Tower of the Star and its surround slum district.

The badge of the order is a collar with a white star on red enamel.

Order of the Dragon (Draconists)

Janos of Sredets is remembered as being the first half breed Nephilim to be given the blood drinker curse. The powers granted to Janos were fearsome indeed, but they changed him physically as well and he soon grew sensitive to light and the prying eyes of the ignorant.

In the last days, many scions of Janos rose up across the slums of Europe infecting all they could find and creating cults that would destabilise cities and kingdoms. In the days after, many of these hardy monsters survived and gathered others to them, spreading their depravations amidst the gifted and mortals alike. The Order of the Dragon is a powerful horsemen cabal the dwells in the curved Tower of Unguis. In some ways, they have lost the way of their founders and been forced to adopt codes and laws of behaviour else the blood curse would have wiped them out long ago.

The Ashikaga

Few Eastern wizards and mystics survived the end of days. Those that did were of the northern court of Japan who followed their late shogun, Lord Ashikaga Takauji.

This militant order of gifted have rebuilt a portion of Kyoto, renaming it Kinkaku-ji and maintain an order amidst the rest of the broken city. The noble houses of the past remain dominant, while those survivors loyal to the southern court are exiles and scattered to the winds.

The rules of the northern court are enforced by the Ashikaga, who bear the name of their late ruler. Lord Ashikaga was killed during the great betrayal in the last days of the old world and his enemies are still hunted by the descendants of his loyal followers.

The Tepanec

The wizards of Tenok are proud servants of the Horsemen, believing the new world is a place of deliverance from the old. Despite this, the vast sprawling ruins they make their home in are always in conflict as different warlords claim to be the inheritors of Famine, Pestilence, War and Death.



The Tepanec keep order throughout the vast city of Tenok, constantly journeying between factions to arbitrate and judge disputes. Justice in these times can be harsh and they are not always merciful, yet the authority of their symbol is rarely questioned.

While patrolling these territories, the Tepanec seek out newly gifted children. They administer crude tests and tortures to determine the power of those believed worthy and steal them away to the centre of Tenok, never to be seen again.

The Koryo

Lord Yi Dan rules the Koryo, a wizard dynasty of five generations. Unlike other orders of Limbo, the Koryo see their continual presence on Limbo as a duty and members of the royal house maintain a connected present between their realms in the empyrean and Wandu, their home inside the Vortex.

Yi Dan's belief in a path towards restoring life to the lands he rules is part of the mission of his people. His three daughters each maintain realms close to the edge of the Vortex and return to Limbo frequently to sit in counsel with him.

The sages of Koryo are renowned for their collection and application of old world knowledge and lore. Unlike the monks of Stormsheim, they guard their archives careful and permit only those loyal to Lord Yi Dan.





Journal Of The Eldritch Plains

Entry 1: Abandoned

After murdering everyone else, they left me alive.

In some ways, living is a greater torture than death. When your body is in constant rebellion, fighting your every movement and gesture, you wonder if a better world exists after you die.

The door of my carriage creaks in the arid breeze, Inside, I lie sweating on the hammock bed, as I have for days. In the past, my only respite was the shame-filled moments where they carried me out into the sand to piss and shit in a freshly dug hole. Precious water is wasted cleaning my unwilling body, wiping puss from the sores on my back and arse, but it must be done, father and mother decree so.

Those rare treats are lost to me now, with everyone dead.

My family are unscrupulous in their caring, providing for my every need, but they do not love me, I know that. Were it not for the gift in my blood, I would have been strangled at birth.

To them, I was an obligation, a burden to be endured. When a place was offered for me to study amongst the monks of Stormsheim, they could be rid of me. I was packed into a cart along with my possessions, placed in this torture for the journey across the Eldritch plains - a vast desert, the land boiling from some hidden heat beneath.

Days passed without event or change. Lepi, the old servant read to me just as he did in the tower, his quavering voice irritating as he stumbled over the words. Yet without him, I would remain ignorant. The books legible, but far from my reach on a shelf, the turning of pages, beyond the ability of my quivering hands. I learned to make do with Lepi's broken chant.

At times, he drew the curtain back and let me look out over the vast empty expanse. Nothing lives here, nothing can.

Today was one of those days.

I saw riders in the distance, their dark silhouettes shimmering in the heat haze. I cried a warning, but the servants did not understand and strapped me down as they do when I thrash my limbs and try to speak. Lepi twitched the curtain closed and stroked my head until I calmed and gave up.

The riders attacked. I heard the clash of steel, the screams and gurgles of the dying. Lepi went out. Later when the noise faded, booted feet climbed the carriage steps and the door opened. It was not Lepi, instead a man entered, holding a bloodstained knife. He stared at me for long moments, his cloth shrouded face hiding everything but his dark desert eyes. I willed him to step forward and make use of his blade. To grant me the oblivion my shaking hands could never deliver, but he remained at the door, revealing nothing of his intention before returning to the sand.

Now, no-one comes. All that is left is the aftermath.

My father told me I could walk once, though I do not remember it. As a baby, my legs shook with each step, but held me up as I tottered into my mother's arms. Only later did my body's revolution set in. Other children grew strong, I grew weak. My limbs turned uncoordinated and awkward. I learned to speak, but as my muscle control waned, so the chance of me being understood diminished. Servants and slaves wiped away drool and ignored my frustrated whispers. I became a prisoner in my own flesh with a mind that grew sharper every day.

I push against the bindings, but they are secured against my efforts. The day I first tried to exercise, my mother believed I was having a fit and ordered me tied down. From that day I knew not to trust those who were closest to me.

My fingers fumble with the straps. I cannot grip them, let alone work at the knots.

I will die of thirst; a long slow lingering death, unless I find help.

The magic came early and easily to me as a child. Some boys and girls find theirs as they change into men and women. Few show signs before that. It is said the twins of the doom practised the arts from birth. The gift marks us. There is little we can do in Limbo, but my father rules Sanctum and owns the great door in its highest room. Every year someone is chosen to walk through and into the Fractured



Worlds.

I will never pass through that door. The power in my veins is greater than anyone honoured by my father, but the physical challenge would be too much.

It is said wizards fight to rule the heavens; that they summon creatures out of the story books read to me by Lepi. The blood in me burns to be one of them.

But I remain a prisoner.

Outside there is nothing but the breeze. The moans of the dying fade, as those that live out their last learn to accept fate.

I hear footsteps. Has the man returned?

The door opens...

Entry 2: The Stranger and the Stave

An old man stands at the carriage entrance. He wears a simple shift, has a long white beard and a necklace of beads. He looks at me, his smile kind but not condescending. "At last I find you." He moves towards me. His fingers work at the knots that secure me to the hammock, releasing the straps. Then he steps back. "I am here to aid you, but only so much as you need," he says.

I try to answer, but speech does not come. My mouth is dry and my lips refuse the words. I shake and thrash, trying to force unwilling limbs to obey, but they will not. All the while the old man watches, his expression unreadable. After some moments he moves forward again, holding a short stick, around two feet in length.

"This is my gift to you. Its touch will cause you great pain, but it will aid movement for a time. This is no solution, but a tool to help you achieve your wishes. I will wait for you outside."

Gently, he throws the item to me. It lands across my legs and they catch fire. Invisible burning lashes the flesh of my calves, I cry out and jerk away, but the stave rolls onto my chest and then brushes my left hand. Each touch brings agony, my fingers twitch and close over the pulsing wood, making a fist. My hand throbs, but does precisely as I wish.

I feel the link along my arm, a burning rope within my body that howls at me to drop this cursed gift, but grants me control of the limb in a way I have never known.

I bend my elbow and lift my hand so I can examine the object. Dark timber, roughly hewn, but straight and true. I sense power here, responding to my own. It is nothing like the staffs given to initiates of Sanctum, or the other rune carved artefacts of the lore wardens. It is natural, latent and of itself. I have never—

"Let me know when you're ready."

The man's voice, a touch of impatience to his tone. I am unused to this, to people demanding things of me, no matter how courteous and polite. His gift responds to my anger and the pain intensifies. I take a rattling breath and seek calm, finding it in the swaying curtain by my side. With the end of the stave I reach out and draw it back, revealing a rare sky of deep green.

I stare for many moments. In the time before Limbo it is said a ball of fire raged in the heavens amidst a serene sea of blue. Our skies are not like this, the vortex seethes and swirls, but today, out there, I see calm. Worlds exist up there, beyond the reach of us left. Beyond my reach.

For now...

I let go of the curtain and rest the stave on my stomach. Pain kindles there, but muscles obey and awkwardly I sit up. I move the touch to my knee and my leg responds as I wish, my foot dropping from the bed to the floor and the same with the other. Such obedience is astonishing. Unstimulated, my limbs remain rebellious, but when charged they act how I want them to.

The journey from the hammock to the door takes a long time. I knew moments of despair, thinking of the days at Sanctum when I called but no servant came and I was left to soil myself and my bed. Father would have them whipped. Once I recall trying to manage on my own and being found exhausted with bloodied knees and elbows, laying on the stone floor. I had given up that day, letting dark thoughts take me.

But this was different. I fell, stumbled and crawled my way across the room, every movement closer a



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triumph and new experience as I learned how best to make use of the old man's gift. I hear nothing of him outside. Either he sits patiently or has given up and wandered away.

My curiosity to learn if he waits as he said burns brighter than the fire provoked by his gift. My limbs tremble now with the unfamiliar effort, but I force them to obey. I reach the door, the steps, the ground. Breath leaves me as I fall and lie in the dirt, looking up into an emerald sky.

I smell burning flesh. It is not mine. The old man appears, he crouches down. "Well done," he says. "Your strength of will is what defines you. I am humbled." He picks up the stave from where I dropped it. "Come, use this once more and sit with me. There is much to discuss."

I grit my teeth against pain as my fingers close around the wood. Carefully, I calm my body and move into a sitting position. I see a smouldering pile of corpses and a small campfire. Beside the latter is a collection of broken planks and beams, fashioned into a chair the shape of one my father uses to mete out judgement to his subjects. I crawl over, settle myself and touch the stave to my jaw.

"W-Who are you?" I manage to ask.

"I am called Vyasa," he replies.

Entry 3: A Rare Sky

Vyasa.

I recognise the name. The stories in books read to me by old Lepi mention a man of the east, who brought peace to wars and enlightenment to the ignorant. Now a man claiming to be him sits cross legged on the ground in front of me, his long staff jabbed into the dirt and the flames casting shadows over his wizened face.

"I am sorry for your friends," he says. "They deserve better than a funeral pyre, but if left here, the bodies will rot away without serving carrion. A fire at least gives them an end. I wish I could do more..."

I stare at him, the words barely registering. There is one story about him I remember best.

"Y-You fought the dragon?" I ask.

Vyasa sighs. "That's a tale I've not heard in a long time. The Sage and Ancient Red, yes? That little verse is remembered by more folk than any other."

"But is it you?"

"Yes, though I cannot claim events went as the story masters tell it."

"How are you still alive?"

Vyasa frowns. "You've learned much from those who know little. Limbo has its own rules. We lie in the eye of the vortex, magic is drained from this world moments from being cast, but we find ways around such things."

"You lived before the apocalypse?"

"And long before that," the old man leans forward. "Your name is Kith," he says.

"How do you—"

"Because you scream it in your mind. Others may not hear, but I do. Your mind's voice led me here. I am glad I found you."

"Why?"

"Because, in the same way I help everyone, I can help you, but only if you are prepared for what comes."

"And what is to come?"

"Change."

I look around. Little of my life remains. If I could return to Sanctum I might regain what I had before, but I hated everything about living—no—existing there. "What... change?" I ask.

Vyasa shades his eyes and he stares past me, his gaze distant. "A settled sky. Days like this are rare. When they happen you can peer far into the empyrean." He points at something above us. "You see that? That is Toran - the nearest of the Fractured Worlds."

I turn my head, but it is hard to hold the right position. For a moment, I glimpse it - an object, a motionless rock, hanging, as if suspended. "Another world?"



"Yes, another world. Where you should be."

I let me head drop and shake. My eyes are wet, from the effort or emotion, I am not sure. "I'm not strong enough."

"You have the gift and the strongest will I've ever known."

"My body..."

He moves from his seat and approaches. He has a cup and jug in his hands. He pours water and helps me drink it. The cool cascade in my throat is welcome relief. Afterwards, he takes my hand in his. His palms and fingers are rough and thin. "Do not compare yourself to others. Each of us is shaped by what we are given and how we challenge our limitations. I touched your mind and I see what power you have. Your body defines you, makes you as you are. Without it you would not be capable of what I propose."

"And what is that?"

"That you summon a dragon."

Entry 4: Dragon

The sound that comes from my mouth is supposed to be laughter. My throat convulses and I shake with the unfamiliar effort. Such things were beyond me less than an hour ago.

"D-Dragon?"

"Yes," Vyasa says. "She already seeks you out. She heard you as I did."

"H-How can a dragon come here?"

"I have said, Limbo is a strange place. When the skies clear, the grip of the vortex weakens. Up in the empyrean, the dragons of Toran stir. Their world is close to this one and a powerful wizard might be able to call one here."

Vyasa gets up. He jabs at the fire between us, stirring the flames. "Limbo smoulders. The ground acts to ward much of what remained from the old world. She is hotter under the surface, more magical. Anything that stirs her releases heat and power to the vortex. Those of us with the gift can do this and on a clear day... well... anything might happen."

I stare at him. "Why don't you perform the summoning?" I ask.

Vyasa shrugs. "Many reasons for that. The two most important are plain. I lack the strength and I lack the need. You however..."

I swallow, trying to suppress my excitement at the thought and stick to reason. "Why should I do this?"

"Look around, your life here is over. Even if you were saved, you would return to a wasted existence. For you, Sanctum is a prison and the monastery will be a tomb. You have outgrown this world, it is time for you to leave, but the portal is not your path. On this day you can make your own story. Summon a dragon and fly away."

"How?"

"Try."

I turn away from him and gaze into the sky, to focus on the green expanse. It is difficult to concentrate. The pain from holding the stave is a distraction. I drop it. My body sags and my head lolls as before. I hear Vyasa's sharp intake of breath and his approach. I wave him back with a flailing hand. *I know what I'm doing.*

Like this I can't look up, but perhaps I don't need to. I didn't meet Vyasa, but he heard the shouting voice of my mind.

I picture the sky and the strange rock suspended above us. I imagine floating, rising up in the air. It becomes clearer than when I beheld it with my eyes. There are trees, rivers and mountains, just like the storybooks, but real.

The whole place is *alive*, throbbing with living plants and creatures, their calls, their movement, the beating of hearts, *everything*.

Then I find her and all other things fade. Her mind envelops mine, a huge, predatory intelligence suddenly aware of me, devouring me into itself. I feel hunger and joy. I am flying above land and sea. I am hunting, to eat, to feast.



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Below, the ground seethes. Animals, hundreds of them, running in fear. The part of me that remains Kith recognises them, but the dragon doesn't care, it sees only food.

Our wings furl and we dive, down, down, down. Our jaws open and the flames pour forth, creatures stumble and we reach for them.

NO!

The voice is loud, it is mine, drawing us from the prey and back into the sky. We soar away above, above, beyond and more. The air is gone, there is cold and dark and nothing, only black and dust and stars...

...and green!

Green sky, lower and lower and lower. I see myself, the fire, the burning corpses and Vyasa.

We land and gaze at the body in the chair - my body. I am Kith, but I am also the dragon. I stare through the eyes of both, lost in reflection. My soul in each mind, each body, each place.

Lost...

Entry 5: Help When Required

A void, a chasm within parts of my mind. A danger I had not anticipated, been warned of or planned for. I stare at myself and stare back and stare back and—

A shadow falls between us and the link is severed. Something of me is broken off and remains within the dragon, but at least I can move and remember who I am, remember the difference.

“Well done Kith! I wasn't sure... but...”

My fingers touch the stave. The pain brings focus. I clutch the object tight and bring it to my neck. The muscles respond as before and I gaze at Vyasa. He stands between me and the dragon, his eyes wide.

I sense irritation in her. This world is anathema. The sky is calm for now, but the magic sustaining her unravels with each moment. She turns towards the smouldering pyre of corpses. I feel the hunger well up and she rises from her haunches, moving...

“N-No...”

Vyasa touches my shoulder. “Be at ease. Let your new friend feast. What other purpose might the dead serve?”

“You knew?”

“I considered the possibility,” he admits. “Whilst the dragon sates itself, we can plan,” he kneels in front of me. “You must ride the creature.”

“How?”

“In a way unlike any other person. Wait here.” Vyasa walks to my carriage and goes inside. After some minutes, he returns with the hammock and an assortment of ropes. “Your command of her is not dependent on physical control or guidance. That means you are not restricted in how she carries you. We must make a pouch large enough to fit.”

He busies himself with the work, the plan it seems to strap me to the belly of the beast. I gaze at her as she gorges on the charred dead that were once my father's servants - old Lepi and the others. My guts heave at the thought, but I make myself watch. She is joined to me now. I must accept that. I must understand her nature and modify my own. Such a creature cannot be expected to care for my dead, to revere the memories of shared lifetimes she played no part in. The corpses serve no purpose now. By consuming them the dragon gives them purpose.

Her scaly skin ripples as she moves, stripping flesh from limbs, working methodically for her meal. The process is noisy. Sometimes she becomes impatient, pulverising bones in her huge mouth, the sound a wincing cacophony that encourages my stomach to rebel.

As she feeds, Vyasa approaches. She stirs but he croons soothing words. “You remember me, little one. I spoke with your great sire a long time ago. We flew together for ten glorious days in the old world. No-one remembers that story. Only how we quarrelled and fought one another.”

Carefully, he slips the ropes around the dragon's limbs and secures them. I sense the creature's irritation and concentrate to suppress it. She turns back to the corpses, dragging out a blackened body, pinning it



with her forelimbs and tearing it in half.

Vyasa continues his work, tying lines across the creatures back legs and wing joints. Beneath her belly I see my hammock prison from before, lined now with a thick fur cloak. "Will it hold?" I ask.

"Fate grants us no opportunity to determine an answer," Vyasa replies, but gentle laughter softens his tone. "You must risk this, or die here in your chair."

I nod and swallow past the lump in my throat. My life to this point has not been about taking risks. My parents always tried to limit chance and by doing so, limit opportunity. I see how this made me angry - a raging ignorant fool, not truly accepting how their care protected and stifled in equal measure.

Let me fail! Let me struggle, let me try and then I'll know my limitations!

Now liberty is in front of me and I hesitate. *Why? Isn't this what you've always wanted?*

"What will become of me?" I ask Vyasa.

"You will join minds with her and fly far from here to the worlds above."

"Afterwards though, when I am hungry, sick, or need to get down?"

Vyasa shrugs. "When I sleep, I cannot be sure what will happen. I must rest and trust my preparation is enough, or that I will be a match for any surprise. Your life is different to mine, the challenge greater, but not different. You will find a way."

"I wish I believed that."

"The first step to doing so is to make the attempt. What else can you do?"

I think about that for a long time. The dragon continues to eat, leaving little more than a black stain of charred ash on the ground.

"Very well," I say at last. "Help me to fly."

Entry 6: To Fly and to Fall

Vyasa's hands are strong and sure. He drags me from the chair to the dragon - quite a feat for one man - and lets me rest beside her.

I lie on the ground looking at him. A thin man in simple clothes, older than this world, ancient in the world before. I sense an unfathomable strength within him, physical, mental and magical, yet he says I am stronger, that I can do things he cannot.

I summoned a dragon!

The realisation is only just beginning to sink in. I gaze at the creature. She has finished eating and crouches, eyeing the bone fragments and scraps of cloth that remain. Part of me remains with her, feeling hunger sated, but not gone. Her scaly skin ripples as she moves, her great wings are furled and idle. Her claws are bigger than my hands, her teeth bigger than my fingers. *I summoned a—*

"You must command her to sit up, so I can get to the belly and strap you in."

The words bring me back. I nod loosely and struggle to master myself first. The buzzing pain of the stave is a distraction, so I let it fall. The dragon is here, in front of me. The link between us palpable. I ask her to move and she snorts. A flicker of flame emanating from her nostrils, making Vyasa gasp.

"Apologies, this isn't easy."

"Take your time."

I try again, exploring the connection, revisiting the fragment of myself that stayed in her mind. Her body is like mine, her limbs move in the same way - only by consensus. For a moment she resists me, but then acquiesces. She knows me as I know her. There is no harm in my intention.

I see with her as we raise our self onto hind legs. Vyasa's arms are around me. My body presses against our body. The touch is strange; another link that makes our connection easier and more difficult.

"We're done. You're ready."

I gaze at Vyasa through two sets of eyes. My mind, adapting to the different perspectives - from above and in front. "M-my..."

"The stave is tied on beside your right hand. You need only flex your fingers. Let me step back then try reaching for it."

He moves away. We watch him. I move my hand and a jolt of pain confirms the stave's presence, its magic separating me from her. I explore and find it attached with flexible cord. I can move it to my arm,

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my neck and my chest without effort. When I let go, it returns to its place.

I stretch again, clasp the stave and touch it to my jaw. "How can I thank—"

With a cry, the dragon unfurls her wings, gathers herself and leaps. We are airborne, flying away from the wasteland, up, up and into the sky. I glimpse Vyasa waving as he grows smaller and smaller. I wish I'd had time to express my gratitude and say goodbye.

He understands. You don't need to torture yourself.

I release the stave and reach for her. Our minds join again and her visceral joy at flying overwhelms me. This is her realm, where she transcends beauty and grace, her world that she permits me to share.

Her gaze shifts to the strange rock. A beat of wings propels us towards it. Another and another. The air is thin. I hear the wheezing breaths of my fragile body. From her memory I learn it will worsen as we climb, until there is nothing to breathe. I am frightened. *Can I survive such a place?*

We rise into the green sky, the light fades. I witness memories of her home and share her yearning to return. I shut my eyes and drift, immersing myself in her past.

One last look.

The green is gone now, leaving unending black. I see land! Trees! Mountains!

I take my last rattling breath and together, we fall...





The Sage and Ancient Red

*It flew over boiling land and sky,
Free at last as all things die.
Red brought flame to their screaming plight.
The people fled no-one would fight.*

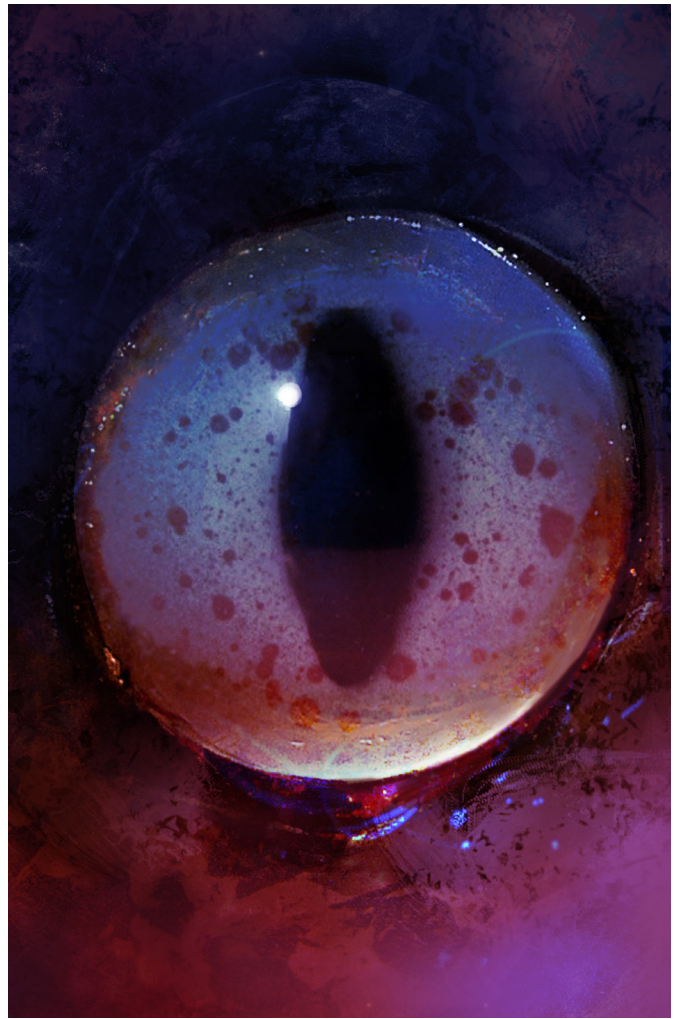
*Upon the mountain, stood the Sage.
His back to stone confronting phage.
"Wyrms I see thee for what thou art."
By my hand, I bid thee depart.*

*Ancient Red smiled displaying teeth.
"I will not go, I will not leave!
I shall burn and break your kind,
Revenge I seek, it will be mine!"*

*The Sage muttered spells and thrust out his staff.
The Dragon stared and began to laugh.
"In oldest times you tried that trick,
I'll not fall again, I'll burn you quick!"*

*Flame came then and Sage caught fire.
But he sprang from mountain into the air.
Onto the dragon's back he fell,
And dragged the beast away to hell.*

*The people know Sage for what he did,
They tell his tale to girl and boy.
He and Red, still strive and war.
Far from our world for ever more.*



Journal of the Witness

I watch him enter, condemned wizard of the Horsemen's cabal, his power shackled by Limbo. Grey hair spills down over his shoulders and thread bare vestment - a weak and vulnerable man, much less than the armoured God who murdered our kind. His eyes were dark and shot venomous looks around all those upon the benches. He regards us as nothing, but memorises each face in turn. I sense he will remember us, even in death.

The wizard is brought to the centre and King Theias stands in front of him. He carries the axe, kept only for these rare moments. "You are condemned for your crimes," he says. "What have you to say?"

He smiles at the King then turns and smiles at me. "When I have finished my speech, you will put me to death. All that I am in this life will end. If you believe in an eternal soul then perhaps what you do will set me free? You do this deed and commit this act because you believe me guilty, when in truth all I am guilty of is living a life with different values to yours. You name me a murderer, but accept nothing of the blood on your own hands, the lives broken in your drive towards understanding.

"On matter of consorting with demons and heeding the whispers of the underworld, I am innocent. It is easy for the ignorant to name that which it does not understand as a monster. There are things I have knowledge of that you do not. What astonishes me is your unwillingness to learn. You claim to be guardians of lore, hoarders of it indeed, but you refuse to accept the enlightenment I bring you, recording only these last moments and nothing of the skill and art I offer."

The words stirs the gathering. I catch a murmur of conversation from two women. "Why is he still alive?" she asks.

"Would you be here, if he wasn't permitted his speech?"

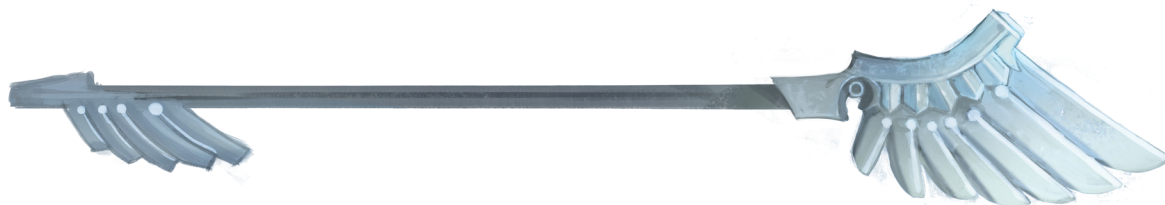
The wizard raises his hands and the crowd quiets. "I need not see the anger in your eyes, nor hear your insults and blame. I have been free and understand what freedom means. You do not.

"Many of you wish for the old world. Know this, there is no return to that place. You must plan for what is, not what was. Life in its multiplicity will thrive if it let loose upon what remains. You must feast, let it nurture you and in turn you will nurture the worlds."

The guard pushes the wizard forward. He falls to his knees and King Theias raises the axe.

"If you wish to know then my people are out there, beyond the Eldritch plains. In time beyond my time, you may learn to trust each other. Perhaps then you can remake the worlds."

The axe falls.





The Fractured Worlds

The Fractured Worlds are outside of the vortex and are bathed in its energies. They are the cast off remains of the old world, sustained by magic. The near realms are perilous places, bathed constantly in the fluxing energies. Yet as you travel further, the distortions settle. Some places are the homes of particular creatures, others have become kingdoms ruled over by powerful wizards.

Each realm may contain fragments of the old world surviving relatively intact - artefacts, ruined cities - relics which may be treasured and potentially contain great knowledge and power. Perhaps the story of what happened in the long past is contained in scattered fragments spread throughout the void.

Wizards who master the flows of mana learn to manipulate and shape the realms themselves. They return to Limbo as saviours, bringing a chosen few with them into their kingdoms. This deliverance has a price and many find themselves working for their new masters as little more than slaves.



Time Beyond The Vortex

Time is often perceived by us as a branching tree. We travel from its trunk into the branches which represent possible futures as each decision presents a set of new realities. A yes/no decision means reality has duplicated, a yes/no/maybe triplicated and so on.

However, if you perceive the past as a series of branches as well, with the only constant point being the here and now, this explains why we can all experience similar stories and realities, but end up in the same place and meet in a given moment.

The energies unleashed during the schism have affected both time and space. Wizards often meet to find they have experienced similar adventures on the countless worlds that surround Limbo.

Outside of Limbo, time can be measured in many ways depending on the location of the vortex and the realm's rotation in relation with this. In previous days, the passage of sun and moon divided day and night, now such contrivances might exist through a wizard's artifice or the kingdom's passage around the vortex. A realm's people may measure time in ways local to them, or in the ways they remember from their past.



The Wanderer

Marit approached the fire with trepidation. It was not often in these dark days that strangers came to the lands of the Nine Tribes and the Proud Eagle folk.

The man sat in front of his fire, seemingly unaware of his watcher. He wore a long patchwork cloak and many trophies. His eyes caught the flickering light and scars gleamed on his forearms. Little unusual about that, but his direction of travel provoked curiosity.

He walked from the west. There was nothing to the west.

Marit's duty was to alert her people of any visitor. A confrontation might prevent this, so she kept to the shadows outside the light. The stranger had set snares, which she'd carefully avoided, before crawling forward on her belly to wait.

In times past, there were many enemies to threaten the tribe. The old tellers spoke of the long past when the restless dead came down from the mountains that divided tribe lands from the eastern forests. There tales of feral men who preyed upon the flesh of others. Though visits were fewer now, these remained dangerous days.

Yet, this stranger seemed little threat. He bore marks of a warrior, but bore no blade, instead carrying a staff with a curved end. His faded raiment showed good skills in weave and his tools showed use. He displayed no pelt of tribe or run. He was alone; little threat to the Proud Eagle.

"I know you're out there."

The stranger's words startled Marit, she'd been careful. What gave her away? Instinct took over, she sprang to her feet, drew two stone knives from her belt and called out into the darkness before running into the light.

The man stood slowly to meet her, staff gripped with both hands. His eyes caught hers and she stopped.

"I have no wish to fight you."

Marit stared. The face that stared back was worn and stained by battle and travel. Yet the eyes gleamed with vigour and she thought, amusement. A glistening onyx trail of thick hair adorned the gnarled brow and thick black eyebrows.

"Where do you come from?" she asked.

"You know where," the stranger replied and inclined his head. "From that direction."

"There is nothing out there but ruins and Realm's End Ridge," Marit said. "You are lying."

"I am not."

"What is your business in the land of my people?"

The questions seemed not to surprise the stranger. He sighed and sat back upon a protrusion of rock, adjusting his burdens to gain some form of comfort. "Your questions assume I have walked here or that I have any business in this place."

"Everyone has purpose."

"My choice to walk through your land is no indication I have business with your people, I do not."

"You lie. Who else would you be here to meet?"

"Perhaps no-one."

Marit inched closer, raising her weapons, but the stranger did not get up. "I wish to pass unhindered through your land," he said. "What payment do you require that I might do so?"

Marit frowned. *Payment?* Everything she owned had been made by her own hand or given to her as trophies. No-one had offered her payment before. "What do you ask?" she said.

"Let me walk on, I will be far from your lands by the day after tomorrow. Watch me as you wish and keep your weapons at your belt, but leave me be. For this I offer a gift."

"I am tasked to alert the tribe."

"If you give no sign and I give no trouble, who will ever know?"

Marit didn't answer, but stared at him for a time. When he did not speak, she stepped backwards, her gaze upon him still, waiting for his move as she gradually retreating into the shadows and to where she came.



But the stranger did not move, not for a long time. The ground beneath Marit's belly was warm with a trace of the day's heat. The fire warmed her too, though its light did not reach as far. Slowly she drifted off to sleep.

The sun was high in the sky when she awoke and the man was gone.

Marit leapt up and ran eastwards. She soon noticed the tracks and followed them as fast as she could. She climbed a steep hill and caught sight of him in the distance, walking just as he said he would, towards the forest lands.

She followed at a distance. When he stopped, so did she. At night she watched again from the edge of the firelight behind a stone. She saw him place a great pot over the fire and her belly rumbled at the smell that came from it, but she stayed where she was until he dowsed the fire and went to sleep.

In the grey before dawn she crept over the ground between them and went to his fire. The broth in was still warm and she scooped out what she could with her hands.

When the pot was empty, she stole back to her hiding place. When he awoke and left, she waited a time and followed after.

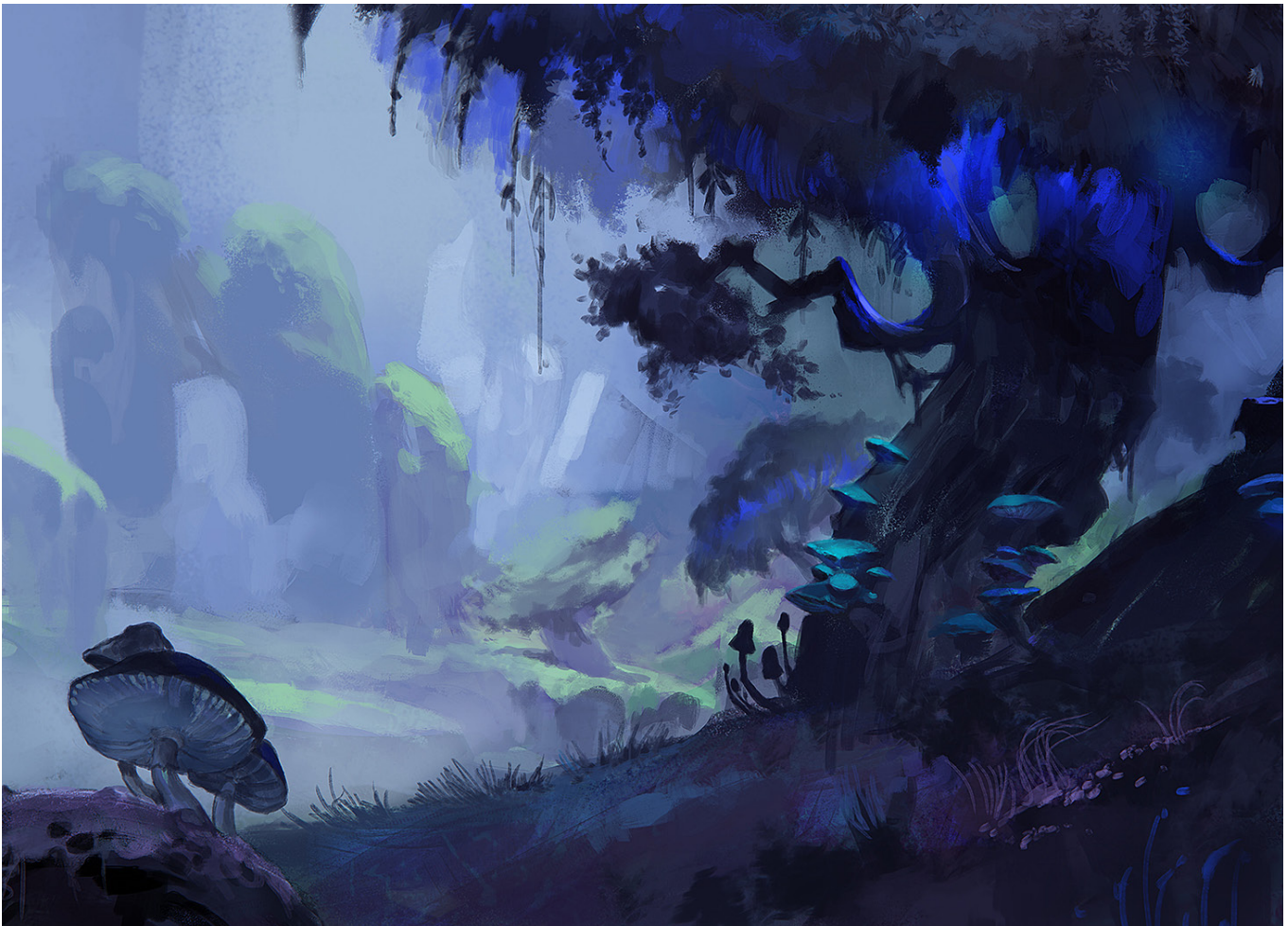
The land changed. Patches of green appeared amidst the dirt and stone, the gnarled trees of her homeland transformed into straight sentinels and became numerous. She could smell the bubbling waters that ran along the edge of the tribelands, a border she dared not cross. The stories of what lay beyond in the mountains and forests were enough to keep her back, but also there was her duty to watch and ward. To cross the river meant abandoning all she had been given to do.

The stranger forded the river, his long cloak dragging out behind him. When he reached the other side he sat down.

Slowly Marit approached. When she reached the water's edge, she saw something shining amidst the stones, she reached down and picked it up. It was a knife like hers, but made from gleaming metal, carved into a blade. Her own face stared back at her as she looked at it.

"You earned it," said the stranger from across the shore.

Marit waved at him. He waved back, then turned away, disappearing into the woodland.



Realms Beyond

There are countless fragments of the old world drifting out beyond the vortex. These have become kingdoms and empires of wizards who pledge their allegiance to one god or another.

Some realms are known to many travellers and stories of them become legend in the libraries of Limbo.

Toran

A world of legend, some say the nearest to the magic. It is here, upon the Great Howe, overlooking the darkness an Egregoroi one may bridge the gap and touch the Vortex from without.

Toran does not appear to all travellers. At times it remained submerged in the magic storms. Distorted powers rage across its surface, making any journey fraught with danger. Only the bravest wizard might venture here on their quest for power as to do so may leave them trapped as the Vortex closes around them.

The danger to wizards journeying here means the world of Toran is as yet an unclaimed domain.

Erebus

A world of caverns and perpetual night. In the depths of this realm live creatures who remember the old world. Their clans fear no Wizard or Alchemist and their leaders have learned magic for themselves. This is a realm of vampires and their minions. The living are taken from many worlds and brought to this place to sate the blood hunger of these ancient dead. The least fortunate, turned and made vassals to the eternal thirst.

Temesne

Jadvar was once an initiate of the Tower of the Star. After leaving Limbo, he ventured to the allied realm of Temesne and became an apprentice wizard at court. No-one can say for sure what happened to Queen Bellisana, the realm's ruler, but the next emissary from the Tower received a frosty greeting from Jadvar's soldiers and left quickly, declaring the realm overthrown.

Rumours circulate about the circumstances of Jadvar's rise. Many alchemists and artificers live in Temesne and all seem changed, altered it is said by a dark ritual that bound all with the gifted blood to Jadvar's will.





The Many Promised Land

The thrill of portal magic fades, despite my effort to hold on. In its depths I glimpse an eye, searching and seeking, but it does not find me as I leave its domain to arrive...

In someone's home.

Darkness. I smell decay. Shelves lined with jars and pots, the contents tinged with mould; a broken pallet bed, a discarded stool. The stone floor strewn with the remains of a life; in the corner, an old key, discarded by the occupants. A touch to my hat and a gesture brings light to the room, candles in each lit by my will. I lean on my staff and pick it up, brushing away the dust.

A one room cruck house with four doors and no windows, long since abandoned. The walls are stone, the floor painted with an arcane symbol that draws an echo from my heart. A wizard has been here, recently. The lingering trace of power is not old it is... subtle... a warning against intruders.

My presence is known.

I must prepare quickly. This world is unknown – unknown to anyone from the council. I grasp my staff in both hands and extend my senses into the realm beyond. Once again I feel the eye, but I ignore it, concentrating on my task.

The air ripples and a figure steps through - a small mischievous face with a smile of remembered pain. I remember this creature from another time, but never asked his name.

"You summoned me, master?"

I hear the repressed anger in his voice, but I have no time to discuss his right to freedom. I hand him the key. "Outside. Find what this is for," I tell him, "and stay hidden."

He bows and scampers to the door. Such sprites have their use, when information is required. There are few creatures better at finding what you need. In my mind, I see the world through his eyes. The outside is a mass of greenery, like an unchecked garden, the fresh air a welcome relief. For a moment I am reminded of the old world I have seen in the paintings, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's scenes made real. Can it be I have found an idyll? A new place large enough that we might rebuild what we once—

"Master!"

A flicker of movement in the trees. I move to the door and shut it. A sharpened thumbnail slices open a scar on my palm and blood drips into the symbol on the floor, improving the chance of my spell succeeding. I grip my staff with bloodstained fingers and reach out once more, finding an answer closer at hand than I'd thought.

An apparition walks through the wall – a woman, her face lined with grief. I have used magic to bring her back. She cannot speak, but I can tell she feels violated by my action. In times past we left the dead to their rest, we venerated their passing, but now the need of the living outweighs such concerns.

I gesture to the door, she moves that way and passes through the wooden panels – a silent guardian sent to keep watch. A wizard lives here and could be friend or foe. I sense she would know the answer if she could speak, but I cannot spare the time for the questions.

A muffled shout and I glance at the walls. Thick coloured ooze is seeping through the cracks in the wall to pool on the floor. This time, I do not need the shiver to recognise magic or the spell. I make for the opposite side of the room, kick the door aside and run.

A flash, an explosion and I am in the air, the defensive magic of my robes is triggered, they harden. I hit the ground, the impact, enough to take my breath.

I am surrounded by unfamiliar plants and grass, a riot of colour in bloom. There is no time to linger and marvel, I rise quickly, gesture and extend my will; a winged horse, straight from Bellerophon's tale appears at my side. Quickly I am on its back and the land falls away beneath us.

Through the eyes of my creature I see a figure approach the house. He is dressed like me, the style giving away his heritage. Robes of a Dominican monk, interlaced with symbols of enchantment, a survivor from the old times then.

I locate him from above. He points at me with his staff, a young face, barely older than mine. To the right I see the spectral form of my minion wrestling with two figures. Her touch is death, but they with-



THE LOREMASTER'S GUIDE

stand it.

Above in the sky, I see more fragmented worlds and the lambent glow of the seething vortex – the remains of the world that was. Contained in its centre, the survivors from the time before, shielded by the magic of the ancient orders. Thousands wait there in Limbo for people like me, explorers, sent to find the remnants of lost lore and places where we can begin again. They have waited since the days of my childhood and they will wait longer still.

From the back of my steed it is clear this world is not enough for our needs. Thirty or forty could live here in comfort, but no more. This is no home for the desperate numbers clinging to life in ruins.

A scream draws me back to the present. Giant spiders burst from the forest forcing my minion to run. I command him towards a second cruck house. He runs inside, the spectre following close behind. The Pegasus descends on the far side and I run in to join them.

I shut the door and the spectre stands against it. “We have scant moments,” I say to my minions. The sprite nods and pulls an apple from the ragged pocket of his treads. I take it and eat. The magic of this world flows through the fruit, restoring my power and strength.

I look around the room. There is a chest in the corner and a broken mirror on the wall. I can see a face in the cracked slivers. A thin and haggard man, with sunken eyes and nervous expression stares back. Dark hair, streaked with white, all these marks belie my age, less than twenty turns in total from before and after the Schism. I have not seen this face – the face others see of me – in some time. There is a dangerous power in reflections. I look away and turn to the spectre and add power to her summoning. “Tell me of your past,” I say. Her pained expression tightens.

The spectre’s voice feels otherworldly and strange as she speaks. “We survived the end. My grandmother was like you, skilled in the arts. But then he came here, claiming we abandoned the ways of faith!” The words are in the Slavic tongue, the vehemence, passionate and living, in contrast to her dead state. “He brought judgment, my grandmother could not withstand him and he burned her alive. For my crimes I was permitted death, but my brother and my father...”

“They are the living dead,” I finish the sentence for her and swallow hard. “I sent you to fight them.”

Her transparent lips thin and she stares at me. “There is great pain in what you made me, but your magic gives me power to end their suffering.”

I nod. “The wizard, does he have a name?”

“Torquemada.”

I recognise this. A fellow explorer sent to find refuge for our people, but presumed lost. Spanish by birth and a member of the old church, he had been fervent and powerful, a prime candidate to lose his way. “He killed everyone?”

The dead woman nods. “Only the great spiders remain in the woodland.”

“Begging your pardon, master.” The sprite inquires. “Oughtn’t we to keep moving?”

I need no reminder. I hold out a hand, “Key.” The creature flinches and produces what I gave him. I walk to the chest, kneel down and open it. Inside are a sword, some gemstones and a piece of paper. I pocket the stones and the paper and pick up the sword, running my hand along the blade. It glows blue in response. I pass it to the sprite. “Make yourself useful.”

He takes the weapon nervously. “I have no training—”

“Stab them until they stop moving.”

“Will it hurt the dead?”

“It will now.”

The door on the far side of the room shatters. Clawed hands reach out and dead eyes capture mine in a hungry stare. I back away, clutching my staff and speak the words of magic. A ball of energy coalesces in the air, flying through the broken door. The screams from those outside are chilling.

Vines appear around the shattered arch, growing at an impossible speed. I gesture to the sprite, who steps forward, hacking and slashing at the barbed plants, but for every cut, two more growths spring into life, quickly wrapping themselves around him.

“Run!” he gasps as the tendrils reach his neck. I turn and make for the other door, the spectre in front of me melting through the wall.

Outside again, I can hear the muffled chanting of Torquemada. I turn the corner and watch as the spec-



tre erupts from the wall, her form solidifying to grab her dead brother by the throat, dragging him away from the building. I point my staff at her father and release the words. There is a splintering crack and a forked bolt of lightning passes between us, leaving him a smoking ruin on the ground.

The wizard charges towards me. His face is burned and raw. I grab his wrist and turn him, driving him to the ground. "Heathen!" he gasps under my weight. "Blasphemer!"

"Lay your accusations on yourself," I growl. "It is you who have become Judas, abandoning the people you swore to protect."

"I made no oath to help unbelievers!" He spits in my face.

I wipe the drool away whilst holding him down. He is weak, drained by his injuries and exertions. "It is not too late for you," I tell him. "Return with me through the portal. The orders will listen if you accept their judgment."

"I accept nothing from half breeds!"

In that moment I know what must be done. As I hold him, I reach into myself for the magic and my heart becomes stone. I speak the words and touch his chest, watching and feeling him wither beneath my fingers. When it ends and I stand up, only a dry husk remains.

A head nudges my hand. I turn to the Pegasus. "You served me well," I say and stroke her head. I let go of the spell and she fades, returning from whence she came.

At the door of the house I find the spectre, standing over her dead brothers. "Thank you," she says. "They are at peace now."

I nod, kneel in the dirt and begin to dig. After a time, I have two shallow graves, large enough for them. I drag the bodies over and drop them with as much grace as I can manage then replace the earth. All the while, the spectre stands over me, in silent approval.

When it is done I face her again. "I can release you now," I say.

"Your spell will end when you leave, wizard," she replies and points. The portal has returned, in my efforts I hadn't felt it arrive. "You must go."

"Others will come here," I tell her. "I will ask them to leave you be."

"That would be best," she replies.

"I walk to the shimmering door and pass through. Once more I feel the eye searching, but still it does not find me. Perhaps one day I will linger too long and it will.





Herbology and Alchemy

Alchemy is both an art and a science. Its original premise was in the transformation of base metals into rare and precious ones, but with the writings and work of the Nephilim, these principles expanded. The prima materia of all things, comprising of earth, air, fire and water, suggested boundless potential properties of transformation with the right catalyst.

Some Nephilim themselves are naturally attuned to this task; they are a blended people, each being the descendant of Egregoroi and mortal parents or grandparents.

The mix of magically attuned blood and the restless mortal mind is ideal to the further exploration of inert transformation. Their sensitivity to magic is an essential part of this process, as is their lack of personal power; else the subtleties of such constructions would be missed.

Throughout the Fractured Realms there are thousands of different plants, some are variations and memories of old Earth, but others are new and unknown to any book or catalogue.

At times, wizards have found the ingestion of herbs to enhance their magic, but such experimentation is chancy at best and many have died trying to find rumoured plants that might aid them.

Alchemists are much better at assessing the affinity and relationship of flora to the magical arts. In the monastery of the Stormsheim monks there are vast indexes of drawings and copious notes detailing the experiments with each plant found, preserved and returned.

It is known that certain roots, flowers, powders and leaves can be combined with magic to produce potions. Others can be used in rituals to summon rare creatures and others ingested to create strange magical effects, but only an alchemist has the ability and lore to determine what any discovered plant may do.

Brandenwurt

A strange flowerless plant that grows in clumps in the higher climes of the realms. When eaten, brandenwurt can make you drowsy. Infusions in boiled water helps rest and sleep.

Kalliphan

A strange red powder found between rocks and near riverbeds. Kaliphan must be filtered and purified to become potent. It is known to banish the requirement for sleep, but not indefinitely. Those who use it are warned that eventually they will need rest.

Derrioc

This yellow flowered plant can be found in many places, but becomes numerous in woodland. Many healers use it to dull the pain of wounds and the bite of insects.

Velder Root

A brown or red root found in woodland, this part of the velder plant can cause hallucinations when consumed.

Queen's Sting

A furred plant. Queen's sting irritates the skin. It can be used in brewing to add a bitter taste to drinks.

Barl Berry

A delicious red berry fruit, barl berry can be dangerous as it offers little sustenance, but has a subtle taste that can make eaters want more and more.

Dead Man's Breath

A distinctive brown plant with an oval shaped green leaf. A boiled drink infused with this, will slow the



beating heart of any living thing.

Greel

Greel plants are poisonous to eat. However, their small white seed are less potent and can be consumed. They will cause mild dizziness.

Monolite Powder

A grey powder found amidst the ruins of old stone buildings, monolite can be used to induce vomiting.



Journal of the Aelfen

They must be warned...

The forest has always been under our care. We patrol the woodland as we were ordered by the magi a hundred turns ago. This has been our bond, to wander amidst leaf and tree, living in the embrace of this silent army.

The agreement is binding. We know what they are capable of if we disobey. The stories of our past are told from mother to daughter, generation after generation remember the twilight in the caverns of our prison. We do as we are bid, shepherding tree and bush and seeking the small plants that the magi want. Finding such herbs and roots always brings reward.

Amongst our people, Rangers are respected. It has always been considered honourable for the young of the villages. To learn the ways of the land to aid us later when we return to our farms and to the hills.

One such volunteer am I, along with five others from Mossfen. My parents hoped this work would teach me respect. Perhaps they knew I cared for Braneli and sought to leave so we might be alone together against their wishes.

Now indeed we will. Our last living days spent with one another. The bitter irony would be lost on poor mother if she still lives.

I am alone in the lodge, I hear them enter the clearing, I hear their foul breath, memory of breathing, they are the new dead whose lives fade in the fresh stink of magic that raised them. They were my friends, the five from Mossfen. I grieve for the life we shared, the life that remains in my beating heart, but not in theirs. Their new master intends me to join them and I welcome it. There is no escape, only the waiting.

Even now I hear Braneli call, though she makes no sound. I ready myself to go to her and face my fate and the end of my freedom. I glimpse the black robed figure who accompanies my shambling friends, and realise that only one reason holds me back from accepting my fate.

If ever anyone is to read this, know now. The forest has been lost and the dead walk once more. A wizard is abroad in the land and we shall know war.





Physiologies

The Wizards (Egregoroi)

Humankind has never been alone. Hidden amongst the multitude of societies and civilisations since the first days of fire and writing are the Egregoroi; similar but different to us. Some say they are the chosen of the Creator, others that they themselves were creators of our world and the worlds beyond.

In ancient writings the Egregoroi have many names; Immortal, Elohim, demigod and more. To some they are prophets, guardians harbingers, seers and oracles; to others, totems of punishment, vengeance and death.

The Egregoroi are vastly knowledgeable, with lifespans far longer than any human. Their origin is wrapped up in countless mythologies and religions. Their nature is as changeable as mortals, but their outlook on life differs, owing to their continuation.

The Egregoroi are hardy individuals, capable of surviving exposure and temperature extremes beyond that of mortals, but this physical fortitude is still limited and not excessive by comparison.

The chief strength of the Egregoroi lies in their affinity with magic. They are capable of manipulating the basic material of reality in a vast number of ways. Over time, these manipulations have become taught rituals, rites and spells passed on from elder to novice.

Gradually, most Egregoroi develop an affinity with a particular aspect of magic - law, nature/neutrality or chaos. This is often shaped by their outlook on life.

Egregoroi do age and share many vulnerabilities with humans. The oldest Egregoroi might live to three hundred years. However, they have found a way to transcend their mortal form and become Gods, a transformation which makes them immortal.

Transcendence

A life changing event for any Egregoroi, the moment of transcendence is different for each individual. In the pre-schism world, this process remained elusive, took decades and centuries and for the most part, remained part of the hierarchies of faith. In the post-schism world, with the Gifted exposed to the energies of the Vortex, the time needed is much less, and with wizards travelling amongst countless realms, they gradually accrue the knowledge and experience to shed their mortal form and become conscious magic. At this point, as the individual's mortal form dissipates, so their magical affinity solidifies, meaning they become attuned to the particular aspect of magic which has been predominant in their lives.

Duelling

In the days before the edicts the ancients duelled through storms and rain, wind and sun. They boiled stone and summoned tornados as they strove against one another. Their wars formed and froze the seas, bringing about ages of ice and fire. Many times whole civilisations were wiped out by the battles of these gods.

In those early times, such battles had no rules. Only when the elders saw the ruin they were making of the world they had made did they agree to limit themselves. There were many ways that wizards elect to settle disputes. Contests became a challenge of might or skill, of chance, knowledge and wisdom, their variety made manifest by the earliest established rule; that one wizard issued the challenge and the other decided terms.

After the first Chaos War, when the first council of orders considered the question of how they might solve disputes, the matter was debated at length and many ritualised forms of combat were considered. In the end, a set of simple courtesies were agreed. Two wizards would fight with an agreed number of resources that were to hand. The challenger would approach first, but the challenged would choose the ground.

In the Fractured Worlds, most recognise that a costly duel to the death might last hours or days, owing to the preparations and wards each has cast and constructed around them. Long-time companions of



wizards are known to respect the agreed terms of a duel. It is unlikely an alchemist or an artificer would involve themselves in such a contest. Such individuals know their worth and see no benefit in the risk. Creatures coerced by the wizard, or summoned by spells at hand would participate.

The wards placed in the vestments of wizards prevent the true death and so the majority of ritualised conflicts are not fatal. However, they will remove the loser from the immediate location, often returning them to Limbo where they can meditate upon their defeat.

It is also worth remembering that not all wizards adhere to such courtesy.

The Nephilim

Throughout time, the Nephilim have existed. The first of them, wrote extensively about the world's workings, defining its transformational properties and relationships. His followers, other mortals with the blood of the Egregoroi, refined his work through the centuries.

The world remained ignorant of the truth; that magic exists and is the true catalyst of reality. Behind a veil of religion, prophecy and politics, Nephilim and Egregoroi have guided societies and nations, shepherding them towards enlightenment.

After the schism, the Nephilim are more known for the part they play in selecting, training and assisting wizards. They are known as alchemists, artificers, archivists, door wardens and more. Most live in the great towers on Limbo where they maintain a place of truce and parley for wizards to visit. These towers trade with their guests, who bring offerings in exchange for repairs to their equipment and wise counsel. Physically half breeds are amongst the weakest of our kind. Bound by their patterns as they are to the existence, so they like humanity are doomed to suffer its sickness and eventual destruction.

Humans (Mortals)

In the days of the old world they numbered countless thousands. Nations and kingdoms warred across sea and earth. Always hidden amongst them were the gifted, labouring in secret towards betterment for all.

In the days after the shattering, most of humanity perished. Death by fire, preferable to starvation or the slow asphyxiation of the void. Only those protected by their secret masters or by chance survived.

Now these remnants wander the ruins of Limbo, waiting for deliverance into the realms of the wizard kings. Their physiology makes them inherently non-magical. Spells may be cast upon them, but they cannot be summoned or wield magical power themselves, without having something of the blood.

Life for humans in the Fractured Worlds is much better, but the price of passage is always steep. A wizard seeking a populace for a magical kingdom can afford to be selective and choosy. Those who skill, beauty or a proven work ethic are chosen, leaving behind the most wretched to a cursed existence in the ruins of a broken land.

A wandering wizard may find humans who will accompany them on their travels, but these are rare folk.





Journal of the Singing City

Entry 1: The Bounteous Place

We came from everywhere else, all across the ruins and wasteland to here, this city, the last city of Limbo. Beneath a purple sky it shines. Marbled walkways edged with gold and silver gilt. Clean white flagstones, minarets and domes of the ancient east. A miracle that it survived, some God must have held tight to this place whilst all else shattered.

Water pours from sculpted fountains, trees thrive and birds fly above. People walk the streets barefoot, the only clue of malcontent, the pained expression they share.

No-one goes hungry here, no-one thirsts, no-one dies. That would be release.

There is a noise; an eternal scream that comes from the city. Wherever I go the noise is with me, crouched in the back of my head, always the same in volume and pitch, to plague both my sleep and waking. The stones thrum at my touch, the air tastes thick and tense.

I find no rest here. The scream fades only when you leave. Those who try always return and are welcomed back by its curse.

An old man floats in the fountain pool. He is naked, blind and deaf. He never leaves the water, but smiles and laughs when people throw him scraps of food, mouldy bread and fruit. He shouts of *Vilon Paradis* and rambles of deliverance, *asura* and *shamayim*. In all the time I lingered, he speaks no evil.

We cannot ignore the city scream, yet we act as if we do. We clench ourselves tight whilst our souls writhe.

We are trapped in an echo of salvation, while the old man laughs at what he does not see or hear.

Above the fountain stands the tower; a hooked finger stretching into the sky. Its gleaming golden doors shine even on the darkest days. Shapes adorn them and their arch, but no wizard or servant ever comes out. Only once did I witness a door open. A girl child went inside, never to be seen again.

One day the way will open for all, when the Harrower is to appear with his pipe and bells, to lead us from this place to another.

As we wait for that day, so too does the city. Perhaps the Harrower will end its pain?

All the world is a memory; the stage is empty, the performers long dead and gone. This place was their place and we are but strangers who cannot bring ease. The city finds no comfort in us, we are loath to suckle, but we have no other milk and so we sup as it screams; eat as it howls; drink as it gibbers, cries and begs.

One day I will leave this city, never to return, but for now...

Entry 2: The Choosing

I sit up in the wet grass. I have not slept, but lain for hours between wake and sleep, the song of the city scratching at the back of my eyes.

Time is difficult to judge in this place, but there are periods of dimness which we call night, borrowing the word from our ancestors.

I am hungry. I reach out to the tree and pick fruit from its lowest branches. The apple is a gorgeous shiny red. I bite down and taste the mould I always taste here. The promise given to my eyes is betrayed as know it will be, but that does not stop me hoping each time. Such beauty cannot all be tainted, can it? Is everything promised to us corrupted with blood and ash?

I stand up. Other people are lying on the stones, inside doorways, anywhere they chose to be, but it isn't really resting. There is no rest to be found here, nothing more than existing, but the alternative is a risk. At least here we survive.

I brush mud from my robe and walk down a white stone street. The lush greenery of trees and plants stir in the gentle breeze, such a perfect image of nature, under the purple sky.

The old stories tell it best. How survivors followed the star of a true god to here; how the Elohim rewarded



faith with bliss, guiding us, protecting us as all else perished. Only this place remained untouched by the tumultuous earth, resting in the palm of its lord, defended by his minions. The people who lived here before are long gone, never to return.

In the first days we called it *The Singing City*. The noise was distant and unsettling, not as it is now, a constant torturer of mind and soul.

Over time, the lies revealed themselves and the bliss faded. The song grew louder and we learned its pain. Now it will not let us from its grip.

I turn left on the street and come to a house with a closed wooden door. Small paintings and symbols adorn the archway. The people from before were like us; dark of skin and hair, but they wore strange clothes and in the pictures, practice rituals I do not understand. I remember my father saying we came from the sand and that we were a chosen people, the towns and cities were for fools. Perhaps that's why he left us in the end.

I knock softly at the door, but no-one answers. I go inside. I know where she will be; curled in the corner of the room, her whole body clenched upon itself.

"A'idah, it is time."

She raises her head. Tears and mud stain her face, but she nods and smiles. It is a smile full of pain, but still a precious gift. She trusts me; she trusts what I will do. A moment after father disappeared she gave me the same look; one moment of indecision before she transferred her dependence to me.

"We must go."

Slowly my sister uncoils, standing on shaking legs. I hold out my hand and she takes it, leaning on me for support. "Have you eaten?" I ask. She shakes her head.

I take her outside. We stop by a tree and she picks two small apples, hardly grown or ready to eat. She forces herself to bite and swallow, her jaw set firm against the retching.

I lead her down the street, towards the fountain and the tower. A line of people are there, heads bowed, waiting as we will wait. I recognise several, but others are newcomers. All sorts are here, even pale folk from far away. Somehow we all know the time to rise from our restless rest and make our way here. Even the old man sits up in the pool, his ramblings quiet and his sightless eyes upon us in expectation.

As we near the line, no-one greets us. We take our place at the end. A'idah clings on to my hand tightly and also bows her head. I do not and choose to gaze about the place, searching for a sign of what is to come, but as with every time before, I fail.

The wizard appears twenty steps from me as if he has always been there and I didn't notice. He smiles in response to my scowl, revealing his ruined teeth and walks towards us, his long staff clicking on stone. His robe is plain white like mine, but unstained and without blemish, his face is ancient, a mess of lines and scars. He is older than anyone I have ever seen, older even than the blind old man.

He continues on, gazing at each person in turn then walks back up. His eyes alight upon my sister. "Today is a fortunate day," he says and bends down, lifting her chin with his hand. "I am called Vyasa. You are A'idah, come with me."

A'idah squeezes my hand, hard. She stares into Vyasa's eyes and shakes her head.

Vyasa's face contorts into a frown. "I will not be denied," he says. He moves fast, his shoulder into my sister's stomach, scooping her up and tearing her hand from my grasp.

"No!" I scream, but it is too late. Vyasa is walking quickly towards the golden doors. I stumble after him, breaking into a run. Others from the line shout at me. People block my way, other hands grab mine. I'm surrounded and my sister disappears from view. I hear the old man in the pool laughing and see the way open ahead. "No!" I say again, "No! No!"

I tear myself free from the crowd's grip and charge towards Vyasa and A'idah. As they reach the entrance, I crash into them, sending them flying.

The doors slam shut. We are left in darkness.

The city's scream is gone.



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Entry 3: Dark Scrutiny

Blackness. Silence. Everything gone. I am alone.

I know I am alone, because I feel it; that sense you get when there is no-one nearby, the stillness, emptiness, nothingness. It is a deeper impression now, as the two things in my life that are reliable sticks are gone.

My sister and the noise.

I almost miss the city's song; almost, but not quite. She has not ceased speaking, but the stones of this place protect me. Something of them shields those within, something dead.

Slowly, I raise myself from the floor. With curious fingers, I touch the smooth and dusty surface. A vast flat rock, bigger than any I have ever seen. I crawl around the space, wincing at the pain in my legs. I scraped the skin from my shins getting here as the doors closed.

There are no doors.

My mind refuses to accept this the first time. I fumble about the room again, searching the grooved indentations in the walls, all the time expecting the touch of cold metal alongside daubed stone, but I find no metal. The entrance I came through is no longer there.

I am not alone. I stand up. I sense this, a moment before light appears high above, revealing my gaol - a circular space of grey, all around me writing in strange symbols I do not recognise, no roof, but the illumination is blindingly bright, to hide those who command it.

"You were not invited," a woman's voice calls out.

I swallow and shade my eyes. If they wanted rid of me, they would not be talking. "Where is my sister?" I shout.

"In her rightful place, with us," the woman replies.

"I came here for her," I say. "She is too young to be on her own."

"We will decide that. You cannot be with her. You are not gifted, like her."

"How can you tell?"

"We tested your blood."

I close my eyes against their light, but continue to look up. I am dizzy. "I see things, as she does, I knew you were here before you came, I understand the magic of these stones, the pain and purpose behind the city's song."

There is silence - a deliberation; more than one of them then. The quiet discussion goes on a long time and I back away to the wall, leaning for a while then slipping down to sit and rest. My stomach throbs, a murmur of rebellion against my mouldy meal. I clench myself around it, determined not to give way and decorate this space while my fate is decided.

I expect an answer, but nothing comes. Their scrutiny weighs on me, their eyes, evaluating my worth and use to their hidden plan.

Time goes by. I wait, wait and wait. Eventually, the lights fade. The voice and her companions are gone and I am alone again.

I close my eyes. If I am to leave, they will wake me when they come to drag me out.

Entry 4: Enlightening

I thought they would wake me with rough hands. I was wrong. The city's noise had banished sleep from me for too long and its return renders me senseless when they come. I remember nothing of being moved or manhandled and nothing of the transport. My ignorance preserves their secret ways.

I open my eyes to a light different to all I have known; calm and constant, not the seething half-illumination of the vortex, but clean and healing brightness.

I am lying down. A hand caresses my cheek. Above me a woman's face, she smiles and speaks to me in a whisper. "You mourn for the loss of those you love. They are gone. I cannot recall them to you."

I raise myself to my elbows and her hand withdraws. "Where am I?" I ask.

"In a place between places," she replies, "no Elysian field, but there is time for us all to be delivered. You



are still in the city of Barzakh as you were, but those who come here are afforded more comfort. You are fortunate to be accepted."

I look around. The room is white stone, the walls polished smooth and shining. I gaze at my host. Her perfect teeth and beautiful oval face an antidote to her words. "I only seek my sister," I say. "Is she harmed?" "No, but you will not see her again. That is the price of you being here."

My mood darkens. "Why be so cruel?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "This is not cruelty, only truth. You are not worthy of her. You are permitted to remain so you may serve as others of our station serve. You will join us and trust your work will help all those gifted like your sister and capable of delivering us from torment."

The words are barbs to my heart. I try not to react, but it is hard when all you value is taken. I stare at the woman and breathe. Anger will not avail me. She is dressed in a similar white robe to mine, but hers is covered in symbols, smudged letters that I cannot make out. These marks, her face, hair and hands a dark contrast to all that surrounds us. "Who are you?" I ask.

Her eyes stray to her sleeve and flick from left to right as they read. "My name is Fakhr," she says. "I am of the Hadith - the truthseekers. I serve the sihr. If you grant us what you claimed, you will do also." She stands up and offers me her hand. I take it and stand with her. The pain in my legs is gone. I glance down; the wounds from before are puckered scars.

"What do you want from me?" I ask.

"You claim to understand the purpose of the city's song," Fakhr says. "What is it?"

I flinch and avoid the question, staring at the wall. "I am hungry and thirsty. Is this how your people treat guests?"

"We do not permit guests," Fakhr replies.

Again, I see no door in this room. I touch the stone with my fingers and feel the same deadening as before. I turn to Fakhr. "How long have you been here?"

She frowns. "I arrived only moments before you awoke."

"No, I mean since you came through the door?"

Fakhr shrugs. "I was a little girl then, clinging to the arm of my father before they took me from him, but this is the way of things. There is no way to tell how long ago that was. I found my place here."

I swallow my instinctive reply and continue my questioning. "Do you remember the city's song?"

"Of course," she says, but I sense a confusion about her. "Did you truly learn its secret?"

"What happens if I say no?"

"They will not let you stay."

"Then I know its purpose."

Fakhr stares at me and this time I hold her gaze without flinching. "I said, I am hungry and thirsty. I have eaten beautiful corruption for weeks. If you can block out the song from here, there must be decent food."

Fakhr nods. "I will get you some."

"That would be appreciated."

Entry 5: Sustenance

She takes my hands and we move toward the wall without hesitation. I flinch as we walk into it, but there is only the slightest sensation, a tingling in my arms and legs.

In the room beyond, the light is subdued. I see written marks on the hewn stone as before and turn to my guide. "Were those walls real?" I ask.

"As real as required," she says and smiles. "You would not have left without my hand in yours."

"Then I am your prisoner?"

"That is yet to be determined."

We walk along passageways, up uneven steps, further and further from the outside. I think back on it, the faces of people in the line are fading away, the tree and the old man too, all becoming dim.

We come to a door. Fakhr stares at it. Her face contorts and becomes strained. Slowly, she reaches out



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a hand and grasps the handle as if discovering it for the first time. The door is unlocked and the hinges creak as she opens it.

We walk through into a wide cavernous room lit with torches. I see figures clad like us in robes huddled around a long table, on its surface, a box containing sickly green plants. They shuffled around, taking turns to pluck from the growth and eat. I move closer, my belly rumbles. A man turns and glares at me. His robes are grey and unwashed. Writing covers his arms and legs too, but my gaze is drawn to his fingers, cut and bloodied, leaves in his hands, sharp leaves like knives. He smiles at me, displaying broken teeth and jams the leaves into his mouth, grimacing as he chews and swallows. Blood and drool run from his lip to the floor.

"Dhari leaves will sustain you," Fakhr says as if recalling by rote. "They are bitter but not corrupt."

"The taste of penance," I reply.

The pinched look returns to her face; confusion as if she knows she should understand me, but does not.

"What is the secret of the city's song?" she asks again.

I reach for the plants and pluck several leaves from the nearest. Carefully I roll them with my fingers and place them in my mouth, chewing gently. The taste is bitter, but clear and clean. The fog rolls from my mind. "There is no bliss to be found in Barzakh," I tell her.

She nods slowly. "That sounds like something I would say."

I grab the man with broken teeth and drag him from the table. "What is your name?" I demand.

"I—I do not..."

"You do not know?"

"I cannot... remember..."

I let him go. He slips back to the table and the leaves. I turn to Fakhr. "The song of the city its curse, the flaw in perfection. Without it, there is heaven for a time, out there on the white stone streets, amidst the grass and trees and crystal clear fountains. Only hunger holds us to mortality and the taste of corruption, banishes bliss once more. The old man of the pool who is blind and deaf knows heaven until his belly rumbles, but only he is so gifted."

Fakhr stares at me. "Why would the ancients of this place be so cruel?" she asks.

"The city's song is magic made to keep its dwellers on the ground and their keepers in the sky," I explain.

"I know why it is made and how it can be stopped."

"Tell me."

"I will see my sister first."

She hesitates. Her eyes drop from mine and stray to the others in the room; the bloody fingers and filthy robes. "It is forbidden," she murmurs.

I take her hand and draw her close. I nod at the shuffling figures. "Do you wish to become like them? You know in your heart that soon you will be the same, unable to leave this room, your name lost to the stillness. Let me see A'idah one last time, let me speak with the elders and all things may change for you and for all of these people."

"You are not permitted."

"Do you know why?"

Her confusion returns. "I used to know," she says.

I take her other hand in mine. "Then let me help you," I say.

Slowly, her face relaxes and she nods.

I smile.

Entry 6: The Warden

We walk through an archway to a spiral staircase. As we leave the hall, I feel the disapproval of those behind us. I stop for a moment, turn around and meet the stares, the smudged faces of men, women and children. This is transgression. We are breaking the laws they have lived by for as long as they remember, but these are memories and fragments. They cannot recall why the arch and stairway is forbidden.



I smile and shrug in apology then turn and begin the climb.

Fahkr leads. Her hand in mine is warm and her grip firm. I trace my index finger along the cut scar on her wrist, deciphering its shape. She stops on the stairs, turns and lets go, glaring at me. "What are you doing?"

"Learning your past," I reply. I grab her hand again and turn it palm upwards, revealing the scars on her arm. "You did this," I say, "so you could remember your name."

Tears fill her eyes, "Let go of me," she says.

I release her and we climb in awkward silence. I did not tell her the whole truth. Already I sense the same magic at work upon me. I cannot recall my father's name, the faces of our tribe grow dim. The bitter dhari leaf helps and as I chew it, memories become vivid once more, but I know those that are lost are gone, never to return.

The steps bring us to a new hallway. There is a large man in front of a wooden door sat on a chair. He is bald, his robes and dark skin daubed with paint and ink; word upon word upon word. The walls either side of him are covered in scratched writing, the stench and stain on the floor under his seat tells me he does not moved to tend to any mortal need. In one hand he clutches a long spear, the other is bloody and holds a handful of leaves.

I walk up to him and meet his vacant gaze. He blinks once, deliberately and his eyes focus on mine. "Who are you?" I ask.

He breaks our stare and reads the words from the wall. "I am the Warden," he says.

I shake my head. "They told you that," I tell him. "It isn't true. You must let us pass."

His bald brow creases in confusion. "I am the Warden," he repeats. "No-one shall go through the door and disturb the masters. Anyone who tries is turned away."

I appraise him. His scarred arms are the size of my legs. The spear is held in stiff, thick fingers. He has fought many times, defending the door from those who tried to force their way past him. Violence isn't the way. Slowly, I reach out my hand and close it over his. "Let go of your burden," I say. "Rest, you earned it."

He stands up, looming over me. I smell sweat, piss and shit. For a moment, I think he is going to lay hands on me, but then his gaze moves on down the hall and he walks away, leaving behind his spear and the stink of his purpose.

"How did you... do that?" Fahkr asks in wonder.

"I told him the truth," I say.

I grab the chair and drag it aside, smearing filth across the floor. Then I grasp the door handle and it turns.

Entry 7: The Sihr

I open the door. There is a noise - a sustained keening, like a memory from within and without. People in the room are singing this note, it rises and falls as each exhausts their breath and re-joins afresh. I recognise the song, it is the city's voice I have been free of since I passed through the entrance to this place. This room is its source. These people, the sihr, are its choir.

I step into the darkened room with the false warden's spear in my hand. All around I sense stone and people. The light of the hallway falls upon their bodies as they sing, lying, writhing, moving on the floor. Fakhr is at my shoulder. She gasps and clutches my arm. A head turns towards her, but the eyes of the woman who stares look through us both. "You should not be here," she slurs before returning to the keen - the same voice from before, when I first followed my sister through the door.

I am reminded of my purpose. "A'idah!" I shout. "Are you here?"

My cries attract more attention, but no direct reply. The people sing as before, reflexively joining and re-joining. Gleaming eyes peering at us from the undulating shadows. The air of this place is thick and cloying, something you can taste. The spear responds, tingling my fingers.

"The woman is right, we should not be here," Fakhr says, her voice shaking. "We are not sihr!"

"Neither are they, anymore," I reply and step forward, picking my way through the tangle of people. The



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spell holds them all in thrall. Perhaps they began long ago, but the magic has run away and become a living thing. A carpet of flesh and noise, that moves around my feet and brushes my legs. The people are filthy, entwined as snakes or lovers might be, but with no urgency to their languid embraces, only sightless struggle and sound to fulfil a need which has no name.

My eyes adjust and I see an archway in the centre of the room. I reach out and grasp it to steady myself. It is made of polished wood and unlike most things here, remains plain. I sense no magic in it.

"The passageway!" Fakhr gasps. "The gate to deliverance!"

I shake my head. "There is no power in this artifice. It is carved, meticulously made, but not enchanted. It is a false idol." I turn slowly, the spear in my hands is glowing, revealing the room and more writhing bodies. "Maybe they believe they are making a portal here, but they are not. This is the song, taken from this room into the walls and then out into the city. This unending noise is what keeps people awake at night." "You said you knew its purpose," Fakhr says and points at the arch. "If not to deliver us through gateway, then for what?"

I ignore her question, instead, I stare around the brightening room. In the furthest corner, I find what I am seeking - A'idah curled up as she was when I found her, before she was taken. I see fear in her eyes, banished by hope when she notices me.

I hurry to her side, stumbling over twisted bodies and worse. She is in my arms, face wet with tears. I head back toward the door, but hear a bell ringing on the other side of the room. Immediately, several other figures rise from the floor and also make their way to the exit.

"What is happening?" I ask Fakhr.

"It is the sign that the sihr must answer," she explains.

"What sign?"

"The golden doors open. Another will be entering the tower."

I carry A'idah from the room. Four of the singers are ahead of us in the hallway, numbly making for the stairs. "This is our chance," I breathe.

"Our chance for what?" Fakhr asks.

"To escape."

Entry 8: Leaving the Tower

We descend the stairs, I lead with the spear in my right hand, A'idiah clutching my sleeve. Fakhr follows us both, her face pinched with confusion. She wants to be free, but everything she remembers is being transgressed.

"We should not—"

I face her. "You asked me the purpose of the city's song? You cannot recall your past without looking at your wrist and your clothes. Your masters sent you to me to find it out, but when we left that room they did not stop us or ask again. The man who claimed to be the warden could not remember what he was supposed to ward. You saw what became of your sihr with their mindless writhing. Even these people we follow now, only reply to their bell out of fading instinct."

"But what does it mean?"

"It means that the song is magic, drawing from the soul of each man, woman and child in this tower.

Thieving what defines you to perpetuate itself, stealing your memories Fakhr, leaving you so broken that you do not know your own name!"

I turn away from her, not caring if she follows or not. A'idiah is by my side now, the sole reason for my coming here, returned to me. Fakhr can escape with us, or stay in the fugue. She has most of the truth she asked of me, only one question remains.

What is the song's purpose?

The sihr from the room have disappeared down the winding stairwell. I hurry after them, A'idiah right behind me, her hand squeezes my fingers. As we descend, the light disappears. The glow from the spear is gone, but moving shadows and pale white robes stand out in the gloom. A door opens to our left and new illumination reveals a gantry across a hole. I recognise this place, not from memory, but from being below. The sihr shuffle along the gantry. A'idiah goes to follow them but I hold her back. "No, that is not for us," I



say.

"Then where do we go?"

"This way."

I lead her on down the stairs and into the darkness. The steps become thin and wet, the walls too are slick with moisture. Behind us I hear Fakhr hiss as she slips on the stone. I ignore her and press on.

Down, down, down, into the dark where hands and feet disappear. We are swallowed by cloying air and hack up our fetid breaths in echoing coughs. There is something dead and decayed in this darkness and something else that lurks and watches.

I stop and look back. I cannot see Ai'diah, but I her hand is still mine. Another presence joins us. "The doors are below," Fakhr says.

"Will we be barred?" I ask.

"I do not know. I have no memory of this place."

I continue the descent, my hand on the damp wall. I sense each step brings us closer to the lurker. My legs tremble and soon I halt again. I feel the mighty stench of judgement staring out of the shadows, weighing the moments of my life with lidless eyes.

Then Ai'diah takes the spear from my hand and light wells from it once more. The fear is banished and the unseen lurker slithers away into its darkness.

Ai'diah turns and smiles at me. For the first time, there is no pain in her eyes, only strength.

"Courage," she says and tugs at my arm.

I follow her down the last few steps. The small room is just as I remember it, a circular stone space with no door. A small ragged figure lies huddled in the centre shivering.

Ai'diah walks to the wall and places the spear against it. The stone fades and the doors appear. "We must leave," she says.

I nod and she pushes the doors wide.

Entry 9: The Old Man

The doors open, light embraces us and the song of the city returns like an old and bitter friend.

I shade my eyes. Before us lies the square, empty now unlike the last time we were here. Trees and flowers sway in a gentle breeze, the white stone of walls and floor gleams. I am seduced by this. The dirt, smell and taste of the tower is washed away by the sight. I hear the sound of splashing and smile.

I take the spear from Ai'diah's hand and stride forwards towards the pool. The old man is there as he was before. He floats in the water, a beatific grin upon his face. He does not note our approach, but as my shadow falls across his face, his expression changes.

"Why did you come?" he asks.

"You know why," I tell him.

A feeble hand reaches out and grabs my wrist. The old man frowns. "Your gift does not suffice."

"The path is not for me."

"Then bring forth the one who is to pass."

I turn to my sister and smile sadly. She nods and grasps the spindly arm. The old man smiles.

"This one may take the journey," he says. "Come." He draws her to him.

"Wait!" I say, holding her for a moment. I let go and hold the spear in both hands. With little effort, I snap the blade from its shaft and hand the wood to her. "A wizard should carry a staff."

"Is that what I am?" she asks.

"It is what you were, are and will become," says the old man. He pulls her towards him and backs away, leaving her in the centre. "Dive down," he says.

Ai'diah's gazes at me. She touches a finger to her lips, breathes deeply and drops beneath the surface.

The song swells within me and without. All around becomes harmonious affirmation. The bass thrills, the soprano soars and all notes sustain. There is magic in the melody, an ancient purpose encrypted by us that we have forgotten as it carried away our souls. We have sung and lost ourselves, the tower dwellers

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more than anyone. What remains are spent shells, renewed only by the fulfilment of purpose, of that one full chord, all octave affirmation that swells...

Then falls.

I gaze into the rippling waters. Ai'diah is gone.

I turn to Fakhr. She is on her knees crying and staring at her scarred arms and legs. "Now you know the purpose of the singing."

"I remember now," she wails. "I remember everything of who I was!"

I help her to her feet. "Who you are," I tell her. "Who you will be again."

The song is far from my mind now - a lingering echo of before. The city has been sated, a wizard has left us and be sent to where she belongs. Legends say there will be a time when one returns and opens the way for us all.

All the world *is* a memory; the stage *is* empty, but the performers are no longer absent. The dead are raised and purpose returns. The memory of generations is upon me. I know why we and they built this place, why we are here as others are here. To deliver a voyager to the empyrean, a voyager to the worlds beyond. I walk from the pool and the old man to the spot under the tree where I awoke. With Fakhr beside me, I lay down, close my eyes and sleep.







Artefacts

Nephilim skilled in the arts of forging and construction are trained as artificers. These lorewise folk are capable of making all manner of devices and items imbued with magic. Some are gifted with a natural affinity for the seeing the gift in objects and can simply craft them in such a way as to let this potential speak. Others require glyphs and runes to imbue an item with power taken from elsewhere. Generally, items made with the former ability are less powerful, although some of the greatest works of the ancient past were made by these means and it is these that are spoken of in legend and song.

Armour

Artificers are half-blooded mortals whose gifts give them extraordinary insight into the workings of magic. Given time, their elaborate wards can be made to perform almost any task, enhancing the nature of any substance.

The armour of wizards is crafted with enchantments. The magical workings empower the natural properties of metal, leather and other resistant forgings to make protections tougher than anything that might be crafted without such work.

Upon this, sigils are woven into the surface of a wizard's garb. These devices are conditional protections, designed to activate against specific threat. The most common is the warding that will transport a wizard from a realm into a predetermined safe place when their life is threatened. The activation of this ward occurs when immersed in virulent magic or the material of the armour itself has been broken. Either should happen instantaneously.

Staffs

A staff is the most common permanent construction carried by wizards. In times past, the attainment of a staff was a rite of passage for those trained in the use of their gift.

The staff of a wizard amplifies the magic of its owner. Most are used to assist in the casting of spells, having been previously attuned to the wizard's power. A staff makes the invocations easier and more focused, preventing exhaustion in the rigours of combat or other desperate circumstances.

Some staffs are also imbued with spells of their own. These require charging through a continual invoked connection with the vortex. A portion of the wizard's gift and the residual vortex energy around castings are absorbed into the wards placed on a correctly enchanted staff and further casting will then unlock a more powerful expression of magic.

Talismans

These are enhancements designed by artificers to resonate with the magic of the wizard. The choice of talismans is another way in which spells and physical prowess can be improved, manipulated and empowered.

Talismans can be grouped into seven types based mostly around the ways in which they are activated and used, but all affect physicality or magical power. The different ways in which they do this and in which they are constructed determine their categorisation.

Other Items

The vast magical machines used by Wizard Kings to refine and shape their realms are the product of much more complex artifice. These can be used to remake the land itself should it be required.

Temporary weapons are also made by wizards to be used by their creatures. On occasion, these can be made more permanent.

It is rare for an artificer or wizard skilled in crafting to make items that do not fulfil the purposes mentioned above. However, such things are made and can be found throughout the Fractured Realms. They might be small charms of warding, finding, scrying or otherwise, manufactured for specific purpose or as



a gift for a mortal.

Legendary Items

In the oldest days, items were forged that transcend the limitations of imbuelement and ritual. Hints of these periapts appear in stories told to children. They have many names, appearing and disappearing throughout history in moments of crisis.

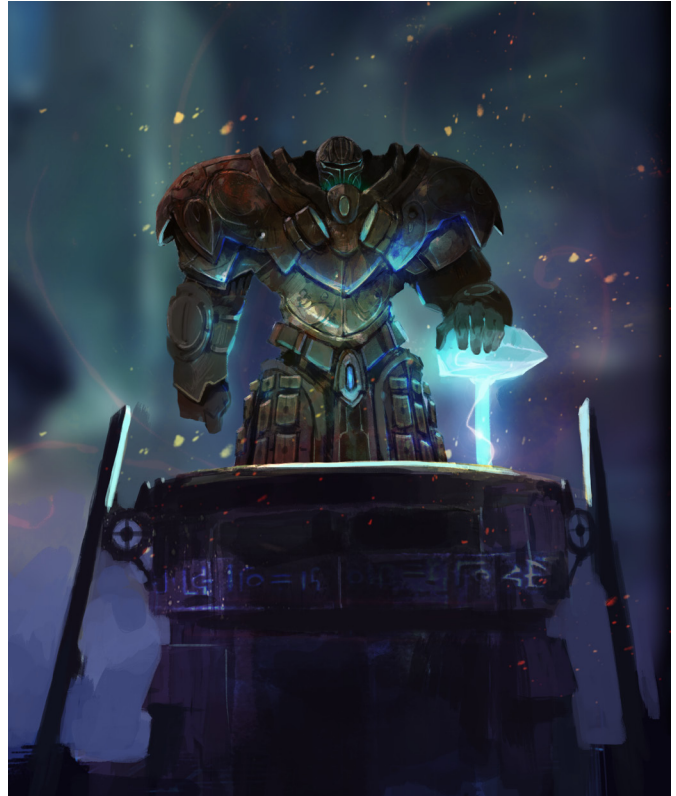
The Slayer Sword

Forged in the earliest of times by an unknown master of the art, the Slayer sword is unadorned by runes or symbols. To all intents and purposes it is a beautifully crafted and polished weapon with a curved blade that remains sharp without need of care. In the hands of the gifted it changes, becoming a conduit for the wielder's power. Nephilim have wielded the sword and become heroes of myth. Wizards become killers of gods.

The sword is potent against gifted foes and can enable its wielder to kill those who wield the magic.

An attack from the sword unbinds all magical defence. No wizard, demigod or god is known to have survived the touch of the blade.

The Slayer sword cannot be transported through portals. To be moved, it must be carried to a different location.



The Seer Stone

An ancient blue gemstone the size of a large egg, this stone has known many names. In truth it is no gem, but a plane stone, polished by its maker so finely that its surface hardened and became like brittle diamond.

The stone grants visions to those who stare into its depths. Its power is not restricted to the gifted. Mortals have been known to make use of it and there are stories of its origin amidst the oldest Dwarven tellers. Over time it is said to drive its keeper's mad as they try to interpret the strange glimpses of fate that it grants.

The Box of Secrets

Throughout history, there have been legends of the box that contains forbidden spirits and power trapped within its depths by the Creator God. Curiosity is a powerful temptation to some and the story of the box is told in many forms so the young might be cautious when finding something strange, magical and dangerous.

There is little retained lore about the box itself. Some claim it to be a fiendishly complex mechanism that traps spirits and power in each layer its design. This story is preserved to us in the game children play when unwrapping the layers of a gift. Others claim it is simple and unadorned with a catch and lock that defies the will of the strongest and deftest of keepers.

What the box contains, who can know?

The Hammer of Storms

In many religions of the old world there are Gods of the wind and rain. Some war in the heavens, others wreak their moods upon the earth through by shaping the sky to their ends.

The Hammer of Storms grants a wielder the ability to shape and command violence from the elements of air and water. It is said an elemental of each aspect is contained within the hammer itself and that these

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poor creatures call to their brethren, stirring them to violence as they strive to free their kin. In the legends, many wielders of the hammer become lost in the storms they summon and are never heard of again.

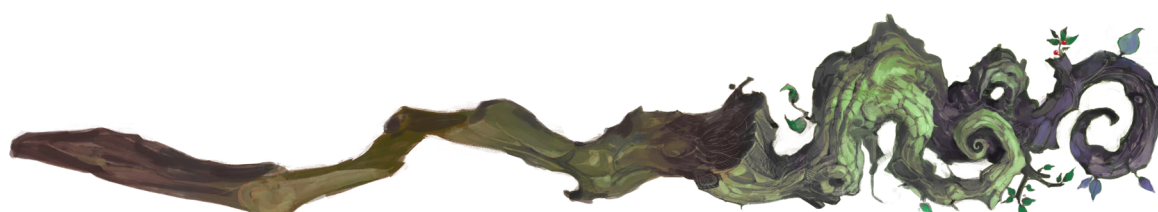
Runic Language

The construction of portals and encoding of runes is a complex art. Alchemists of the various orders of Limbo have managed to recover much of the lost lore, recreating and replicating some of the devices produced by the ancient masters. However, much still eludes them.

In many locations, the old runes and writings of

What they have managed to translate is the basic elements of the symbol language of ancient engineers.

Symbol	Letter	Symbol	Letter	Symbol	Letter	Symbol	Letter
	A		H		O		V
	B		I		P		W
	C		J		Q		Y
	D		K		R		Z
	E		L		S		
	F		M		T		
	G		N		U		





Meeting the Cursed Ones

I stood in the antechamber next to the wizard as they entered. I had been warned by my master what to expect, but was unable to resist surprise.

The room, lit dimly with candles as they filed into the hall, seemed to darken as they approached. There were eight of them, all pale of complexion, despite their heritage. I could feel the wizard's fear, palpable, and radiating across the room. I studied him, no outward sign betrayed his emotions, but they already sensed it and knew.

They arranged themselves in a semi-circle, facing him. Not too close as to tempt effrontery, but near enough to perpetuate the trepidation and fear that clutched at us. Of me, they took little notice, numbering my presence amongst the undead who watched over us all in irresistible vigilance.

Vampires they call themselves, so named by the power they found. The ancient texts name the rituals as power of long past, and ancient history, re-awoken in the last days of the old world.

The Conclave named them *drinkers of blood and eaters of flesh*, warning of the curse they would spread. The Horsemen made them, it is said. A ritual that corrupted half-blood folk like myself into mortals who fear the light.

After a pause, long enough to appraise and also to unsettle, their leader stepped forward, a half smile about his lips. He sketched a bow, both perfunctory and mocking.

"My Lord."

His whisper carried his words throughout the hall just as his posture conveyed his patronising acknowledgement of a superior.

The wizard waited as he had been instructed, he had lost the initiative and used the silence to try to grasp it back, falling utterly. The enforced pause served only to increase the tension.

"I have been given a task for you."

As he spoke, his voice betrayed his nerves. The man smiled further.

"We exist to serve our... masters." *But not you.* The implication of the words was not lost to me or the wizard.

"You are to begin working upon the general populace, to increase dissension and chaos amongst the people. Only then will our legion march upon the cities."

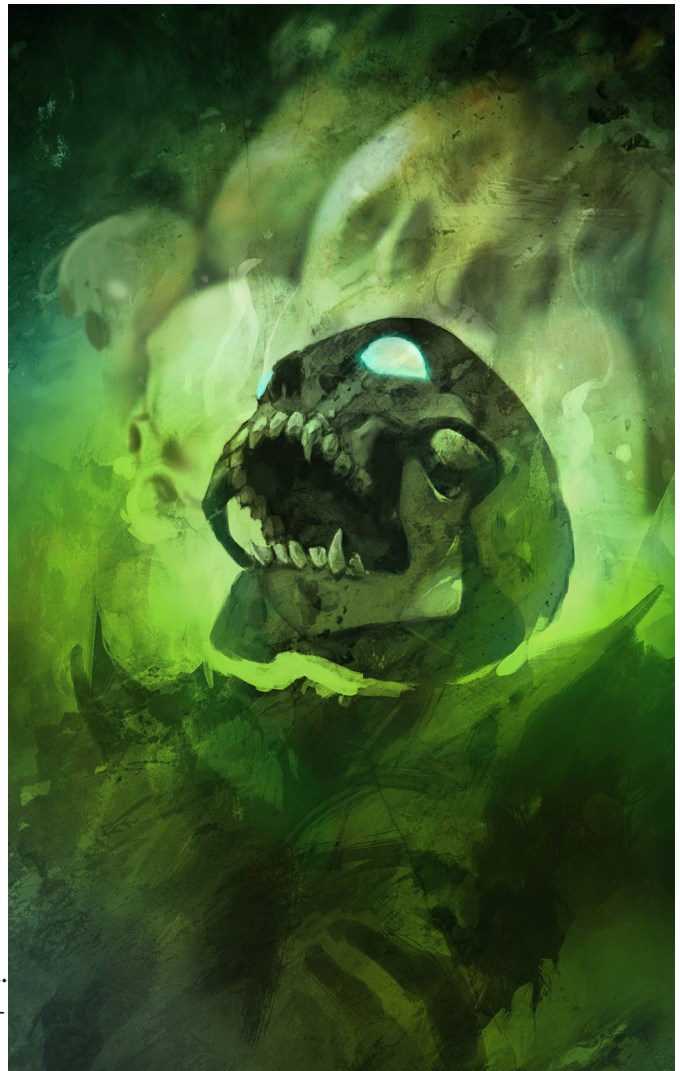
"It will be done."

Once again the wizard paused, He had completed his instructions and yet I sensed that he wished to say more, to take back the authority he felt was his due, the fear and revulsion was rapidly being replaced by frustration and anger.

As he opened his mouth to speak, the strangers turned their backs and left the room.

I felt some grim amusement at their bravado and struggled to keep the smile from my face. The wizard could perhaps face down any three of them, but all eight? Even with his undying guards, they knew they outmatched him. Yet, they respected him well enough to be subtle and wary. The insult might be explained away as ignorance should he prove a worthy foe.

A high compliment and, once his anger cools, he might come to understand it.





The Bestiary

Since the early days of the world, legends have existed about monsters wandering the lands and living in strange hidden kingdoms. These have taken many forms, reflecting the myths and legends built up around their existence.

The Dooms

After the first wars between wizards, creatures that could not be accepted were imprisoned in vast caverns beneath the world. In the lead up to and the aftermath of apocalypse, these creatures were set free. Most to perish along with entire nations of humanity, but some survived and came to prosper in the Fractured Worlds.

There are two origins of creatures. One is the conjured origin, where they appear as summoned immediately with no knowledge of any past, are suddenly self-aware and immediately slaved to the command of the wizard. In some ways this is little more than an extension of illusory magic.

The second is the hidden origin, where they retain memories of a life they have been stolen from to answer the magical call of their summoner; yanked from home and compelled to serve.

Magic is intrinsic to these creations, but unlike humans, they do not radiate it in ways that can sustain a wizard, instead it is part of what they are. This makes them susceptible to a wizard's spells. In the first Chaos War, vast armies of creatures were forced to fight one another at the behest of their wizard masters. The time of peace afterwards occurred when these creatures disappeared. Some say they were hunted down, others that they were imprisoned in vast dooms beneath the world.

After the Schism, the release of magical energy changed the nature of reality. The Rephaim are no longer hidden and live upon many of the fragmented worlds. The magic of wizards is stronger since the change and the connection between these creatures and the Egregoroi much more pronounced, making the summoning spells of wizards easier to cast and succeed.

Amidst the myriad of Fractured Worlds, all manner of beings can exist. The dreams and nightmares of the gifted are made flesh and the summoning magic of wizards calls to the stuff of creation. The summoned creature can be one called from family and kin on a far flung world to serve a new master, or it might be newly made there and then out of the conscious desire of the wizard. All summoned creatures share common traits. They are subservient to the will of the wizard and they are aware of their plight. Some are intelligent, others are not.

Summoning Creatures

The use of such beings for personal gain is an undertaking that should be approached with great deal of caution and only when one has made sufficient researches into the nature of the creature one intends to contact.

Many think of summoned as universally evil, this is simply not the case. While many are self-serving at best, if not downright dedicated to the active pursuit of evil for its own sake, an equal number are quite the opposite. Only diligent research will allow the summoner to comprehend the nature of that which is being summoned.

In the days of old Earth, books littered libraries full of stories of creatures, their predilections, weaknesses and strengths. Now we must rely on what lore we can scrape together before chancing the magic.

That said, with the vortex released and bathing worlds in magical energy, our invocations are answered much more readily and easily, although some still fail.

Spells by rote are the most common forms of summoning. These bring forth common allies known to most wizards. Hosts of such creatures are also available through the enhancements made to staves by the artificers of Limbo. Both methods are quick and dirty expressions of magic that can be called upon in battle.

Beyond this, there are rarer creatures, whose calling is treacherous, requiring preparation and ritual.



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Air Elementals

The sand swirled and for a moment, I thought I saw the figure of a man within the whirlwind, his hand reaching out to me.

The air made into purpose and form, these elementals might be the echoing ghosts of dead spirits or sentience born into the wind itself. No wizard knows as none have ever spoken with these silent storms.



Dwarves (Dweorg, Juje)

"Are you a..."

Galina fell silent, staring, afraid to ask her question. The short bearded man held her gaze, his eyes like chips of stone and his thick fingers curled tight around a hammer that was taller than him. Then, abruptly, he burst out laughing, a low barking growl which didn't little to ease her caution.

"Aye, I'm of the old folk, girl. The dvergr as we were known to your kind, the stone dwellers of the deep."

Determined and unyielding, Dwarves live in a multitude of cavernous realms. To some they have minds like the stone they live within, to others they are fast friends and loyal companions. Dwarven society is ordered and has a strict hierarchy. They view a summoning by wizards as an opportunity to prospect new realms.

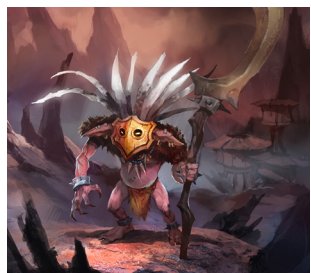


Elves (Aelfen)

The strangers were thin and tall, with long hair, angular faces and almond shaped eyes. The rocklight cast shadows on their faces, lighting them from below, making them seem severe and judgemental.

Ten of them, dressed in loose fitting robes. They carried bows and long hunting knives. Their leader wore a circlet of dark leaves, his open hand keeping the arrows at bay. Behind them, a vast city on a midnight lake, curved towers and houses surrounded by an obsidian wall.

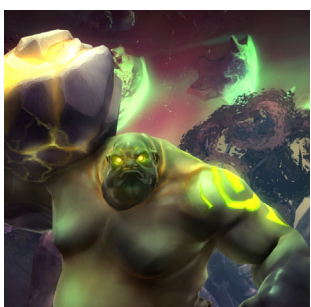
Almost human in appearance, but gifted with greater sight and agility, Elves live in many of the outer worlds where the semblance of old nature asserts itself best. Woodland realms suit them, allowing most use of their affinity for all growing things.



Goblin (Gobelin)

Piers had seen such a creature before, but only in a book as a child while being instructed in Avignon. A gobelin – one of the world's ancient monsters, summoned by the earliest wizards to bring mischief to their enemies.

When first discovered, these creatures were regarded as an infestation. Goblins breed quickly and their colonies quickly overpower the realms they inhabit. They are a useful asset in exploring new realms and assisting wizards owing to their quick strength and energy, but they are ultimately self-serving and cowardly in nature.



Giant (Ispolin, Jotun)

He could sense the magic of the creature; a vague wrongness about it. It was three or four times the size of a man, its body covered in sharp spiky fur, now matted with blood around its strangely shaped mouth. It stared back, all four of its eyes focused on him as he struggled to inch back up the slope.

A regressive throwback in human form, Giants exhibit the intelligence of the earliest people. They are difficult to manage, but useful in terms of their

strength and height. Many wizards summon them to assist in building lairs and other structures in the fragmented worlds. They have a placid nature which is slow to anger.



Hydra

She marvelled at the creature, staring in horrid fascination as the multiple heads nipped and snarled at each other until they found agreement and resumed their lumbering walk through the ruined city walls.

Serpentile creatures found in marshes, swamps, tunnels and caves, they are awkward creatures, often divided in purpose by the disagreements of each snakelike head. However, when threatened, the Hydrae will unite in aggression and action. The spell to master such a creature is arduous and complicated as each head must be seduced and controlled. They are deadly dangerous to foes.



Manticore

"It is a corruption - a hell beast."

Katya knelt down to examine the strange corpse. Leathery wings attached to a powerful feline body, but the dead eyes that stared up at her were human.

A strange hybrid creature born from the fusion of others, Manticores are rumoured to be the byproduct of experimentation by the rebellious Iconics known as the Four Horsemen in the aftermath of the Schism.

However they came about, the creatures are wild, vicious and unpredictable. Only the strongest wizards can master them.

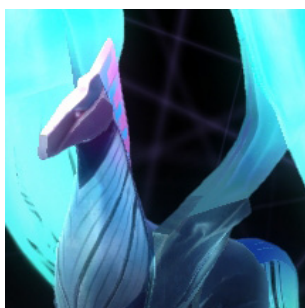


Paladin (Palatin)

"What are you?" Katya asked.

"I don't know," Brynfrid said, lowering her weapon. "But whatever I am, I swear, by Odin, I'll protect you."

Paladins are transformed mortals, forged into enchanted suits of armour. The purity of their faith and commitment blends with the magic ritual to make them hardy and immortal, living until their armour rusts and dissolves around them.



Pegasus

She crouched low on the creatures back and felt the wind in her hair. The winged horse galloped through the sky, its movements strained and ungainly compared to the soaring birds, but with a beauty and grace all of its own.

Magical horses trapped for centuries beneath the earth, the Pegasi are free once more to roam skies and plains. Loyal and lawful creatures whose intellect rivals that of humans, Pegasi have not forgotten their imprisonment and remain wary of wizards in the wild.



Unicorn

A flicker of movement drew Galina's attention, a horse walking across open ground, stark white in colour with a horn between its ears. On its back, a woman, her hair long and raven dark across its back. She regarded Galina and Hino with a solemn expression, but did not speak.

A strange creature of legend, as intelligent as a man, but with the body of a horse and a great horn that is sharp enough to cut steel, Unicorns (also known as Re'm) are solitary and lonely creatures. Since the Schism, they have become more numerous, but remain distrustful of each other.



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Sapphire Dragon

Dragons. The oldest stories he remembered being told as a child. The great Ryūjin father of the first Emperor Jimmu and Yamata no Orochi the eight-headed serpent. The creature he saw was neither of these, nor a Nāga of the Buddhists, but he recognised it for being kin of those ancient legends.

Creatures of myth in ancient times, some say they were made real by the change, others that they had always been real, just remaining on the fringe of the world, to be found by sailors and explorers into its farthest reaches.

Now, they live in their own realms, drawn by the currents of magic across the void. Dragons are the most powerful of beasts a wizard might summon, difficult to control, but once mastered they are powerful minions, capable of defeating the strongest of wizards.



Eagle

He heard a noise from above, the sound of wings - large wings. Instinctively he ducked as something swooped overhead. The faint trace of a spell in the air and the shadow of a bird above, larger than anything he'd ever seen. It wheeled quickly, screamed and dived at him again. The snap of claws and beak, close to his ear and then the creature was on him, its weight and strength pinning him to the ground.

An ancient and majestic bird of the old world, eagles are difficult to tame, but loyal and fierce fighting companions. Eagles are found in realms like the lands of before. They normally build eyries in tall trees or on high cliffs. Many lay two eggs, but the older, larger chick frequently kills its younger sibling once it has hatched. The dominant chick tends to be a female, as they are bigger than males.



Elephant

They came thundering across the open ground, maddened by whips and a wizard's compulsion. On the walls, soldiers screamed; they had never seen anything like these huge behemoths of the east.

Monsters of the ancient world that rampaged through battle lines of friend and foe alike, the elephant is a sturdy, biddable and protective mount for wizards. Herds roam the wide plains and savannahs of the largest realms, as they once did centuries ago.



Giant Spider

Before she got two steps, the spider swept her up into its jaws and began to eat her alive.

Gargantuan creatures, enhanced by the magic of wizards to grow to a frightening size, Giant spiders live in deep caves and burrow into the earth to lay eggs and ambush their prey.



Lion

Claws, fur and teeth, barrelling towards the woman, a lion, straight from the African delta, now here and at Rani's command. She watched as the woman struggled to avoid it, falling to the ground as she twisted aside.

The king predator of jungle and plains in the old world, there is much that outmatches the lion in the Fractured Realms, yet the creatures do not lack for courage and see all enemies as prey. They do not make good long term companions and resent a wizard's magic being used to control them.

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Rats

Small beady eyes appeared in the darkness, focused on him, their intention murderous and predatory. Piers backed away.

Even the smallest creatures can serve the purpose of a shrewd wizard. Rodents are used as carriers of plague and poison to kill enemies in their sleep or during their meals. They are easy to master and control, but can easily slip the leash if forgotten.

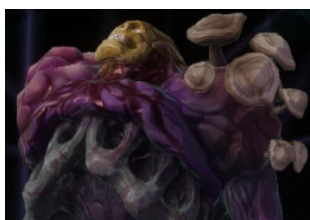
The Undead

Undead have existed throughout history. The ways in which individuals can return from death are varied, but intrinsically magical. To maintain the memories and sentience of the returner, some portion of their being must be sacrificed in this process.

Some Nephilim and Egregoroi have made use of these rites and rituals to survive when all other possible hope has been lost. There are many spells that will only work on them, as opposed to humans.

The choice of undeath is a sacrifice. Many forms are unstable and not suited to continual existence. For some, the material concerns of the flesh are lost as their physical forms rot and decay, being stretched beyond their means to preserve the consciousness within. Others who are enslaved into the lowest forms lose much of their previous awareness and understanding of the world. A remnant of a mind remains to serve the will of the wizard who has rendered them to this state.

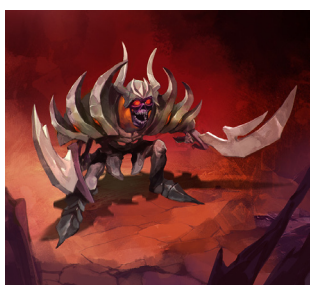
The benefit of undeath is a state of decaying immortality. Some forms are hardy, others not so, but the preservation of sentience in a moment of crisis can be essential for those who feel their work in this world is not yet done.



The Walking Dead (Zombies)

The corpse stirred and twitched. With a groan it sat up, eyes slack and vacant. A corruption of the life that once ran through its veins.

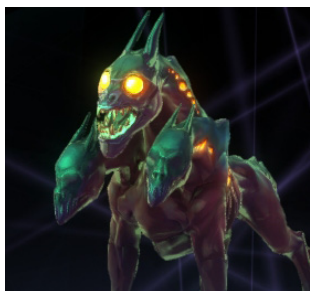
The remains of humans, brought back by the magic of wizards. There is no mind in the animated form, only an articulated body, forced to obey the will of its master.



Skeleton

Motionless figures stood around the excavation, each bearing a weapon and wearing armour. They too stank of magic, spells dark and twisted to Piers' heightened senses. They too were dead.

Animated warriors, brought back to fight for their new master; Skeletons are dead soldiers who remember little more than their training and martial skills. Any remnant of their past lives remains vague and they are incapable of communication with the living, unless a specific spell is cast to allow this.



Hellhound (Barghest)

A three-headed dog, larger than any Katya had ever seen. It was furless, instead scales covered its body, rippling as it moved, stirred from rest by her attention. One head's attention remained fixed on Brynfrid, but the other two turned to her, the eyes of each glowing like hot coals.

Beasts of legend in many civilisations, Hellhounds were used by wizards as enforcers and guards, their loyalty to their wizard summoner is generally strong, despite their chaotic nature and this made them a preferential creature to use as close bodyguards, particularly as their paralysing stare would enable the capture of would be assassins.



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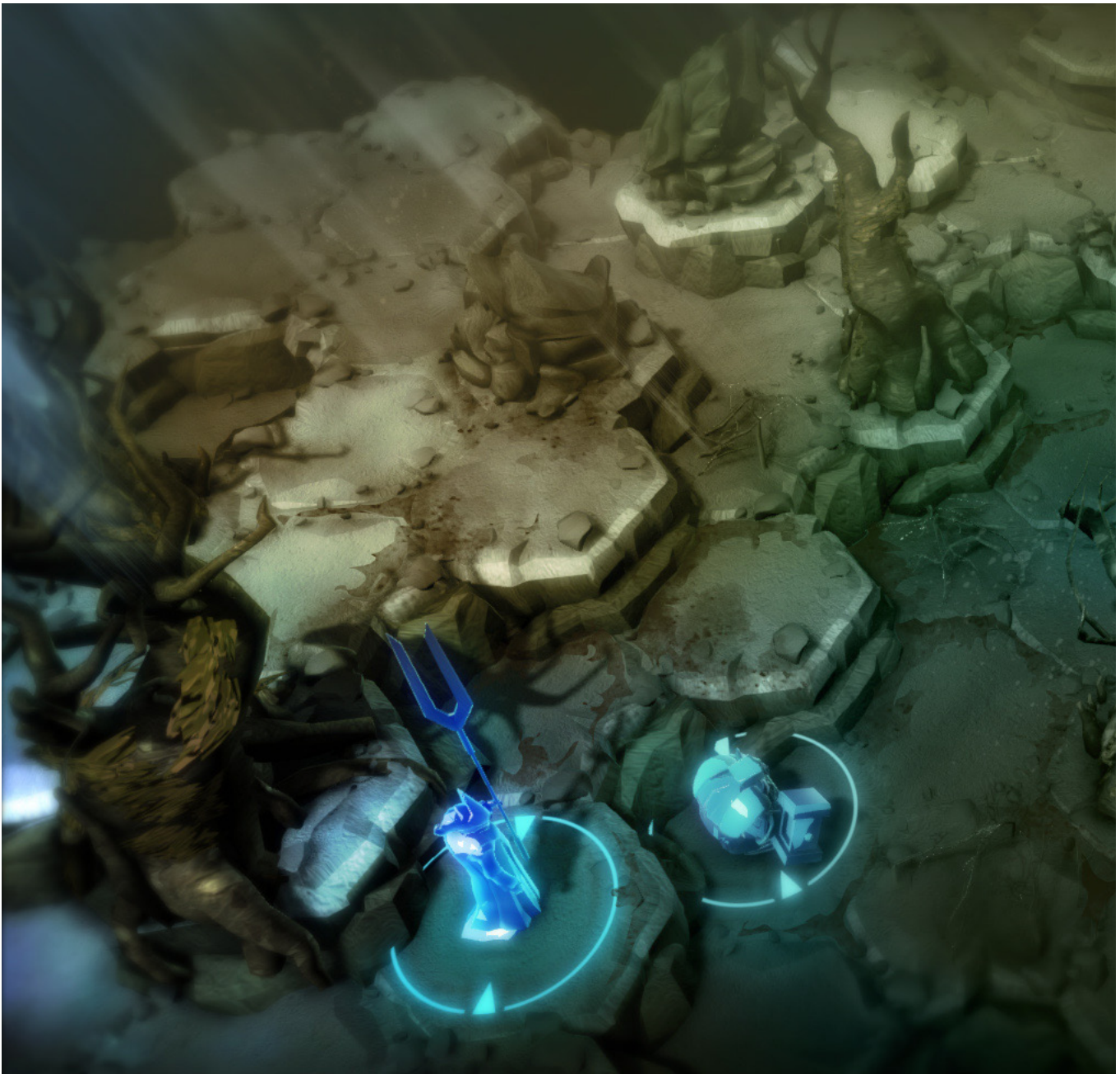
The Living Dead (Vampires)

Something rushed across the room. Hands grappled his, nails dug into his wrists and savage strength drove him into the wall. He thrashed against the sinewy grasp, but couldn't break it. Impossible! No-one mortal could—

It is believed that the first of these creatures have existed from before the change, that they roamed the old world as enemies and rivals to the Egregoroi and the Nephilim. Such creatures are ancient by now and long since grown resistant to the summoning of wizards. But each time the magic is invoked, they hear the call and remember.

The lore and knowledge of the living dead is a well-guarded secret. Some wizards make alliances with these creatures, but should never trust them entirely. It is said the most powerful elders have also learned how to construct portals and journey between worlds. This suggests the first of these creatures may have been empowered by the blood of the Egregoroi.

Lesser minions roam the realms seeking our new prey for their brethren. They find the living, defeat them and drag them back to their nest worlds as food for their kin.







On Automata and Other Matters

For a time, during the years before the end of times, it is said that alchemists rediscovered the ancient lore of how to create automata.

The first golems were created back in the ancient days of the first war and served the decadent wizards who led its ruling council. Vanguard of vast wizard armies were led by silent stone warriors, animated and compelled to march and destroy.

In latter days, the Conclave's reliance on such constructs to perform its will proved to be its undoing. Some imperfection or perfection in the workings of the wizards allowed the creatures to develop an intelligence of their own. As the Mages relaxed their guard, so the Gargoyles were less controlled. Eventually it is said that many of the Earth Colleges fell owing to the neglect of their members, as other mages were able to simply trap and subvert such creatures.

The key with Gargoyles lies in their name. This remains true today as it was then. Anyone who knows the true name of a Gargoyle may command its absolute obedience. The Gargoyle will obey them to the letter and without question.

The weakness of such creature lies when they are kept in groups. If the name of one Gargoyle is known, it is easy to swiftly obtain the others, if one is clever. It requires the slip of only one stone tongue to gain the obedience of many.

However the profit of commanding such creatures is limited. Gargoyles are not highly intelligent creatures, and prove an ineffectual army. They best serve as messengers or wardens, using their abilities to brave moderate dangers to achieve the aims of their master.

The construction of a Golem is somewhat different. For the most part these creatures are less intelligent and more open to command. However, the lore of their construction, and of commanding them has been lost to us. However, should one be obtained it is possible for to cause substantial damage with such creatures. All but impervious to the effects of non-magical attack, one of such creatures is enough to defeat entire armies.

Golems are typically made of base elements. However, the variety of there construction is usually quite considerable in comparison to Gargoyles, who are only made from stone. It is plain that the arts of magic used in these efforts were refined considerably in later years.

Nevertheless neither type of creature appeals to me as useful. Such minions have already proven to be unreliable unless given constant attention, and remain limited in their interpretations of orders.

More recently, alchemists and wizards have devised a semi-sentient engine of war. Working from these base principles, the Icarus Tower is the first well used spell that attempts to bind a remnant of intelligence into a physical object.

Complex Summoning

The actual process of a summoning ritual can be approached in two ways: *Binding* and *Bargaining*.

Binding is the most dangerous of the two but can be the more profitable in terms of power gained. By use of might and power, a strong wizard can force a weak spirit to absolute obedience.

Clearly most creatures will attempt to resist this form of magical enslavement and the penalties for failure in even the smallest respect are high. Most gruesome tales of summonings gone wrong stem from a failed attempt to bind the subject. For as long as one holds the means of controlling a demon, it is bound absolutely to one's service. In theory this servitude can extend indefinitely, in practice it tends not to.

Bargaining, on the other hand, is a relatively straightforward process that carries only minimal risk so long as one's research is accurate and diligently undertaken. In this ritual, one simply needs to create safeguards against the spirit's refusal and offer the correct inducement in return for a service performed. Although the results of this tend to be of shorter duration than a binding, this is offset by the advantage of being relatively safe and simple to perform. In addition, it is also far less likely to awake the enmity of an entire people in future, a fate to be studiously avoided.

Of what may be requested, there are but three forms: possession either of a being or an item, imbuing of

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power or a service.

To permit a spirit, whether bound or bargained to possess oneself is the height of foolishness and will inevitably end badly for the poor fool who allows such a thing to come to pass. However, this is a most potent means for power and if the consequences are of little matter to the subject, such a ritual may be worth performing. It is far safer, although less powerful to have the creature possess an item, although few will willingly accede to this form of servitude without significant inducement and a finite duration. A spirit bound into a non-living object will be contained for a shorter period than one bound into a living being. The imbuing of power is a simple transference of an ability from one being to another. This can be straightforward but equally, if one demands a power precious to the spirit, this can be difficult to achieve without a great deal of risk or expense since, for the duration of the bargain or binding, the spirit loses the power given to the subject.

Of the three requests, service is probably the most equitable to both summoned and summoner. The exact nature of the servitude must be specified with great care though, since should a demon decide it no longer wishes to carry out the service it will often attempt to twist the intent within the letter of the command, and thus escape its obligations.

Demons

Wizards who seek the rare and potent darkness turn their ear to the whispers of the unnamed. The promise of great power and dominion over others is tempting and to some it becomes too much to resist. Such rituals require blood and rare ingredients that are difficult to find amidst the void.

In the depths of such power, the gifted lose their way and identity, lapsing to become the minions of the fell spirits they have summoned where they once were masters.

Once beginning on the darkest of paths, few can navigate in any other direction. Yet, some still make the attempt and the advice below might save a life from damnation.

Whether bargaining or binding a demon, there are three things that a wizard must first obtain. The creature's name (note that this does not need to be its True Name, the name that it commonly uses should be sufficient), a weapon to coerce it or payment that the demon will find apt. This is the most skilful part of the ritual, since weapon or payment must be tailored very specifically or it will fail. Often the True Name of the demon is sufficient to bind it in servitude for a year, but only the very foolish will rely upon only this as an inducement. Demons will not suffer one who knows their true name to live long. Lastly the Ritualist will need a defence should anything go awry. Again this should be carefully considered, although defences need to be of a more general nature than the inducement, in the event that something other than that which was intended is summoned.

Once a demon has acquiesced to the ministrations of the summoner, it should be stated that the contest of wills is not over. Many creatures will look to find a loophole or missed phrase within a bargain, whilst those bound, will always seek to exploit the weaknesses of their new masters.

However, the profit of such a servant can be immense. The properties of creatures from the darkness and even of those who have great power can be varied and vast. Often they can perform the most difficult of tasks with relative ease and can become far more useful than any other minion.





A Realm Divided

Step followed step, followed step.

A road beaten to dust by many feet over years, a haze in the air as three quiet stars beat down on weary travellers, backs bent with burdens.

Dee sighed as she shouldered her pack. She moved to the side, climbed the verge, pulled a battered leather gourd from her belt and emptied the last water into her mouth.

She felt a soft touch on the shoulder and turned. "Something wrong?" Teb asked, lifting the wide brim of his hat to reveal a lined face and kindly brown eyes.

"No Uncle," Dee replied. "Just tired."

"Aren't we all?"

"I suppose."

Ahead, folk moved north, a long undulating worm across the land, a pilgrimage to the same place, with the same goal.

Speaker's hill and the meeting of tribes.

Plants and twisted trees patrolled the edge of the road, a verdant mass of differing shades beneath the star haze. The border of Dark Wood; a teeming chaotic horde of life, threatening to engulf struggling travellers who strayed. There were eyes in that woodland, watching. No place for clan folk from the far shores, like she and Teb, but the meeting called them.

Dee gazed up into the sky at the two stars - the Emerald and above it the Great Star. More shone from the heavens, but these three were brightest. Each day they moved apart more and more from their alignment in the child time of grandfathers. *Strange times indeed.*

Teb prodded her in the ribs with his stick. "Quit gawping. We don't want to be last," he said. "I've old knees and no wish to stand whilst folk talk."

Dee shrugged and glanced back. The line of walking figures stretched away far into the distance. "Some of these people have come further than us," he said. "They must have walked for weeks."

Teb grunted. "Months perhaps from the furthest south?" he smiled. "Means a lot to represent your village an' more to speak for the clan."

"Will they wait for everyone?"

"For some things, but others begin when they need. Best to be early and miss nothing. We go to listen and take back what we learn."

Dee nodded and stepped back down to the road. They carried on walking, moving into the lumbering train. Most folk walked, but occasionally, a cart with a family rumbled past. Dee kept her strides short, so Uncle could keep up, his shuffling gait another sign of age. "What happened last time?" she asked.

Teb snorted. "Last time?" he pulled off his pointed hat and wiped sweat from his forehead. His dark hair remained long in and held in a loose ponytail, but there was a patch on top of his head where it thinned. "Then I was the youngster, no older than you. I did the fetch and carry while Ol' Caster talked and listened in the circles."

"I know, I remember you telling me," Dee said, trying to keep the irritation from her voice. "But what occurs? What was decided?"

"Not much," Teb said.

"Not much?"

Teb juggled his hat back into place and he fussed a little, getting the floppy brim just as he wanted. "We talked trade, shared stories, made friends and saw folk wed, but if you mean grander things - not much."

Dee frowned. "Why all the speeches back in the village?" She'd lived fifteen turns in Alder's Bay, five days walk away on Moonsea's edge, Uncle Teb more than three times that. For Dee's whole life, Speaker's Hill and the Meets had been mentioned in hushed tones. A Meet was a rare thing, called once a generation. Each settlement got places. In the Bay, an aspirant and an elder were chosen, the elder always the aspirant from the previous occasion, leaving the other space to be won by those of age when the call came. "Why all the tests and trials for a long walk?" Dee asked.



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Teb laughed and squeezed her hand. "By the stars, to be young again! I didn't say it wasn't worth the trip, only that the grand dreams of youth aren't to be found when we get there. Stone and song is what we are, hands and breath, made to live, love and learn." He wrapped an arm around Dee's shoulder and leaned in, his old eyes twinkling. "The last Meet changed me. Made me what I am, it'll be the same for you, once in a lifetime there's a chance, and fate brought that chance to you."

Dee smiled, despite her irritation. "Twice in a lifetime for you, Uncle," he said.

"Twice indeed," said Teb. "And who'd blame me for wanting to share the road with my niece?"

The eyes in the woodland followed the two as they re-joined the moving mass of folk, staying with them until they disappeared from view.

There was a preternatural quiet, born from fear. All animals long gone, leaving the eyes and their owner alone in the thick brush.

A faint breeze stirred the tree where the creature crouched. It could feel terror through the bark, the tree too would have run, if it could.

The creature preferred the ones who ran.

Long after the two figures disappeared, their scent lingered. A distinct smell, picked out from the mortal stink. For the creature, it was always like this. Once chosen, something primal kept him intent on the prey, a hunger that sustained him and gnawed at his gut; sated only by the kill, until the next scent and stare.

He wore a mismatched cloak, fashioned from previous victims, flesh, skin and bone knitted into a coverage worn as a warning to others he might meet; a record of moments and triumph. The cloak reminded him of who he was, what he'd become. The memories before then were dim and difficult to remember.

The creature smiled and began to move, slipping silently through the brush, heading north.

Elsewhere, three the stars shone down on the Castle of Glass, a huge towering structure, shaped like a forearm, thrusting out of the earth; its minarets and towers, fingers extended toward the sky.

The light reflected and refracted, finding its way inside through a myriad of paths, coalescing in each room, rendering them as bright as the day outside.

Laughter and song filled the bowels of the castle; the opulence of celebration, amidst the court of its ruler, Jadvar, Wizard King of Temesne.

Rian stood at the doors of the throne room, his eyes roamed the faces with professional interest, struggling to keep his expression in check. A soldier for ten turns, he had never been to the Castle of Glass before and found it difficult to concentrate. Around him, polished walls gleamed, mirrors shone and gold glittered amidst the red banners of each wizard. Clanfolk mingled and spoke together, the mood cordial, but cautious. In the corner, Woodlanders played their pipes and sang, but no-one paid them much regard. An opulent table of food lay in the centre of the room, but it was untouched. Trust was fragile between folk in this hall, yet the watchful eye of their hosts, quarrel and dispute remained at bay.

The Wizard Lords.

They weaved in and out amongst the guests, robed nobles in the crowd, wheeling around the room, wholly unique in their dress and manner. Some he could identify. The huge laugh of snub nosed Ubblikk. The scratch of Bebray's quill on parchment and the bellowing voice of Grashan, the Lord of Beasts, but there were more, twelve in total, about the hall. Whilst Jadvar, the Wizard King sat, watching, from his elaborately carved throne.

Rian's mind turned to thinking of home and he sighed. His mountain home was a long way from here.

"You are elsewhere."

He glanced up; eyes met his - a scarred face he had learned to respect and admire. The wide mouth set in a grim line. Lord Nwarr, military second to the Wizard King and the reason for Rian's presence. He flinched and looked at the floor. "I'm sorry my Lord," he mumbled.



A crooked finger caressed his chin, lifting his head. "Be here. Act now. See now," Lord Nwarr said. "All these things I need from you."

Rian nodded, but Lord Nwarr had already turned away. His gleaming armour, clinked as he walked. The two curved swords strapped across his back were a calculated image of power and strength, backed by reputation and resolve. Rian wore a similar, lesser vestment as befitting his place as a personal guard. The working of metal, a knowledge held by the wizards and taught to a privileged few. Rian had forged his own garment under his master's instruction. Under Nwarr leadership, soldiers had brought order to the southlands. Now, he watched his master cross the room and noted the stares drawn from each side. One was Grashan, whose loud voice fell silent. He wiped drool from his lips and stared at Nwarr as he approached the Wizard King's seat.

The room went quiet. Rian's fingers strayed to the hilt of his sword.

For a moment, Nwarr stood and held the gaze of his ruler, but then as with Rian, his eyes went to the floor. His body shrank as he sank to a knee, placing his hands, palm downwards on the patterned stone.

"Majesty," he said. "In your name we are united. We have achieved in one hundred turns what our forebears did not in thousands. By your will, this world knows peace!"

A scatter of applause and murmurs of approval ran around the room. Both mortals and wizards, nodded in affirmation to Nwarr's words, but some remained unmoved.

"Transgressors are captured and guests in your dungeon," Nwarr continued. "Allies stand here and celebrate. When morning dawns, many will leave to return to their peoples and speak of your achievements, Majesty, yet one thing remains to concern me," Nwarr raised his head. "What now?"

The silence returned, but the question hung unanswered in the air. Rian found he was holding his breath.

Slowly Jadvar rose from his chair. He spread his arms wide, casting a huge shadow into the hall and over his inquiring second. He met Nwarr's gaze and stepped forward. Eventually, Nwarr nodded and his eyes returned to the floor.

Jadvar held up a hand. "I shall consider the matter," he said. "You will have an answer."

Nwarr looked up again. "When shall we be given your wisdom?" he asked.

"Tomorrow," Jadvar replied.

The Great Star slipped below the mountain ridge, leaving the sky darkness and to Samell, Chancellor of Temesne.

He crouched on the terrace of the east watchtower, an upraised claw from the Castle of Glass. Below, the land of Temesne gradually fell into shadow. A patchwork of yellowed grass and shrubs dotted the ground about the castle's root. A waste of resources, according to Draddan, the artificer. Vast underground caverns, littered with his experiments leached life from the earth.

The night, a time that brought weakness. The light of day nourished all living things on Temesne. The two stars, each brought their own flavour, encouraging growth and nurturing life. *But it is not enough for us*, Samell thought. *We are not of this world. We never were.*

"Lord Chancellor?"

The words were little more than a whisper from the darkness within, echoing across the chamber walls. He turned. An ancient, shrivelled figure in a tattered cloak, no bigger than a child stood by the entrance.

"Mmhm?" Samell replied in a whimsical tone, favouring the speaker with a smile it didn't deserve.

"His majesty is asking for you."

"Then I shall attend him," Samell said. He turned from the view and walked past the messenger. A flicker of movement caught his eye and he paused, turning toward his reflection.

After a hundred turns, the face looking back still seemed strange. A distended mouth and rows of fang like teeth, a curved spine and long claw like fingernails. Only the eyes remained familiar; eyes that had seen things long forgotten in memory.

Samell laboured along the passageway. The embroidered red robes he wore masked much of his body.



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They proclaimed status; Lord Chancellor of Temesne, second only to the Wizard King in matters of state and the instrument of his will. The burdens of office and the need for secrets made clothing useful. Under this lay more cloth and more before that. Gathered up to hide what he recalled of the flesh beneath.

Before this body, he remembered light, a discordant song, chanting, blood and magic all around, then awakened rage, hatred at himself and everyone else. Mirrors always reminded him of the change.

Afterwards, there was a time when he walked tall and powerful, proud of his new form, but pride offered no concealment and his private nakedness conveyed no status. His self-loathing grew with each day. The price of immortality, the blood drinker's curse.

He looked away, walking quickly to the King's apartment. Etchings and pictures throughout the castle gave hints to the time before, showing strange figures, unbowed with staves and hands raised outward. They were familiar, but distant. The more he stared, the more he hated them also; alien, yet connected. The rage never went away, but he learned to control and use it carefully.

A hundred turns ago, he and his brethren emerged, all changed from a powerful ritual. They fought under the laughing gaze of the Wizard King. Some died, but others did not and became strong.

As Samell made for the King's rooms, the walls, ceiling and floor reflected and refracted his movements. The castle had been built to contain the stars' light and channel them towards its heart. Despite nightfall outside, illumination would continue within for a while yet, preserving some vestige of strength.

"Why the delay?"

A shadow loomed over Samell, darkening the reflective floor beneath his clawed feet. He looked up. Jadvar, Wizard King of Temesne, stared down at him, teeth bared in a wide grin. Samell met his master's gaze with a submissive expression of his own.

"If it pleases your magnificence, I tarried only a moment before—"

"Then why so long?"

"Perhaps the servant was inadequate to the task?" Samell said, lowering himself further. "If you wish, I will attend—"

Powerful claws seized Samell by the throat. Jadvar leaned forwards. "There are more important matters to discuss!" he hissed. Claws dug into the fleshy skin of Samell's neck as long nailed fingers seized handfuls of his robes. He shivered in pain, but did not struggle. Jadvar turned back towards the chamber, dragging the Lord Chancellor with him.

Samell went limp, accepting his King's will. He knew to resist meant death. It had always been thus between them, since the ritual and bloodthirst. Jadvar had saved him from the others and together they had established dominance. It had been Jadvar's plan that had given them life and his power that had shaped their flesh.

The hands released him and Samell caught himself before his face hit the floor. The wet lash of his liege's tongue ran over his head and drool dripped into his eyes and mouth. He tasted blood, mixed with desiccated human flesh. Slowly, Samell pushed himself up, but stayed low, his gaze on Jadvar's feet. A hand remained concealed under his robes and strayed to the hidden knife and vial of poison in his belt. He hated, feared and loved Jadvar, hated most that he owed him a debt.

"Attend!" Jadvar ordered.

Samell got to his feet warily. Jadvar stood by a circular stone table next to his bed, on top, rested an ancient map of the realm. "We rule this world," Jadvar said. "Each of the human clans has come here and sworn fealty. The Elves of the western sea are subjugated, we have defeated the Giants, the vast lands are conquered and ours to do with as we please."

"Assuredly so, your magnificence," Samell replied, keeping his eyes low.

"Then what answer do I give to Nwarr?" Jadvar asked. "You read the hall, as I did."

"Mmmhmmm?" Samell said. "Forgive me, I don't understand."

"Apply your wits! Remember, they are what I value in you," Jadvar snarled. "Nwarr is a powerful leader of an army that spreads my will across Tesmesne, Grashen nearly as strong with his own allies and weapons. Peace breeds discontent amongst soldiers. Without lands to conquer, armies become dangerous."

"What of other worlds?" Samell suggested. "There is much lore concerning these and the alignment of stars. My people could consult the scrolls, or perhaps the alchemists—"



"I have no wish to entertain the prattle of fools," Jadvar's eyes became slits. "What do you know of other worlds?"

"Very little," Samell replied, "only that which is written by your hand."

"As it should be," Jadvar growled. He scratched at the stone table edge. "Though they smile and sing, the people of this world defy me still."

Samell gave a dissembling shrug. "How can you be sure?"

"I hear their whispers," Jadvar said. "Whether a rebellion exists or not, they look to themselves first. We are the leaders who have given them land, lore and peace, yet still they do not love us. She has not been found."

Samell knew the conversation would turn dark if his King remained focused on her. "May I suggest a strategy?"

"Proceed."

"You are undisputed as ruler. No creature would defy you. However, should we wish to conquer another world, we would require an army, powerful and strong. It would need to be an gathering of all creatures coerced to obey without question."

"Such a host must be mine and mine alone," Jadvar said. "Obedience would necessitate incredible magic. How would we unite them and make them loyal?"

Samell smiled. "Leave that to me, master."

"Welcome and take comfort pilgrims, you come for a story? What tale would you have of me?"

Night time on Temesne. Clanfolk and others gathered at the last Wayhome before Speaker's Hill. The large stone houses had been built all across the land as a refuge for weary travellers. Inside they were a warren of tiny rooms, with a circular hall in the middle. People came here to rest, sleep and socialise. Visitors followed simple rules; lights went out at a set time and quarrels got left at the door.

Dee sat with Teb leaning against her. They had arrived a little while back, eaten cheese and been grateful to find a good spot. Her Uncle's hat drooped over his eyes and he was snoring gently, Dee was tired too, but her curiosity outweighed a need for sleep.

A fire burned in the centre of the room. Benches, chairs and tables teemed with hushed and expectant faces, their attention on one figure sat in a space alone on the stone floor. A woman in robes covered in strange symbols, like nothing Dee had ever seen before.

The woman's head swayed, locking eyes with each face, but no-one answered the question. She had been motionless, bowed forwards when they arrived, only rousing as the light slipped away. A carved stick lay nearby. A whispered word came to Dee from the room, *mystic? What does that mean?* Now she leaned forward, keen to listen to the words.

The mystic wore a robe, with strange carapace plates along her back. Long hair swept the terracotta tiles as she twisted and turned to gaze thoughtfully at the hushed crowd. Brown eyes met Dee's for a moment, then glanced away and settled once more on the floor.

"I am one voice and many that speaks from the heart. A part, child and elder, I live and grow, nurtured by Temesne, though I am no scion of hers."

The head rose again and the large mouth twitched into a thin toothless smile. "The story to be told is one of the past. A tale of the world, that you might understand your place more clearly."

The mystic picked up her carved stick and pointed to a circular window in the roof. "Perhaps you have gazed out into the night sky and wondered, what is up there? Are we alone in this space?" She sighed and reached a hand beneath her robes, drawing out a handful of dust which she threw into the air.

Tiny flecks scattered and gleamed, falling, but then they stopped, hanging motionless. Dee stared at one inches from her nose.

"Behold, above you and around you, Gaze upon stars. These lights are each travellers, countless vessels, creatures and worlds, journeying in the void."

The mystic pointed upwards again with the twisted wood. Dee glanced in that direction, through the



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shining dust. The stone of the ceiling darkened into shadow; the fire guttered, leaving the glowing flakes to illuminate the room. "Gaze upon the space outside this world, the deep, beyond the firmament," the mystic said. "A place you can only glimpse in the dark. Gaze as your ancestors did in the first days; this was what they saw."

Dee stared as she was asked. The distance between the flickering specs seemed endless. If the stars were other places and people, they were a long way away. She began to imagine how far. Her eyes focused on one drifting light, moving lazily towards the rafters.

"Through the wonder of our story you watch as thousands of years pass in moments," the mystic intoned. "All of us, from here and elsewhere, children of the Leviathan."

As the words hung in the air, suddenly, the lights winked out, drawing a gasp from the gathered audience. The light of the fire grew bright once more, illuminating the mystic, who had returned her gaze to the floor.

"Perhaps today, you have learned a little of how to see..."

The last words faded away. Hushed conversations broke out. Some faces filled with wonder others with deep distrust, yet no-one approached the woman, sat motionless as before. Dee stared and waited but it didn't move, only a slight rise of the shoulders indicating breath.

She stepped forward cautiously and glanced around. No-one else seemed to notice. She took another step. As she got approached, she realised how tall the mystic was. Her head reaching up to the woman's shoulder. "Hello?" she whispered.

The mystic didn't answer. Now she was closer, Dee admired the woven detail of the robes; circles spirals, lines and other intricate symbols. The weavers in her village did good work and sold well all along the shore, but she'd never seen cloth stitched like this. On the ground, trails had been scraped into the dust on the terracotta tiles; shapes and triangles, connected by long straight lines. The mystic stared at the pattern intently. Dee reached out a hand...

The mystic raised her head and regarded her.

Dee shrank away. Her hands disappeared behind her back. "I'm sorry, I just wanted—"

"Do not apologise. To be curious is to be alive. Through questions, we learn of the world and find our path."

Dee nodded. The eyes held her and she couldn't look away. They narrowed slowly and she felt as if her mind was being searched and scoured. "Your time is coming, soon your place will be most important of all."

Dee stepped back and stumbled. She glanced around in panic, but no-one was watching. She looked at the mystic again, but she had returned to immobility, her eyes glittering slits in the firelight.

By the bench, Teb yawned and stretched "What did I miss?" he asked.

Dee stared at him. "Everything," she replied.

In the Castle of Glass, candles lined the walls of the audience chamber, their light reflected in a myriad of directions by polished mirrors. At one end on a raised dais, an impressive seat made of dark stone, from where wizard lords dispensed their king's will.

It was empty.

A clash of steel and flicker of movement. Two men, stripped to the waist, breathing heavily, circled one another. They were woodlanders, the best of their respective clans. One post in the castle guard remained vacant. The two aspirants fought, but only one would be selected. They wielded metal blades, a pair each. Wizard workmanship, superior to the wooden knives normally used.

And far more deadly.

Samell watched idly an alcove in the furthest corner of the chamber, out of sight. In attendance stood six proud soldiers, dressed in the black of the guard, all veterans, having served the castle for ten turns or more, the very reason Samell had invited them.

The knives flashed again, a grunt of effort and a shout. Samell licked his lips. The men would fight until



one was bested. Occasionally such contests brought injury, but courage would fade before lives were lost. Bright red blood ran from the shoulder of one aspirant, a male with long blonde hair. The sight excited Samell, but there was little he could do about it. There would be no death. The outcome here remained predictable and unsatisfying. The castellan of the castle would never allow murder in the name of ambition. *A shame*, Samell thought. *A little killing might harden them for what is to come.*

He emerged from behind the seat, moving swiftly towards the duel. As soon as he was seen, the contest ended and the combatants stepped back. Both bowed to him, as they should. These aspirants knew their place.

His eyes strayed to the sculpted stones of the floor, covered with symbols and grooves. They traced a path into the ritual chamber beyond, where the patterns became more intricate and diverse. The work was familiar to Samell. Long ago he'd been able to read it, but now he couldn't.

"My Lord Chancellor, will the King be joining us?"

"Mmmhmmm?" Samell turned. The words came from the eldest guard - the castellan. The last of his white hair covered the sides and back of his head like a broken crown. Tremallan was his name. Fifty turns before, he'd been presented at the gates as a boy. *They wither so easily*, Samell thought. Generations had guarded the castle since Jadvar's ascension, *but guarded it from what?* He couldn't remember. "No, his Imperial Majesty granted me dispensation to deal with matters."

Tremallan frowned, drawing more wrinkles on his forehead. "Then, why are we here, my Lord?" he asked.

Samell smiled them all, making sure he displayed all three rows of his teeth. "Because I sent for you," he replied. "The reason for that? Somewhat more complex." He turned to the two combatants. "It seems I arrived in good time, matters have changed, we will need both of you."

"For what purpose my Lord?" Tremallan asked.

"His Majesty favours me with a task," Samell said. "I am to visit your tribes. Assemble an entourage. We leave for Speaker's Hill at once."

If Tremallan's brow could have furrowed further, it would have done. "When, my Lord?"

"As soon as possible, Castellan," Samell said and turned away. He walked quickly past the raised dais and through a small arch, into the larger room beyond.

The ritual chamber.

Lines and symbols from the audience floor room wove into a more complex pattern here as they did with all rooms, tracing a torturous path to the beating heart of the keep.

The portal.

Samell's eyes strayed towards it instinctively. The rippling doorway floated in the middle of the chamber, suspended by its own gravity over a chasm that disappeared into the centre of the world. Vaguely he remembered other portals, held within stone arches, but this one was different. At times it was barely visible, but now a lambent red glow emanated from its depths.

Each morning, as the star's rays shone through a window in the roof, the wizards of Temesne would stand in the first places they remembered. Twelve to rule a vast realm, yet most remained in the castle, unable to drag themselves away from the machinations of Jadvar's court.

Samell glanced around. This place was never empty. Humans were not permitted to enter alone, by order of the King, but each wizard lord had other, more malleable spies. He would be spied upon here, no matter what he did.

Samell tried to remember back to those first days, the ritual, the agonising rebirth and anger. It had all been a grand design, the symbols and patterns on the floor, part of a plan. Some parts of the etchings were more familiar to him than others, yet he recalled nothing of what they meant. Lord Ulam, the Master of Rituals claimed knowledge of this lore, but Samell saw through his lies. Only the Jadvar had such insight and could interpret the signs. The King's word was not to be questioned.

In sending him away from the Castle of Glass, the King was excluding him from the schemes of his peers. That made Samell afraid.

"Something on your mind, Lord Chancellor?"

"Mmmmmhmmm?" Samell glanced around. Another figure, limped into the dim light at the centre



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of the room. Fremac, the Engineer Wizard, the strangest of his kin, obsessed with experimentation, the workings of strange devices. No-one trusted him, but he seemed not to care, preferring the company of artificers in the vast underground caverns beneath the castle. Samell smiled at him coldly. "Unusual that you would be here," he said.

Fremac returned the smile, an awkward gesture for his squinting face owing to the strange viewing tube perched in front of his right eye. "Not so unusual," he countered. "I often visit in the darkest hours."

Samell inclined his head dismissively. "Your movements are of no interest to me."

Fremac mimicked him. "But yours are of much interest to me," he said. He wore thin robes, with simple adornment, revealing more of his twisted body, a mess of badly stitched wounds and puffy scars. "His majesty gave you a task. Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

Samell eyed him with disgust. "Why would you help me?"

Fremac edged closer. "Your needs compliment mine, his majesty sends you to the north, to speak with the clans, he will want someone to accompany you, I offer myself."

"You would abandon your research?"

"Never," Fremac replied. "But the path of my work takes me from this place." He stared, closing an eye and fixing Samell with his monocular gaze through the strange device. "You fear leaving the castle?"

"I fear nothing," Samell lied.

"Fear is necessary, it drives us to excel," Fremac said. "You fear our liege as we all do, but there is something else in your bones, a gathering dread crouching around your heart. The creatures of Temesne age, grow weak and decay. Even the drinking of blood cannot and magic of the portal can withhold death, even from us. You come here because you do not wish the same fate."

"What use are these words to me?" Samell snarled. "You lurk in your pit amidst the vermin of this world. You know nothing of my mind!"

Fremac held up a hand. "Be assured brother, you are not alone in this fear. Once I too felt this dread. My experiments led me to an answer."

An answer? Samell's eyes narrowed. He stepped towards Fremac, taking in the man's uneven stance and scarred hands, the result perhaps of dangerous experimentation? "What solution do you speak of?"

Fremac smiled. "Come with me to my laboratory and I will show you."

Darkness on Temesne. The land shrouded in shadow. A time when all things living drew themselves up to rest and wait for the rise of the stars.

Then in the furthest parts of the realm came the day. Life waxing under a twin dawn, plants grew and stretched towards the shining orbs above. In these lands, the wilderness thrived unchecked. Trees waded through steaming swamps; mushrooms unfurled their wings and gathered in flocks, all to follow the light, creeping across the sky.

In the darkened north, the creature did not rest. It suffered the same weakness as others, but learned to relish this and found an answer.

The creature, slipped through the brush soundlessly. Where he did make noise, it was far less than a living being of his size had right to. Bigger animals roamed the world than he, but none could move as he. Each thing he encountered, he judged a challenge or dismissed as weak. He thrilled at the hunt and chance to best all that might oppose him.

A hundred turns since the ritual. In that time, he ranged further and further from the castle. At first, on the order of the King, to find the former Queen who escaped, but later he abandoned such trivia for his own ambition.

The creature lived for the chase and the kill.

He pressed on, his path parallel to the road used by the clans. They gave him many names and told stories to their children of a shadow in the night. Often he lurked on the edge of their firelight, listened and smiled to himself.

It had not always been thus. In the earliest times, he visited the Woodlanders and was honoured by



their chiefs. In those days, they had requested him when monsters plagued their lands. But gradually their looks and whispers of fear became harder to ignore.

As were their weaknesses.

He took to living alone in the wild in disguise. A mask fashioned from his kills, disguising his face, so that he might still visit the camp fires when it suited. Occasionally another hunger drew him back to the castle, but each time, the hunt called him to return.

Lights flickered in the darkness, more pilgrims; some sleeping, others walking a little further before they rested. In times past the creature might have turned on the sleepers, easy prey in the night, but not this time. The scent of the two from before remained fresh - something about them, different and distinct.

Ahead, a large shape loomed out of the darkness. The creature stopped and crouched in the long grass; *a Wayhome*.

It was dark inside. Outside, guttering lanterns hung on poles at intervals around the circular stone building. The creature approached one quietly and hunkered down beneath.

Footsteps, the smell again, stronger than before; laboured breathing and a rustle of cloth, a splash of water in the dirt, the smell ripe and pungent. One of the two - the old man, outside to relieve himself, the creature smiled and inched forwards, silently, getting closer.

Samell followed Fremac, his hand running idly along the wall as they descended from the ritual chamber, to a spiral staircase leading into the pitch black catacombs, beneath the castle.

Scratched grooves, more symbols and writing, the stairs had been built long before, another part of the grand design etched into the floor and walls of the castle.

The spiral grew narrower, the faint lambent rock-light, fainter, and the steps, further and further apart. Samell's fingers brushed over a scar in the rock, marking the new excavation. From then on, the stones were pitted and scarred, but unmarked by design. No servant came here, unless trusted, or never to return.

He wondered of Fremac's purpose. The wizard had no allies amongst his kin, keeping to himself and his mechanical madness. King Jadvar tolerated his work, leaving him to scheme beneath the castle.

They came to the bottom and Fremac moved ahead into the gloom. The catacombs were kept in abject darkness. Light invoked unwanted groans of hope and despair from the cells.

"Please, I have children..."

"Just some water... anything..."

In the earliest days of Jadvar's rule, he summoned leaders of the many nations of Temesne. Samell had worked tirelessly, talking of the new age brought about by the rise of their new ruler and how the wizard lords would bring a glorious era for everyone. They walked amongst the disparate peoples, bringing peace to warring factions and healing division. The Castle of Glass had been opened, its wonders revealed. The people of Temesne accepted King Jadvar and agreed to his wish that they send the worst transgressors of their laws to the castle for incarceration.

"Do you remember the past, Lord Chancellor?" Fremac asked, his voice floating back in the darkness, "before the ritual?"

"What need do I have for such memories?" Samell scoffed. "His Majesty knows our history, his grand design succeeded. We are the embodiment of his will. I am content with that."

"I remember things," Fremac said, "fragments and flashes of the time before. A queen ruled us and I served her, right until the end." A door creaked open and a red glow filled the passageway. Samell could feel heat, emanating from the room beyond. He guessed they were close to the great vent beneath the Portal.

He followed Fremac through the doorway into a small laboratory. The light and temperature rose made Samell sweat under his robes. In the middle of the room was a wooden chair with restraints for hands and feet. There was a hole in the far wall, to the vent in the chamber above and a bottomless drop into the centre of the world. "What is your purpose in bringing me here?" Samell demanded.



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"Only this," Fremac said and picked up a vial from a cluttered shelf, the liquid within, was dark. He held it out. "Drink."

Samell took the vial and examined it. The glass was a part of a special set, reserved for state banquets. "You stole this," he said.

"I borrowed the receptacle," Fremac replied. "Suitable for an honoured guest like yourself."

"What concoction do you give me?"

Fremac smiled. "The thirst calls to all of us, each in a different way. We control our urges as we can and we know the life we suck from the veins of mortals preserves our fragile forms. Granted, they are greater than those before the ritual, but they remain a limit upon our potential. I made something better, more potent than mortal blood, drink."

Samell's stared at the glass then at him, but Fremac did not flinch from the scrutiny. "Come. If I wished to poison you, there would be easier ways. Besides, you have his Majesty's ear and his protection. Bringing you here, to my laboratories makes me the obvious suspect doesn't it?"

Samell shrugged. The words rang true, but something remained in Fremac's eyes to mistrust.

Slowly, he raised the vial to his lips...

"...I remember not, my beginning, only light and a memory of things before. Over time, I have guessed much from the dreams in my fractured mind. I came from the stars first and made a home on this world.

From the strange woman I learned to dream. Her embrace was warm and comforting. My brothers followed and I sensed them close, above me; kindred spirits on our path in the void..."

"Wake up, you are needed."

Dee blinked and found herself looking into the unfamiliar face of a man. His words blended with the voice of the mystic in her dream. She sat up, her hand reaching for the bone knife at her belt. The stranger withdrew. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Brin," the man replied. "Forgive me, but you came here with an older man?"

"Uncle Teb," Dee glanced around. The blankets next to her were empty. "Where is he?"

"Outside," Brin said. When Dee got to her feet, he put a hand on her shoulder. "I think you should prepare yourself," he warned, but Dee pulled away from his grip, running out of the stone building and into the grassland.

An early dawn, the first star, peaking over the horizon in the east, the land, chill and cold. A small crowd had gathered near a lantern pole to her left. Dee headed in that direction and people stepped back as she drew close.

"Uncle?"

What remained of Teb lay in the grass. His stared blankly into the sky and deep gouges ran across his face. A blanket had been thrown over the rest of him and already stained dark red.

Dee stood transfixed. Her hands went to her lips. She couldn't look away, but couldn't go to him either. She wanted to, but somehow, getting close would make it real.

"I'm sorry," said Brin, coming up from behind her. "I tried to tell you."

Dee opened her mouth. No words came out. She gazed at the body.

"What could have done this?" said someone.

"I don't know," said Brin.

Early morning and both stars in the sky; the ritual chamber, a vast circular space. From his position in the easternmost gallery, Rian gazed down in wonder at the room and the glowing portal in its centre.

From above, the spiral pattern etched into the floor became a maze for the eye. Any attempt to trace a path resulted in a strange multi-faceted and mesmerising journey of distraction.

Gradually the stars waxed and as they did, more of the intricacies of the stone floor were revealed;



twelve pools of light appeared around the room, eight occupied by wizards, four left empty. On the far side, Rian spotted one he hadn't seen last night. A hunched and scarred individual, dressed in a thin white robe.

Despite the disapproval of the guards, Rian had secured a good position at the front of the balcony; scant love existed between his people's clan and those who guarded the castle. His master, Nwarr stood directly below, his sheathed swords and upright stance making him an impressive figure amongst the others. Starlight reflecting from his armour scattered into the view tiers and drew disgruntled glances from those either side of his place.

A bell sounded and the doors at the end of the room swung back. King Jadvar strode purposefully into the chamber, his arms wide and eyes flashing left and right. The dark robes he wore were patterned with golden lines and symbols. The wizard lords flinched then knelt as he approached them. Samell cowered as their master chose his spot. Behind him a crowd of slave carried a tall finger-like stone, large and black it sucked up light. The servants placed the burden in one of the vacant pools, then bowed to their King and scuttled out of the room.

Another bell sounded, deep and sonorous, a hush descended on the watching crowd. Rian glanced up. The both stars shone through a triangular window in the apex of the roof. The light brightened and refracted on the portal. It shimmered and flashed. Yellow rays spat out at the robed figures and the obsidian stone. Each wizard seemed to grow, feeding from the light that bathed them, standing taller and stronger than before.

Time passed, but the people in the galleries remained motionless, staring in fascination. As the magic began to fade, Rian shielded his eyes and peered at the enchantment. He thought he could see red, mixed with the vibrant yellow, but he couldn't be sure.

A third bell sounded. The stars passed from the vent, the beams from the portal ceased and the shadows returned. Conversations began in quiet tones, but quickly ended when King Jadvar raised his hand.

"Last night I promised an answer to the words of Nwarr!" he said, his voice, easily carrying around the chamber. He pointed at the dark rock occupying one of places. "Behold, the instrument of new purpose, the sentinel stone. It will absorb the power of the ritual, collecting it for our future use," Jadvar looked up and Rian felt a chill run through him as, for a moment, he met those cold eyes.

"We rule this realm," Jadvar said. "But you are its heart and blood. In three days, your people gather. You honour us with your presence at this ceremony, so we shall send our representative to yours. We will listen to stories and songs, consult with your people at the meeting fires and decide the future of our realm."

A murmur of approval ran through gallery. *A representative?* Rian thought, his eyes, straying to his master. Nwarr, who had earned the respect of the clans through war and had raised the question first.

Who better than—

"Alchemist, rise."

The red robed figure nearest the chamber doors stood up. King Jadvar turned to him. "You will lead our delegation to speak to the people."

From a high tree above the Wayhome, the creature stared down at the humans and smiled. Something about their flesh made him feel strong and powerful. The taste lingered and the scent below kept him here, watching.

He guessed their thoughts, one death amongst hundreds on pilgrimage. There would be talk of a hunt, but no-one took such risks for strangers. They'd caution the girl and walk on, the incident lost to memory and a fireside tale to scare children.

He stared at the group, waiting. People wandered away, until only a few remained. Two figures returned carrying bundles of wood, which they stacked around the corpse.

The creature waited and watched the flames. The smell of roasting flesh filled his nostrils, making his belly rumble and filling his mouth with drool. Death came to all things; the burning ritual released the

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spirit to return to the beginning.

His lip curled into a sneer, *such foolishness*. The body marked his victory, a cremation removed the warning, but those present would remember, and the old man's finger bones, woven into his cloak at the shoulder were sign enough for others.

The fire burned down. More of the pilgrims left, returning to the road, leaving the girl, feeding the flames. The ritual required family remain, but they were far from kin, so the task became hers alone.

The shadows lengthened, the last star set in the darkening sky. The creature moved from his perch, soundlessly climbing down the tree head first, his four hands and feet finding grip and purchase where no other animal might.

When he reached the ground, he caught another scent; old and familiar. He turned around.

A large figure, similar in shape and size crouched in the undergrowth watching him. He recognised it immediately as a memory - like the person he used to be.

"Wizard!" he spat out the word.

The wizard did not move, but leaned on her staff and stared.

The creature returned the look, his hands reaching for the hooked knives strapped to his belt. He slid them out carefully, trying not to draw attention to the movement. Then, he edged forward. "Why you here, wizard?" he shouted. "Nothing for you!"

In reply, the wizard raised a hand. "The young one is protected," it said in a low voice.

"Protected?" the creature grinned, displaying long rows of bloodstained teeth. "By you?"

"By everything," the wizard intoned. "Her hour has not come."

"I am not frightened, killed wizards before!"

"I know what you have done."

Three paces between them, still the wizard had not moved. "You do not choose!" the creature hissed and leapt.

He leapt at the wizard and the knives came down, two swift lunges, slashing across face and arm but then pain!

The creature fell, hit the ground rolled and got up, weapons raised to attack. The wizard turned towards him, continuing to stare. Bright red blood welled in the two wounds and ran down her chin and stained her woven robe, but it made no move. The creature growled, his fingers probed, exploring his own injuries. He flinched and realisation dawned. *Identical! But how could that—*

"The girl is protected," the wizard repeated. "You cannot change this."

The creature limped forward again. Dark ichor dripped from his weapons. Wicked blades, made to slash, maim and incapacitate. "I will kill you," he whispered.

"If so, you end yourself and all possibility," the wizard replied and turned away, leaning heavily on her staff as she shuffled back into the wilderness.





Appendix C: Additional Elite Dangerous Writing

This document contains further writing I have completed in the last two years for the computer game franchise, *Elite Dangerous*, demonstrating the ongoing development of the macrotext in this franchise.

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1. Short Story: The Unexpected Guest

Quator Station unloading, sixteen hundred hours, standard time.

We're in the hangar deck, in one of the huge A-rated berths. The ship's an Imperial Clipper, the engines still warm from her landing. That's a welcome feeling. Some of these pilots sit around a long time before making a trade and giving orders to unload. When that happens, we're set out to unload them in sub-zero temperatures.

Hydraulic pistons hiss and whirr as I walk. The exo-stomper is fully charged and warmed up. I dug under a low beam and approach the open hatch. Maglocks engage to secure me to the station deck and I reach into the ship. Metal pincers grab onto crate handles and the first container slides out on the runner. I lift it, and turn to the waiting truck.

The intercom crackles, "Wait! What's that?"

I pause and glance back. There's something else in the door of the cargo bay, it's been dislodged by my work.

A body.

A dead body.

The man's hands dangle from the back of the ship. His head hangs lifeless, face away from me. He has dark hair, with hints of grey.

"Saul, I need you to stay where you are. A medical team is en-route. They'll be with you in seventy-five seconds. Whatever you do, don't touch him. You can't help."

"Can I least put the crate down?" I ask.

"If you do, the transport may activate and head to dispatch. We need all the evidence in one place.

Saul, please, just stay exactly where you are. "

“Okay.” There’s nothing to do but wait and stare at the dead guy.

Who is he?

Who was he?

I’ve been a station dock worker for thirty years. You hear on the stories about things being found in freight. Most of them aren’t true, but everyone has a tale. This is the first time I’ve found a dead body.

The medical drone scuttles into view, an Achilles design, with four spider-like legs and two extendable arms. Someone back at Control will be piloting it. There’s a hopper on the back, with some sort of Remlok suspension system attached. It grabs the body and bundles it over its shoulder. The Remlok envelopes him, stretching to fit over his whole body. The computer inside will be analysing the body for life signs and triggering a laboratory of stimulants to get a response.

Good luck with that.

“Okay Saul, the medi-drone is clear. Can you put the cargo container back where you found it please then make your way back here for debrief?”

“Sure, understood. On my way.”

“He was a Jameson, a Peter Jameson by all accounts.”

The name gets my attention. Everyone knows the Jameson dynasty. Two centuries ago, a two-bit trader bought a Cobra Mark III from Lave for all the cash he had in his pocket and set out into the darkness. When he came back, he was still in the same ship, but he’d made a fortune.

His name was Peter Jameson too.

Roberts is standing over a terminal in the exo-stomper garage. I'm sat on a bench. The decontamination team has finished with me and I'm dressed in fresh overalls. My skin feels raw, like it's been steam blasted.

"Can't be the same Jameson," I say.

Roberts turns to me and shrugs. "Could be a clone?" he says.

"Why would a rich corporation clone be found dead in an Imperial Clipper's cargo hold?" I ask.

"Don't know," Roberts says. "I'm only telling you what I heard from the investigators."

"Investigators?"

"Yeah, station security appointed some contractors." Roberts rubs a hand over his stubbled face. He came on shift after I went out. We've known each other for three years, since he started here. He's a slob at the best of times, but today he looks worse, as if he hasn't slept for a while. "New people. Never seen them before."

I stand up and walk over the terminal. "What did you find out about him?"

"Just an old story."

"Okay, let's hear it."

Roberts reads slowly from the screen.

"In 3125, the first Peter Jameson left Lave Station at the start of his great expedition which brought him fame and fortune. After him came Naomi Jameson, his daughter the explorer, who in 3163, crashed into a planet in the Zearla system while chasing a comet and bankrupting the family in the process. In 3200, Peter Jameson II, grandson of the famous pioneer followed the same crazy dream as his grandfather and this time, the money stuck. The Jameson family spread out across the stars, adventuring their way into legend."

“All very exciting,” I say. “But that doesn’t explain how more than a hundred years later, a Jameson body got into that cargo hold.”

Roberts sighs. “I don’t think we’ll get an answer to that until they’ve finished and it gets to GalNet.”

“Seems a bit unfortunate,” I say. “We’re right here. We can find out.”

Roberts glares at me. He touches the pips on chest of his overall. “Shouldn’t need to tell you Saul, I outrank you. Best you leave it. All this is way above our pay grades.”

I hold his gaze, but he’s not backing down. I’m the one who looks away. “You’re probably right,” I mutter.

“Yeah, you know I am. Leave it to them investigators, that’s what they’re paid for.”

Hoopy’s Bar in Quator Station is never crowded. A crowd would have brought with it a noisy atmosphere, the kind of general talking noise you get in a social space. People choosing to be there, to talk, relax and unwind.

Maybe Hoopy’s was like that many years ago. Apparently, this place was a franchise, built up by a casino owner from Lave. The flashing neon sign suggests their might have been fun to be had, back in the day. But whatever good times there were, are long gone.

Now there’s just dust, the smell of engine oil and clusters of dirty techs huddled in corners. In one corner, there’s a dirty tarp hiding some antique electronics booth. Behind the bar, amidst the dirty glasses and bottles are two string thin men with matching beards, both in filthy work suits, taking it in turns to eye up customers with the same empty stare.

There’s a hum too. The sound of a half-dead generator being tortured to keep this place alive.

Quator colony is a shithole. Quator Station is a dive. Hoopy’s is a ruin.

I live here.

There's a rind on the edge of my glass, ingrained filth, the kind you scrape off with a cutter. The dark brown liquid says it's a mega gin. Its lying. The half measure in my gut screams the truth under torture. Some sort of illegal moonshine cooked up by the owners, no doubt.

I'm tired. Exhausted. The world gets an edge to it when I get like this. Some things matter more, other things get forgotten.

The empty chair at my table scrapes on the floor. I look up. There's a dark-haired woman sitting down. She's wearing station security fatigues and a smile or a grimace. I can't tell which.

"Saul."

"Lyssa. What brings you out here?"

"You."

"Oh."

Brown hands reach for my glass. Lyssa picks it up, examines it. "Why do you waste your money on this?" she says.

"The Jacksons insist all their lodgers stop by for a glass or two," I say. "If I want to keep my cell, I gotta drink their brew."

She scowls and the half smile fades. Her dark eyes hold onto mine. "I could arrest them for making this. I bet it violates regulations."

"Probably on several counts."

"True."

I sit back. "Did you come here to discuss the menu?"

"No."

"Then what do you want?"

"You to back off." She puts the glass down and leans over the table. "Roberts told me you were asking questions about the Jameson."

I shake my head. "I was shooting the breeze at Roberts, nothing more. He made it clear he wants no chasing."

"It's what we all want."

"Okay."

There's a shift of things and I look up. Five people are walking in. They look clean, marking them out as strangers. "Those your people?" I ask Lyssa, nodding towards them.

"That's the investigation team, yes."

"Leave it to them, right?"

"Yeah."

She gets up and goes over to them. A heavy-set man smiles, says her name and start talking. I can't hear what's said over the hum, but it's a detailed conversation and I've clearly been forgotten.

I pick up the gin glass, tip it back and try not to taste anything as it goes down. Requisite drink done.

Now I can go to bed.

I get up and leave.

There's a subtle shifting to Coriolis station gravity. When you've lived up here most of your life, you get used to it and your walk rolls with the changes. Pilots tend to pick it up fairly quickly as they're used to all sorts of different places. Planetsiders always look awkward by comparison.

All three types of people are distinctive in the way they move. You can pick out the little adjustments for balance, the use of hand rails, all of it.

I'm walking down the access corridor to my cell when a man pushes past.

“Hey watch it!”

He ignores me. He’s grabbing for the hand rails, stumbling, like he’s drunk or unused to the space station. He’s wearing a long dark coat, like you see in the old Earth holo-vids.

I glare after him, but there’s nothing to be done. I’m nearly at my hatch anyway. I glance up and sigh. The security camera’s smashed again, with wires trailing down over my head. It’s not the first time it’s been vandalised, probably the fifth or the sixth in the last year I guess.

I press my thumb to the pad. The system beeps and the door slides back, freezing when it gets halfway. There’s a sizzling noise, a pop and a burning smell. I elbow my way in, grab the interior handle and drag the panel back to close it. I’ll have to report the fault tomorrow. No-one’ll do anything about it for a month or two, but at least it’ll be on the glitch list. Or, I can borrow a tool kit from the garage and take it apart myself? Roberts won’t be happy, but at least he’ll know I’m not asking questions about the Jameson.

Ah yes, the Jameson.

The cell I call home is a small cuboid space. All cells are around here. Space on a space station comes at a premium price, even when it’s a penniless backwater like Quator.

I pick my way to the sink and rinse my hands then turn and sit on the bed. Enough room in here for somewhere to shit, sleep and wash up. That’s about it. I’ve a screen on the wall and a mini-slate to run it, a few clothes and not much else.

A pretty disposable life after fifty years.

That’s why I can let the Jameson situation go. It’s the ultimate rags to riches story. Peter Jameson’s the perfect self-made man, clawing his way out of poverty to carve a legacy in the stars. There’s never been anything for me like that. No chance, or opportunity to leap on board.

I got shipped up here as a teenager from the colony compound when another secession war broke out between the miners and the land administration. Just another kid whose number needed processing. I don't remember much from before. I wanted a life in space, so I took the ride and gazed out of the window, forgetting as much as I could about the ground.

Looking back, I can see how naïve I was. But then, would a life down there have been any better?

Any different?

There's something on the bed. My hands reach for it and pick it up.

A gun?

The gun is metal and plastic, a composite. A kinetic weapon, with ammunition. The barrel is warm.

It's been used.

There's a scream in the corridor. A moment later, the security alert goes off. I'm at the door, but it won't open, it's too heavy to drag back, or something's jamming it. I keep trying then start shouting.

"Hey! Anyone out there? I'm stuck!"

There's an automated locking system that keeps all the cell hatches closed during an emergency. In the event of a fire on a space station, it's the safest thing to do. Seal the adjoining rooms and keep them pressurised, that way people stay alive.

But my door isn't pressure locked, it's broken and jammed.

"Hey!"

There's movement outside. I can hear booted feet and murmured voices talking over the vox. A moment later a metallic scream starts up and the door panel becomes hot. I step back into the room away from it, watching the metal blister and melt. Eventually, part of the central panel falls away to reveal a figure behind it in full tactical assault gear aiming a weapon at me.

“Mister Dahallan? Saul Dallahan?”

Wordlessly I nod.

“You’re under arrest for the murder of Load Supervisor, Jacob Roberts.”

“You’re in a lot of trouble, Saul.”

I’m sat facing Lyssa across a desk in a plain white room with opaque duraglass walls. Behind them will be a variety of security personnel members of the corporate and colonial prosecution service, an appointed advocate and presiding judge. I expect some are viewing in, others are there in person. There’ll be a small-time delay, but then everything I say will be broadcast planet-side on one of their entertainment shows.

Justice in the Quator system is a swift and deadly publicity machine.

“I didn’t do this,” I say. “After I saw you at Hoopy’s, I went home. I didn’t see Roberts. Not since earlier in the day when we found—”

“The Jameson?”

“Yeah.”

Lyssa nods. The kind of nod that commits to nothing other than the fact that she’s heard my words. I can’t tell if she believes them. She runs a hand through her hair, revealing the earpieces she’s wearing. Her dark eyes give nothing away.

“Your DNA and prints are all over the weapon we found in your cell. It’s a stolen revolver. It’s been fired once. There’s a ballistic match between the gun and the bullet taken out of Roberts’ skull.”

“I came home and found that gun on my bed.”

“It’s also documented that you tried to barricade yourself in.”

“The door was jammed, it’d been tampered with!”

“By whom?”

My mind races back, remembering. “There was a man, he went past me on the gantry. He was wearing a long coat.”

“There’s no record of anyone being there.”

“The cameras were taken out.”

Lyssa nods again. There’s a murmuring from the earpiece and her eyes flick towards the opaque glass on our right. She chews her lip thoughtfully for a moment then makes a decision and stands up.

“Wait here,” she says. “Our specialists want a chance to talk to you.”

2. Short Story: Poor Little Rich Girl

"Good morning Meredith. How are you today?"

I open my eyes to the whiteness. The blank space. Blank walls, blank floor, blank ceiling. This has been my life for all of my life.

"I'm fine, thank you," I say. I have to say that, otherwise the question will repeat until I acknowledge and answer.

There's a faint sweetness to the air, the aftermath of a stimulant gas injection to wake me up.

Everything is timed and managed to ensure I remain in the best possible health. My sleeping is scheduled, my awake and activities carefully calculated. There is a library of routines, projects, media, engagements and more for me to choose from, but they are all self-contained within this room. They will have no effect on anything else.

There's gravity here. This part of the ship rotates. In an emergency, the section will be stopped, the outer chamber filled with liquid and restraints deployed to ensure I am not harmed. In all my time here, I can only remember that happening twice.

"Where are we?" I ask as I sit up. It's a meaningless question. The location of this spaceship changes quickly and constantly. The contract demands that it do so to ensure I am never captured or found.

"Eta Cassiopeia," the ship replies. "We are currently refuelling."

Refuelling is the nearest we get to any aspect of human civilisation. Our fuel scoops will be deployed and feasting on hydrogen. Occasionally, there are ships around the same sun. When I ask, the computer will display a feed from the external cameras on the wall and I can see them, but we can't make contact.

That would break the terms of my purchase.

Yes, I am a commodity. I was bought and sold before I was born.

“What would you like to do today Meredith?” The ship asks.

“I’d like to see outside,” I say.

The walls fade into black. Starlight illuminates my bed and then, as the ship rolls, the orange light of the sun catches the room. It’s beautiful. It’s always beautiful. It almost makes the loneliness easy to bear.

“Is there anyone nearby?” I ask.

“There is a Federation patrol within two thousand kilometres of us,” the ship replies. “They have noted our presence, but not deviated from their course. I am monitoring them.”

“Do we have local information access?”

“Yes, I have managed to connect with Wilcutt Terminal. We will not remain long. This system is known to be heavily militarised.”

Not for the first time, I wonder where we’re going or if the ship has a final destination in its programming? We have been travelling my whole conscious life, I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t in this room, alone, talking to an artificial voice.

“Can I have my slate, please?”

“Of course.” A panel slides away in the wall, I get up and pull out the smooth, flat, touchscreen. I access the local records, looking for news, but there is little of interest. The faces change, but people still murder, fight, steal and rebel. The corporations are the biggest thieves, hiding their extortion behind flashing adverts and beautiful holograms that pop out of the screen to talk to you. I remember when I was young I got excited and tried to talk back, but they never listened to me.

I have no inbox and there’s no way to contact people. The ship screens what content I can and can’t access, using powerful algorithms to ensure my needs are anticipated when it downloads information from the local system into its database. If there are items I’d like, they are constructed

and printed for me. If there is media content, its immediately acquired and displayed on a wall of my choice.

I have everything I could possibly want or need, apart from one thing.

Freedom.

“Ship, explain to me why I’m here again?”

“You are Meredith Argent.” The artificial voice takes on a flat tone as it begins reading from the prepared file, “singular authorised clone of Meredith Argent. You were birthed as part of a contract between Argent Incorporated and the Achilles Corporation. You are the last living example of your specific genetic code, the record of which remains on this ship. You were purchased as insurance of collaboration between our two companies for mutual benefit.”

I’ve heard this before, but each time I ask the question, I get a variation on the answer. It’s enough of a variation that I always learn a little bit more. The subtle changes in words, additions to sentences, perhaps the ship is programmed to give me more information as I get older? I certainly remember the explanations being less detailed when I was a child.

“What collaboration are the companies working on?” I can’t remember how many times I’ve tried to find this out.

“The details of the project remain classified. We cannot risk telling you them in case you fall into enemy hands.”

“But you know them, right?”

“Yes. This ship – *The Argent’s Quest III* is manufactured with many experimental components from the project. Automatic emergency protocols protect both information and technology. This program and its database will delete itself in the event of a hull breach and the manufactured artefacts will be destroyed.”

“Can you tell me more about—”

“It is time for your exercise period.”

I sigh. No more clues for now it seems.

I put the slate away, get out of bed and stretch. I know I’m required to perform physical activity for a specific duration every wake period. If I don’t choose an activity, one will be enforced on me.

There are clothes on a rack that has just appeared beside me. I take off my nightdress and pull out a breathable exercise one-piece. As I slip into it, the material tightens, providing support and comfort.

I start to run, jogging towards the wall. The star field fades away to be replaced by a field on a bright summer’s day. The sky is blue, cloudless and beautiful. The floor moves as I move. I know really, I’m not going anywhere, that there’s a wall a metre away from me, but my mind refuses to accept that.

The green grass rolls away into the distance where I can see a house. It’s an old rural home, made of brick, with a sloped roof and a chimney. The sight makes me smile. It comes from an image I found on the database years ago. The house gives me an objective, something to run towards.

But I’ll never get there.

The room lurches to the left. I stumble and I stop running. “What’s happening?” I ask.

“We are under attack,” the ship replies. “We are taking evasive action.”

I make a grab for the bed, dragging myself back onto it as the emergency straps deploy, snaking around my arms and legs. “Show me,” I say. “I want to see what’s going on!”

The blue-sky fades away and the stars return, they are streaming and swirling around as the ship dips and ducks to avoid bright flashing beams of energy. I grit my teeth and fight to keep my stomach under control. “How long until we jump?”

“Fifteen seconds,” the ship replies. “Brace yourself.”

I lock my leg around the bar at the bottom of the bed as the floor becomes a wall, then the ceiling.

Gravity has gone, I’m floating the air when a thought pops into my head. There’s a question I need to ask. An obvious question I’ve not thought of before.

“Who is Meredith Argent?”

“Miss Argent was the head of her company, Argent Incorporated, formerly known as A. A. A. I,” the ship replies. There is no hint of inflection to the voice, no hint of hesitation as it fights to keep up both alive. “She was a hero of the Alioth rebellion and the Alliance.”

I’ve heard of these. Alioth is a system we’ve never been to. It leads the Alliance, or at least claims to. The Alliance itself is a loosely connected organisation that tries to claim it is an interstellar faction to rival the Federation or the Empire, but it really isn’t. The news reports I’ve read over the years don’t say that, but I can see behind the propaganda to the truth. There was hope, ambition and aspiration, but it’s become hollow and tired.

“You are also, Meredith Argent.”

In front of us, I see a Python class ship, it erupts, raining beam weapons, cannon fire and missiles down on us. The screen flashes and the room shakes. I flinch and duck instinctively, but then we’re clear, running for deep space. An orange circle appears and a name I can’t read.

“Where are we going?”

“To a star system that is kept from the galactic chart. We will be safe there, until we move on to our next destination.”

I grab the bed rail and try to think. “You said the system is heavily militarised. Why did you bring us here?”

“We needed to obtain something,” the ship says.

“What? Did we get it?”

“Yes, although I am not sure...” The ship doesn’t finish the sentence. Instead, I feel the engines surge, the room vibrates and the stars turn into lines.

We’re in hyperspace.

There’s a jolt. The walls lighten back into their white, but the gravity doesn’t return. The vibration stops and I’m drifting up from the bed, drifting slowly.

“Ship?”

There’s no answer.

“Ship? Did we make it?”

“We... did not.”

The restraints haven’t released. I struggle, but I can’t free myself. I’m powerless, more powerless than normal. “What do we do?”

“We have suffered damage, I am unable to access core functions. There is a virus... it has... affected...” the ship doesn’t finish its sentence.

I remember the emergency protocol. “I should be dead, you should have deleted yourself.”

“Yes...” the voice is hesitant, strained, as if it’s out of breath or in pain. “I cannot... fulfil my core function.”

“Can we call for help?”

There’s silence for several minutes as I drift above the bed, then the white walls fade out once more and I’m looking at hundreds and hundreds of asteroids, stretching away into the vista of stars. “If I enable... the distress beacon, we do not... know who will answer it,” the ship says. “However, the virus... will soon be able to... contact... its... directly... I cannot... allow...”

The voice is weaker now, the room speakers crackle and hiss with static. “Is Meredith Argent dead?”
I ask.

“She is al... Hibernate mode... initi—”

The restraints are released. I’m left suspended in mid-air. A panel on the wall flips away, revealing a console. The words, ‘DISTRESS BEACON ACTIVE’ appear on the screen.

I have no idea who will come. But perhaps I will be rescued.

Perhaps I will be free?

3. Short Story: The Wreck

"There she is!"

The Ocular - a Lakon Type-9, shudders as we decelerate. I clump through the corridor in the direction of the voice, Captain Robert Tillerton is standing up in his seat, the long-haul bio filters trailing from his back like snakes, floating in the zero G.

"I want a full detail scan on every fragment and container, then get prepped for EVA."

We've been out here in deep space for eleven days, looking for something, anything that isn't cold vacuum. Tillerton's been following a hand drawn map and list of co-ordinates, which he won't share. He's refused to let anyone else at the controls, staying in the pilot's chair the whole time. Thankfully, this ship's equipped for that, but he's still unsteady, leaning on the console for support.

He's stood up and staring into the black. I move a little closer and see why.

A twisted shadow blocks the stars. Debris spins in front of us, the last memory of a time when this wreck tore itself apart and its crew perished. The bulk of metal remains in one piece, the rest stretches behind it, in a spiralled tail.

"What ship is that?" I ask.

"*The Aldus*," Tillerton replies. "A python class trader fresh out of Port Zelada back in 2867 AD."

"But that means-"

"Yes, that means she's been drifting for more than three hundred years."

We're far outside the trading lanes, our frameshift drive flipped on and off for long stretches as we've scoured space for signals, dropping to manoeuvring speed when the captain's decided there's something interesting to look at. This ship's modified for exploration, with cabins and specialist equipment. All the crew are on six-month contracts and there's no plans for rest stops one way to where we're going.

"Are you sure it's her?" I ask. "Could be any old ship."

"Could be, but isn't," Tillerton turns towards me. "She's a prize in and of herself, but there's plenty more she can lead us to, Anna. I want you over there and finding out what we can salvage."

"Hanson picks the suits for space walks, she won't ask me."

"Today I make an exception, you're going, captain's order."

I'm smiling despite myself and flip him a salute. "Right you are, sir," I say. "I won't let you down."

"No," Tillerton replies, "You won't."

I'm in the airlock. The three sullen faces of Biggs, Saunders and Hanson are hidden behind their helmets, just as my grin is hidden behind mine. There's a faint hiss as the outer door rolls away and we're looking out into dark emptiness.

The basics of extra-vehicular activity haven't changed much in twelve centuries, judging by the old vids. Although, back then, they risked humans for a lot more than we do now. The detail scanner has been over the debris field, identifying cargo containers, trace substances and more. We know where the hazardous leaks are and drones will go out to pick up any loose assets. There will be camera remotes out as well, exploring the ship's interior, but there's no substitute for the 'mark one eyeball'.

A puff of gas and the tether snakes away, anchoring itself to our destination. A high tensile cable, anchored on a reel at this end, with some spool left to compensate for drift. Space is all about movement and momentum, fixing our ship to the wreck is dangerous. A Type 9 isn't likely to be

pulled around, but the shifts and collisions of the fragments might draw us into an unexpected dance. Leaving play on the cable means we're not dragging a pile of junk along with us.

Hanson clips herself on, deactivates her mag boots and leaps into the black. Saunders follows, then Biggs. I'm last to leave.

There's an instinct you fight to make jumps like this. Despite everything, something inside still thinks I'm going to fall, tumbling away into the scattered powder of twinkling light. My mind can't accept that I'm in vacuum, that I'm weightless and floating.

My own reaction might be the biggest danger.

I clip on and leap.

Momentum carries me after the rest. There's no sense of deceleration, no sound of the clip moving on the line. Fragments of metal glance off my helmet and suit. Any one of them may be sharp and tear through the multi-weave fabric, forcing it to deploy counter measures.

The wreck is ahead. The others are standing on a jagged ledge which might have been a wall once. Hands grab me, steady me.

"All safe aboard, including the newbie."

"Copy. You're clear to proceed."

I look around. This was someone's living quarters. A book floats past, precious once, now torn and burned. I can't make out the title.

"We'll need to cut our way in."

Biggs unstraps the hull cutter. It's an unwieldy gun, like a two-handed drill, with a large power pack strapped on the end. Saunders tethers him to the wreck so he can brace himself and he presses the tool to the sealed door.

The point of the cutter glows red, then white. A hole appears and the metal peels back like an onion. There's a puff of escaping pressure, the remains of atmosphere from years ago, if Tillerton is right about this ship. Biggs works methodically, gouging out a gap for us to enter. When he's done, he kicks the cut panel and it falls away, revealing the gloomy interior beyond.

"Time to work people," Hanson says and steps forward.

I follow.

Once inside, *The Aldus* wreck is dark, but free from further obstruction. I switch on suit illumination and make for the cargo bay whilst Hanson and Saunders head for the bridge and Biggs goes to Engineering.

I activate the communications link. "Anna to Tillerton."

"Tillerton here. Go secure."

"Secure, aye."

I shift to an encrypted channel as instructed. Hanson, Saunders and Biggs will have heard Tillerton's order, they'll be wondering what we're up to. I can only hope they've been promised fat enough bonuses not to ask.

"So, what did you send me over here for, captain?"

"I need you to access the ship's logs. Make for the manifest terminal in the hold."

"Hanson can do that, she's on the bridge."

"I don't trust Hanson."

There is it, the truth. He's been holding out on us and only now is he bringing me in. "What's in it for me?" I ask.

"Anna, anything on that ship, you keep. That's my gift to you."

"Tempting," I push myself down an access tube and along a corridor. The room beyond has a jammed hatchway, stuck half open. I can just about squeeze through.

Into the cargo hold.

The space opens out. It's massive, crammed with racks full of containers. Not as big as the Lakon's hold when she's empty, but plenty big enough.

"Looks like they were fully loaded," I tell Tillerton. "I'll work out how to open up the doors and let the drones in to collect." I hear him scrabble with the headphones. We're still on a secure channel, I guess he's talking to the others on a different mic.

"Never mind that," he says. "The terminal should be to the left of the door. Tell me what you find."

I float across, activating my magboots as I get close enough, anchoring myself to the deck. The terminal screen is dark, the ship long since deprived of power. I pull a battery unit from my belt. *Not for long.*

The external power socket is easy to find, it's in the same place on most of these interfaces. After a moment, the screen wakes up and runs through its loading sequence, or at least, tries to.

Emergency warnings flash all over the place. *Network compromised... system mainframe unavailable... insufficient power to re-establish life support... access mode initiated... Load new operator Y/N?*

I remove my EVA gauntlet and type 'Y', my inner glove's pudgy fingers just about manage the keys. I'll need to remove that as well to use the touchscreen. I hope that won't be necessary. That'll mean exposure to whatever atmosphere's left in this place.

Accessing public manifest... please wait...

Rows of white text begin to scroll up from the bottom of the display, line after line of cargo inventories with dates as to when they were shipped in and shipped out. I pull a cable from my suit and plug in to the data port. The manifest starts copying over immediately.

"Captain? I'm into the system."

"Brilliant."

"I'll send over the files."

"Fine, but do that later. First up, I need her last docking address."

That's a strange request. "But we already know that. She came out of Port Zelada."

"Yes, she did, but I want to find out if she reached where she was going and was on her way back before she got attacked."

I'm frowning and irritated, but I start tapping the keys, switching requests to port registration only. Space ports and stations will have exchanged entry protocols with the ship to log into the trade network. Most asteroid bases do the same, even the illegal ones, leaving a trail to follow if someone's prepared to jet around a dozen star systems after some rogue ship. Digging through a wreck's datalog is much easier.

Port dock registered. Location unknown.

Hang on. That doesn't make sense.

I read the words again.

Port dock registered. Location unknown.

"Captain... There's something wrong with this."

"What does the log say?"

Tillerton sounds excited, like I've bought him a birthday present. "There's a record of docking, but... it doesn't say where."

"I knew it!" He's laughing, but I can't work out why. "You just made us rich, Anna!"

I switch the terminal back to loading the cargo manifest. "You better explain this. Why are we out here chasing a two-hundred-year-old ship?"

"*The Aldus* was one of three ships sent out to answer an emergency. The signal was an Echo priority distress call, transmitting on the old pre-Federal channels. The captain took a requisitioned cargo and headed out into deep space to rendezvous with a ship that shouldn't exist."

"Echo priority? What's that?"

"An old colonial code for non-hyperspace carriers. The kind of ship the Federation doesn't want you to find."

"You mean... a generation ship?"

"Yes, a generation ship."

Suddenly, it all makes sense. Tillerton's out here after a legend that met a myth. Generation ships were sent from Earth centuries ago. They were how the first worlds were colonised. Back then, hyperdrive capable craft were expensive and too small. Thousands of people bought places on vast arks, to live in cramped compartments for the rest of their lives so their descendants might colonise a new world. The wealthiest would journey in suspended animation along with tens of thousands of fertilised embryos, gestation equipment, plant libraries, everything a colony might need. The whole lot would crawl at sub-light speed towards on a pre-programmed course to their new home.

"Generation ships aren't supposed to exist anymore," I say. "They've all reached their destinations."

"That's what the Federation would like you to think."

"If there's one still out there, it must be off course, stranded and lost. Surely the Feds would want it rescued, so the people can be reintegrated into civilisation?"

"Who knows what they want? All I know is, *The Aldus* docked with an unknown ship at co-ordinates we can use to plot a course."

"Could have been something else. We might be chasing off to find nothing at all?"

"I'm willing to take that chance."

There's something in the background over the channel, a muffled alert. "Everything all right?" I ask.

"Everything's fine, I..." Tillerton goes quiet for a minute then says. "Anna, get back here, now!"

"What's wrong?"

"There's a ship, several ships. They just jumped in. I'm radioing Hanson. Get yourself out of there. We don't have much time."

"How long?"

"Five minutes maximum."

I glance at the terminal. The manifest is still loading, its painfully slow. "I'll never make it. Detach and come back for me."

"What? That's suicide!"

"No, it isn't. I've two hours of air in my suit and plenty to explore. If our new friends are looking for scraps, they'll have to come visit. I'm sure Hanson and the rest of us can make life interesting for them. You promised me anything I find, I keep. That means, I'm pretty motivated to stay here."

Tillerton goes quiet again, clearly weighing up the options. "Okay, I'll tell the others. I'll jump out, wait thirty minutes and come back. Hopefully they'll do a drone sweep and pick up the junk."

"Or it's a coincidence?"

"Unlikely, we're too far out. See you in thirty."

"Copy that."

I click off the comms and turn to the terminal again. The cargo list from the last stop, the unknown location is scrolling up the screen. My stomach lurches when I read what's on board.

Well well, that's a surprise...

4. Short Story: Live Bait

"My name is Kendra Rast."

I hold out my right hand. The man takes it, shakes it with a light, gloved grip of his own. His eyes betray no change of mood and I'm pleased at that. Nice to finally be in a sector where either they don't know your family, or they just don't care.

"Miss Rast, please follow me."

He's wearing the formal robe of an Imperial attaché. His polished shoes click on the polished floor as he walks. Likely had the whole ensemble particle washed before he met me and probably heading back to decontamination when he's done. I feel dirty by comparison, even though I'm wearing my corporate best and carrying a briefcase with my offering to these self-styled gods inside.

I've been invited aboard the Solus, a huge Majestic-class Imperial Interdictor. We're inside the rotating section, crossing a black floored plaza, elevated from level after level beneath.

There's gravity, generated by spin of the torus I'm walking inside and there's a hum, barely perceptible, but present. Not the sound of resistance, but of a working well-oiled machine. A sense of grand purposed matched by the ship's crew. Imperial fleet uniforms are everywhere, as they go about their work, analysing information on countless terminals and dataslates at every station. I glimpse their business at each intersection, hatchway, passage and passing. In times of war, the torus has to be locked and the ship's essential functions managed outside of this space, but when it's in use like this, it's impressive.

Very impressive.

We move on and ahead, there's another robed figure with his back to us, standing in front of a massive viewscreen.

The man I'm here to meet.

The attaché clicks his heel as he walks. A subtle, deliberate sound to attract attention. The other man turns. He's much older than me, a resident of those ageless decades between sixty and decline, with steel grey hair and a calculating stare.

"Miss Rast? Good of you to join us." He offers another gloved hand. As I reach him, I take it and shake it firmly. The attaché smoothly slides away. I barely notice him walking on, disappearing over the incline.

I have been delivered.

"Apologies, you caught me admiring the view. Well, not really the view of course. A feed from an external camera at the prow, unaffected by rotation. Amazing how we cling to our illusions at times, isn't it?"

I nod, but otherwise ignore the question. "You are Mattias?"

His smile slips, but then returns. "I am Imperial Proctor Mattias Salistar. Or at least, I'm the person replying to your messages by that name." He gestures at the camera view. "I could be as much an impersonation as this, although clearly not as magnificent."

I shrug. Most of the words aren't relevant to matters at hand. I hold up the briefcase. The chain on my wrist twists a little, irritating the skin. "I'm here to trade."

"Yes, you said." Mattias' eyes narrow as he studies my baggage. "The Rast family legacy reduced to this? Such a pity. In the end, the galaxy consumes all things. We burn bright as stars, but are quickly forgotten." He glances around and gestures. "Aboard this ship, I doubt there are more than three people who recognise your name. All that effort and not a ripple remains."

"It is what it is. Do you have the payment?"

"It's all authorised, if that's what you mean? New and clean citizen identities in Imperial space for five individuals."

I tap the side of the briefcase with my finger. "What's my assurance that you can't revoke them, the minute I hand this over?"

"The identities are anonymous. I don't know who you will become."

"And how can I know that's true?"

"You have my word."

It's my turn to smile. Sometimes when people trade, they don't realise asking for a little faith can be a weakness. It means you get to ask for the same in return. I press the index finger of my right hand to the cuff on my left wrist. There's a beep as the sensor recognises my fingerprint and a click as the cuff releases. I hold out the case. "Okay, I guess I need to trust you."

Mattias' smile widens as his hand closes on the case handle. I haven't let go, which means he has to get close, very close to me.

"Dentara Rast is no more, Katia Rast is no more. The Valhallan Liberation Army is no more. The genetic legacy of the Rast family and all trace of their work will now disappear. In a year, perhaps two, an Imperial scientist will make a breakthrough in the advanced smelting of Tantalium, a finance ministry will find an interstellar bank account with all that remains of your old organisation's credit and you can walk away."

"Walk away into nothing is what I want."

"Of course, Imperial citizenship is not given lightly. You will find your new lives rich and rewarding, I'm sure."

I let go of the handle. He stumbles back and for a moment, his smooth Imperial calm is ruffled. He turns away, placing the case on a shelf under the viewscreen. A ship has appeared between us and Valhalla, an Asp Explorer, the one I'm expecting.

"Friends of yours?"

"My ride."

Mattias stares at me. "Where is the key?" he asks.

I point at the ship. "We'll transmit a recognition code once I've left here and got safely aboard. The case will open immediately."

"An unauthorised signal sent through an Imperial ship's information shield? I think not."

"That's your choice. You picked the location to meet. If you're not Imperial Proctor, Mattias Salistar, I can imagine he won't be too happy with you coming up short. If you are, well, I'm sure you have someone watching over you who is looking forward to receiving what's in that."

"I have you and the case. I could keep both."

"You could, but then what's in there will be gone. The data is set to delete itself if it doesn't receive the recognition code in the next thirty minutes. Another copy will emerge from compressed backup thirty minutes later if I don't make it back."

"What would your ancestors think of you, betraying their work like this? Are you proud of yourself?"

I frowned. Mattias clearly doesn't like meeting me half way. "They're dead. I'm alive."

"As an Imperial citizen you'll learn, legacy is very important."

"I'll bear that in mind." I held out my hand. "The identities?"

Mattias grimaces. A hand goes into his robes, emerging with a thin black chit. "Here," he says, ungraciously.

"Thanks," I reply, plucking it carefully from him. Then I play the trump card he gave me. "I'm accepting your word. That means you have to accept mine."

Mattias turns away and from nowhere, the attaché appears at my side.

"Time to go," he says.

"Don't forget the recognition code," I say, to the Proctor's back. He doesn't acknowledge me.

I'm walking away, back along the polished plaza, only this time, my guide's pace is too slow for my liking. I find myself almost at his shoulder before I realise and force myself to back off. Whether he noticed or not, I can't tell.

We reach the hangar. The sleek imperial ship that brought me aboard steams on its pad. There's a conveyance for passengers, the attaché stops and turns to me a tight smile on his face.

"I hope your business with the Proctor was beneficial to us all," he says.

I slip the micro dot onto my finger and extend my hand. He takes it, offering the same distasteful handshake as before. My fingertips brush his robe and the dot is deployed. No point in leaving it on his gloves, they'll be incinerated the moment I leave.

"Good journey Miss Rast," he says.

"And to you," I reply.

"Seals secure. Re-pressurising."

The cold and emotionless computer tones echo around the airlock. There's no gravity here. My body feels clumsy, the magnetic contacts on my boots, holding me to the deck. Imperial luxury and elegance is long gone.

The light goes green. I press the button on the side of my helmet and my visor lifts. "Brann, get me in there and let's get moving!"

The airlock door rolls away and Brann's there, his straggly grey beard and pasty bald head a welcome sight compared to the manicured Imperials I've spent the last few hours with. "Send the signal and get us underway!" I tell him. "Quickly!"

"Something go wrong?"

“No, everything went right and we need to get as far away from here as possible!”

Unfamiliar faces are on the bridge, strapped into the pilot and co-pilot seat. “Who’s in charge?” I demand. A head turns towards me. “Get us into hyperspace, pick a system, any system, just jump!”

“What did you do?” Brann mumbles behind me, he’s holding a dataslate in his hand. “I thought we were making a deal.”

“You thought wrong,” I say. “Did you send the signal?”

“Of course,” he says.

And the stars shift.

“You best tell us what we’re into.”

We’re out of hyperspace. An unfamiliar sun fills the viewscreen with white light. The captain’s chair is turned towards me. Three crew, pilot captain, co-pilot and a tech/engineer, plus me and Brann.

No-one’s removed their helmets or lifted their visors.

“Who are you?” The captain’s voice is electronically masked.

“I might ask the same,” I say.

“You’re on my ship. You answer or you get left outside.”

I smile at the visor. “My name is Kendra Rast. I guess you decided transport us to some random shithole before you complete your contract? Where are we?”

“Puppis Sector, IR-W C1-32.”

“A system not even worth a proper name.”

“Best place for us to sit quietly and discuss this.”

I can't read this captain. It's hard to judge a reflective visor. I've no idea if this person knows the Rast history and legend. I guess there's a woman under the skin suit, but I could be wrong. "You've been paid well by Brann, up front too. We need transport to the agreed co-ordinates then we part ways."

"That was before you had us run out on an Imperial Interdictor."

I shrug and glance at the others. "This your whole team? Everyone?"

"We've a couple of escorts coming to join us."

"We best wait until they're all here then," I say and stand up. "Where's my room?"

Brann follows me into the passenger cabins. We clump into my room and I seal the door behind us.

"They likely to be listening?" I ask.

"Doubt it," Brann says. "This ship's mostly outfitted for cargo. I doubt they had time to install audio monitoring back here."

I press a button in the wall and a couch slides out. There's no need to sit down in zero gravity, but it's a planetside habit. Brann takes another seat. "Tell me what happened," he says.

"What I planned," I reply.

"But not what you told me."

"No."

I run a hand through my hair. It floats around me, free in zero gravity to behave as it wants. "We couldn't tell you everything, in case they caught you and tortured you. Only I have the complete picture." I pull out the black chit the Proctor gave me. "This needs destroying. It'll be bugged."

"You don't want the identities?"

"There'll be viruses and software trackers all over them. They can't afford to let me disappear."

"And you knew that before you went on board?"

"Yep."

"What about the Rast legacy?"

"Let's just say it'll take their computer experts a while to untangle all the rubbish I left on that datachit."

Brann frowns. He's worried I've wasted his time and effort, but he's too polite to say it straight out.

"So why did you go?" he asks.

"To plant a couple of devices of my own." I smile at him. "For the next three days, we become mice for Proctor Mattias to chase, only he's not the cat he thinks he is. While he's busy following at us, someone else will be busy following him, until we're ready to act."

"What about the crew?" Brann's eyes stray to the cabin door. "What do we tell them?"

"They're being paid well enough to take us to a secure location. There's danger money included. Offer fifty percent more if you want, but don't answer their questions. We need them to get us to where we want to go and be around for what happens next."

"What's that going to be?"

"War."

5. Short Story: Last Wishes

The Hall of Admirals, Argent's Claim, Alioth.

The air in here is stuffy and old. Wooden panels along the walls look dusty and ill kept. The portraits that adorn them are of smiling military officers and speak of better days. This place is faded glory, a monument to achievements and mistakes.

I'm sat on a bench under a gap in the line. They say Bryce Jander's picture was supposed to hang here, but no-one could stomach seeing his face after what he did.

AD 3265 - revolution on Lave.

"Lieutenant Dexter? Follow me please."

The sergeant of the guard is dressed in immaculate uniform, his movements are parade ground precise. Not a hint of slipping standards about him. I follow him down a corridor, my rolling gait a total contrast.

This was once the system governor's palace, when Alioth was ruled by the Empire. They say all the dark wood for the walls came from Earth, imported all the way out here at vast expense. It's called 'oak' apparently.

There's a set of doors ahead. Brass handles at about the right height to open them. Antiques that are pretending to be older antiques. As the sergeant nears, both open inwards automatically, revealing the room beyond. Some sort of debating chamber with semi circles of seats rising up and away from a central dais. The place could house hundreds, but its empty, apart from one person.

She's leaning against a wooden table on the dais, looking at me.

Admiral Kandus Laurell, the last great admiral of Alioth.

Admiral Laurell must be nearly a hundred years old, but she doesn't look a day over forty. Terraform sickness affects the usual medical reformat treatments here, a side effect of the Empire's rush to colonise this place. Somehow, the Admiral's managed to defy all that and look like an old-time movie star.

"Dexter, isn't it?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Know why you're here?"

I really haven't a clue. "No ma'am. I didn't even know they kept this place open."

"They don't, unless there's an interstellar state occasion. Can't do for offworlders to see the real state of our republic's finances, can it?"

"I suppose not, ma'am."

"No indeed."

She stands up and walks over to me. "You're young. Just into your third decade, right?"

"I'm twenty-three, Admiral."

"Very young then."

She walks back to the desk. "I'm retiring in four days. There's a job that needs doing, a last job that I've kept until now. If anyone gets wind it's being done, they'll get rid of me. Doesn't matter now. You drew the short straw because I heard you have a reputation for being discreet." She opens a draw in the desk and pulls out a wooden box, carved and made the same as the walls of the hall. Must be worth a lot on its own, whatever's inside. "I need you to deliver this."

She hands me the box. "What's inside it, ma'am?" I ask.

"You don't need to know," Kandus replies. "But you do need to take it to the Castellan asteroid field in the Lave system. When you get there, you open the box. There's instructions inside."

"The Lave system? That's a long way."

"Yes, it is. Also, you can't use official transports or military vessels. You'll need to stick to buying your way with privateers and passenger liners."

I frown at her. "Must be something important then."

She smiles, a sad smile full of memory. "Just fulfilling a promise to an old friend."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have cleared the atmosphere and established a temporary orbit. You may unfasten your harnesses and move to the observation window to get a last look at Argent's Claim as we depart."

There's excited conversation amongst the other passengers as they move by in zero gravity, eager to comply, getting a last look at their planet, their home. I'm in the aisle seat. The two-people next to me unfasten their harnesses and push themselves up and over me to join everyone else. It's quite a sight, watching them all float towards the door, trying to form an orderly line.

I don't get up. Argent's Claim is a beautiful world from up here, a testimony to the grand vision of the Empire before independence. It was called New California back then, not Argent's Claim. They renamed it afterwards, a last tribute to Meredith Argent and her efforts to free the system, to free all of us. For a while the name didn't stick, but years of decline made us cling on to those halcyon days.

"Are you all right sir?"

I look up. There's an attendant talking to me. A man who's had a body shave or two in his time to satisfy his professional vanity. He's dressed in the one-piece uniform of the tour company, clearly concerned to make sure I have the good time I've paid for. "I'm fine," I say.

“Not interested in the view?”

“I’ve seen it before.”

A frown line creases the attendant’s perfect forehead. “The Anatolian Ocean is quite a sight when it catches the sunlight, an incredible shade of blue green, not seen anywhere in the sector. Our pilot has practiced getting the angle of the ship just right so you can enjoy a perfect view.”

“No thank you, as I said, I’m fine here.”

“I see.” The man scrapes at a non-existent spec of dirt on the top of the seat in front of me. “Will you be joining us in visiting the Caker Memorial on the gas platform? Most people who pick the tour ticket, do both.”

“I might do that,” I tell him, holding his gaze with a hard stare of my own.

It’s the attendant who looks away first. His perfect lips purse into a pout and he moves off, leaving me alone in the cabin.

The box is resting under my seat, next to my foot. The Admiral’s instructions were to make sure I don’t let it out of my sight. I’m tempted to pick it up and open it now. After all, who’d know?

I would.

There’s a noise at the far end. A man gets up from the seats by the door and glares at me.

It seems I’m not alone after all.

He’s wearing overalls, the sort a tech or maintenance man might wear. He’s coming this way, floating down the aisle between the seats. A hand reaches into a pocket, pulling out an object I recognise instantly.

A gun.

“I believe you have a package for me,” he says and smirks. It’s not a question.

I don't move. In these situations, the best thing to do is to wait for the right moment, the right opportunity. I'm still strapped in, that'll need to be taken care of first. "I think you've got the wrong guy," I say.

"There is zero chance of that, *Lieutenant Dexter*." The smirk turns into a gap-toothed leer and the man points the gun at me. It's a pistol, an antique model or replica of one, the barrel is extended with some sort of muffler and it's about four inches from my forehead. I wonder how he got it passed security?

"If I am Dexter, you know I can't let you take it," I say, as calmly as possible.

"There's nothing in the contract that requires you to live."

I lean forwards and clasp the harness release with both hands. "What does the contract require?" I ask.

"Says you have a package and that someone on Delta Pavonis will pay a tidy sum for it to be diverted there."

I reach under the seat. The man hisses and pushes the gun to my temple. I hold a hand up, palm outwards and pause, before continuing slowly, keeping my hands in sight. I pull out the wooden box. "My orders are not to let this go until I get to the right place," I say. "But, suppose I agreed to a little side trip to help you with your arrangement?"

For a moment, the man looks confused, I can see his mind working. We're alone in the passenger cabin. Shooting me here and now might be the plan, but then he'll have to get off the ship before my body's discovered or hide and escape somehow. If I'm offering to go along with him, he can murder me later, when there's no chance of being found.

"Move up," he says, making a decision. I put the box under the next seat and undo my harness, pushing upwards. He moves towards me, manoeuvring towards the seat. His eyes flick away from

mine. As they do, I reach out wrap the harness strap around his wrist and pull it tight, grabbing the body of the gun with my other hand, jerking it away from him.

“Hey! You can’t—”

He crashes into the chair, his forehead slamming into the plastic. I raise the gun and bring it down on the back of his head, hard. I grab the rest of the harness straps and wind them around him, over and over, then secure the buckle. He’s trapped, his face mashed into the seat.

I let go and examine the gun. The ammunition case slides out easily. I empty it and examine the contents - bullets, a proper antique. I put them in my pocket and reach under the chair again, opening the box and putting the gun inside.

“Maybe we should start this conversation again. My name is Andres Dexter. Who the fuck are you?”

The man grunts and shifts his head so he can reply. “Why do you care?” he says. “You got what you wanted.”

“I got to live,” I reply. I lean forwards and jam my elbow against the bone just below his ear. “What I really want, is to know who you are and how you found out where I was.”

“It was on the whispers, a big reward for intercepting some pencil neck Alliance officer and taking his goods to Delta. I accepted the mission, who wouldn’t? They were offering retirement cash, the kind of pay that buys you a clean slate and a way out!”

“You the only taker?”

“I doubt it. The listing stayed up after I agreed the contract. I expect every merc between here and the frontier will be after the payday!”

He’s struggling to speak and breathe through the pain. I remove my elbow and lean back. “Are you going to be any more trouble?” I ask.

"If you mean am I going to try to jump you first chance I get? Of course."

"Pity."

I grab his head and slam it into the plastic seat again and again until he grunts and goes limp.

Someone clears their throat. I look up. It's the attendant from before.

"Wait a minute, this isn't what it seems I—"

"He attacked you," the attendant says. He takes out a small metallic device and points it above my head. I flinch instinctively, but something beeps. I glance around. The cabin security camera light winks out. "The feed displays on a monitor in the cockpit. I'll wipe the recording, but we'll have to hope they weren't looking."

I let go of the unconscious merc who hangs in the air. "Why are you helping me?" I ask.

The attendant touches his face, his right cheek. The skin changes, colouring orange, red and yellow, a tattoo of a bird in flames. "They sent me to help you," he says.

"Fine," I reply. "You get his legs."

Gotham Park Station has seen better days, but the passenger terminals are clean and functional. My ID is passed without comment and I make my way through into the merchant quarter, amongst the rest of the tourists and travellers.

The return of gravity is welcome to most as they stumble through the corridors and passageways for the first time, but it's different, being on a station. Different in a subtle, shifting way you can feel.

I'm carrying the box in a knapsack bag that bumps against my hip as I walk. I'm wandering, looking for something specific, but not trying to make it obvious that I'm doing exactly that. I browse shops and stalls, listen to vendors and customers alike. Most space pilots never make it down here, they do

all their trading on a screen in their ship, buying and selling cargos in the blink of an eye then waiting for the station stompers to lift and shift all those precious tonnes. They pick up specialist jobs too. Private passengers, classified documents, rare artefacts, all sorts. But those sorts of jobs are advertised on the station bulletin. Below them are the whisper channels, places where people don't trust anything but word of mouth and do their best to keep that out of any station security record, audio or video.

That'll be where people are discussing me and this box.

I can't risk using my dataslate to access travel options. Someone will be looking for people doing that and logging in here would be an invitation to let them track me. Instead, I find a terminal at the far end, away from the crowds. It takes a moment to access the request point. People will know where I am by now, they'll know the first hit failed. The next wannabe assassin or thief may not be so incompetent.

I need to find a ship and get out of here fast. Not just because of the box. When the tour operator does a head count and misses two, he'll start looking for me and the merc I locked in the overhead luggage compartment. The attendant who helped won't be able to cover that up for long.

Only a matter of time.

I post an advert:

PASSAGE REQUIRED for Albert Sellis to CASTELLAN BELT, LAVE, 28 Jan 3303 from Gotham Park, Alioth. Arrive by 30 Jan 3303. HIGHEST PRICES PAID.

Those commanders sat in their ships, plugged in to newsfeeds, trading panels, contract request boards and more won't know about the price on my head unless they've got a well-connected friend on station. They should just be accepting an anonymous passenger who can be loaded up, just like any other cargo. Hardly a need to talk and chat.

That said, my destination's a giveaway. A long trip like that to a random system, anyone looking will know. Better to be safe. I quickly plot a route and write up some more adverts.

*TRANSPORT Albert Sellis to D, 28 Jan 3303 from Gotham Park, Alioth to GATEWAY, DUBLIN CITADEL.
Arrive by 29 Jan 3303.*

I post few variations on this, each one to a different place with a different return box. I could sync all this to my slate and go find somewhere comfortable to wait, but that'll leave a trail.

So, I leave all the boxes open and hang around.

I'm sat on a bench near the wall, a couple of metres from the terminal. The box is still in my bag. I'm thinking about it constantly. When I put the gun inside, my fingers brushed against a piece of paper. I haven't opened it since. My orders from the Admiral are to get to the co-ordinates, then open the box, but she couldn't have known about this.

Could she?

I put the bag on my lap and reach inside. I unfasten the catch on the box and look around. Security cameras cover this area, but I'm near the wall, partially obscured from view. I can keep things hidden, so long as I'm careful.

I need to know what I'm dealing with.

Lieutenant Dexter.

You should find this letter and an accompanying flask. Apologies for the cloak and dagger, but for this to work out, it's necessary.

The contents of the flask are cremated human remains, the ashes of one Admiral Bryce Jander, once of the Alioth Expeditionary Force to Quator and Lave in AD 3265.

Jander was a controversial figure, as I'm sure you know. After his enforced retirement, he went into hiding and employment under an assumed name. One of his reasons in doing this was to free Alliance navy personnel who had been captured and enslaved during the overthrow of the Lave system.

Jander's ship, the Furnace was decommissioned in AD 3282. The Lave Government requested that it be transported to the Castellan Belt and left there as a memorial. However, this act wasn't publicised, as Minister Kyle Merion believed it would cause further diplomatic tension between Alliance members, the Federation and the Empire. So, the ship was left there in secret, alone, to rust. I don't know if it's still there, but people I trust tell me it is.

When I was a junior officer, Jander told me an old Earth phrase, that 'a captain should go down with his ship.' He asked that when he died, we make sure he got back where he belonged. I can't think of any better place than the bridge of the Furnace, where he did the best he could, under extreme circumstances.

Admiral Bryce Jander was a hero. He deserves to rest in peace and be celebrated. But, since we can't change people's minds on the latter, we can at least let him be where he deserves to be.

When you get to Lave Station, someone will meet you and take you where you need to go. You will know them by a tattoo, an orange fiery brand, the Lavian Phoenix.

Best speed, Lieutenant, and good luck.

Admiral Kandus Laurell.

I put the letter back, close the box and put it back in my bag.

There's someone watching me.

A woman, pretending to browse a market stall near the row of terminals. She has a slate in her hand, tapping away as she glances over the items on the table. The dreadlocked vendor is looking the other way, talking to another customer.

They might be working together, one to distract him, one to keep me in sight. If I move, they'll follow, either to try something if they think they can get away with it, or to find out where I'm going, or wait for backup to bring me in. None of these outcomes are good.

My terminal flashes. I stand up and unlock the screen. One of my contracts has been accepted. There's a ship on pad six waiting for me to board. If I can get there in the next ten minutes I can be away, out of their reach.

I'm up and moving quickly, down a corridor away from the market. Not the most direct route, but it startles my tail who has to run to catch up and immediately gives herself away. I take the first right and pull out my slate, loading a route trace to the pad six passenger access point. It's not far and there's a lift at the end of this corridor. If I can just—

"Hey, Dexter!"

There's a woman in front of me, her arm raised over her head. I grab her wrist. Someone screams and there's a sharp pain in my arm. A needle, an injection what have they...

"Time you gave up the goods, lieutenant," she whispers in my ear.

I'm on my knees, my hands knotted in the strap of my bag. I can't remember why I need to keep hold of it, but I can't let them take... let them take... what? She's pulling, tearing screaming.

Someone else shouts, then there's more voices, arms holding me... Helping me get...

So tired... So...

6. Text for the Elite Dangerous Roleplaying Game

The first thing I'm aware of is a sweet smell. A stimulant injection in the air, designed to wake me up.

I open my eyes. The view is as I remember it, velvet blackness littered with pinpricks of light. The universe is silver powder beyond this reinforced screen, a dark and dangerous beauty beyond the relative safety of my ship.

Ice crusts the duraglass. Internal condensation. My breath left over from warmer times before I went to sleep. Even now, its steaming into the unheated air. My pressure suit means I don't feel the cold, but I know it's there, just beyond.

I shift in the chair. Nutrition and waste tubes tug at my shoulders, reminding me that this is has been a long shift. "Computer power up systems, disengage silent running."

"Affirmative, silent running disengaged," says the computer in her cold, dry voice.

Magnetic locks on my wrists release. I reach for the stick and throttle. Some commanders prefer to end their trade runs at a space station, or in some cabin away from this vista, but I've never had a problem with falling asleep in the chair, in zero gravity, at the controls. This way, I can be woken if something happens to disturb us.

We're out here between systems in the middle of nowhere for a reason. It's quiet and free from distractions. When you're working for yourself and no-one checks your hours, it can be tempting to take one more trade run, one more payday for the next little upgrade. Space stations are full of that, promising you gravity and protection as you sleep in their rotating metallic embrace, but there's always a price for it all. One every independent trader has to weigh up before they pay. The adverts and commodities are a constant distraction. At least out here I truly am by myself.

Alone. Just me, and my Cobra Mark III.

The power plant whines as it gets back up to speed. Holo-screens come to life all around me. I check each one in turn. Cargo? Yep, all thirty-five tonnes of consumer electronics still sitting in the hold.

The local scanner is back online, the shields are re-charging. I was on my way to Diso, a quiet Alliance affiliated agricultural world that'll pay well for all this tech. I'll pick up some sort of crop by return and ferry that out to an industrial world, sell again, pick up something else and so-on and on.

The glamorous life of an interstellar trader.

You can't waste time at this. Goods move, markets shift and alter. A projected profit can quickly turn into a loss if you turn up behind a corporate convoy or some new product comes to market, rendering your delivery obsolete. Still, the dangers are manageable and mostly you can see them coming. If someone takes a shine to your cargo, you run. Usually a ship like this can get away.

Usually...

I could go for something more risky I suppose? Bulletin boards at each space station and outpost offer you a chance to take on a variety of odd jobs. You dock and log into the local request network, make contact with a needy advertiser and go become someone's corporate slave for a day or two. Tasks include illegal transport, piracy, hunting pirates, assassinations, special trade commissions and more. You make your choice and gamble your ship and reputation on the outcome.

Everyone's got a vested interest, you have to remember that. Torching some cargo thief for a bounty will make some people like you and others hate you. It isn't personal. Money drives everything.

System security scan your ship a lot, if they find something wrong, you get fined, they see you shoot someone without proper authorisation, you get fined. The trick is to make sure credits keep changing hands in your favour.

Shields are at full charge. I'm twisting the stick, bringing my girl around. An orange circle appears around a cluster of stars; Diso - my destination.

We're the little people out here. There's big corporations, huge interstellar factions, famous politicians, rock stars, all sorts of vested interests with resources and economic levels I can't even begin to comprehend. It's a vast network of human activity, stretching across the galaxy.

The main players we all have to watch for are the big three – the Federation, the Empire and the Alliance. They're at war with each other, but not the kind of war anyone admits to. There's secret violence going on out in the void, people dying in cold vacuum, their lives intentionally forgotten to preserve a non-existent peace. Lives are spent like credits as Emperors, presidents and councils duel across the stars. Corporations fuel each side, trading weapons, munitions and more to maintain the balance of power.

There's aliens too and other dangers, out there on the fringes of known space.

Independent spaceship commanders like me try to stay on the good side of them all. It's a tricky, constant zero-gravity dance. Sometimes you make friends, help each other out to upset the odds. But you have to pick your friends carefully and remember the bottom line.

Survival.

I'm powering up the engines, accelerating at sub-light speed. The ship hums. She prefers to be moving, active and busy. The destination is locked in and I activate the hyperdrive. The countdown starts. We're on our way again, on our way to earn a living, one step closer to where I want to be.

Sometimes I have to remind myself of where that is. It's easy to lose track.

Introduction

AD 3303. Welcome to galaxy. This is Elite Dangerous, a vast sprawling interstellar society of the future. Starship commanders trade their way across the galaxy, offering goods, services and skills to the highest bidders. Others explore into the edges of known space. Everything is a commodity out here in the darkness.

Finding your way in this future can be hard. Many billions are born, live and die under strange suns far from Earth and Sol. Above them between worlds, aboard space stations, outposts and on starships are where the adventures happen.

Your character is part of this space opera. They may have started out as a station worker, a soldier in one of the faction militaries, or a planet raised civilian, venturing into space for the first time. There are hundreds of different back stories you could devise that fit into this future galactic society.

History

Mankind's first ventures into space were tentative and gradual. The early part of the 21st century saw the first manned spaceflights beyond the moon, but it took major population and economic problems to stimulate enough commercial commitment to start settlements beyond Earth.

The Third World War saw this exploration expenditure dragged back again and it wasn't until the very end of this century that colonies on Mars and the Moon became truly permanent and viable.

After the war, the dominant power was the United States of the Americas, and as the remaining other countries joined it over the next few decades, it was renamed the Federation of the United States and much later *The Federation* as the implied reference to one of the pre-war powers was a block to the remaining countries joining.

The 22nd century saw early pioneering projects begin to take shape. The discovery of a workable hyperspace theory and the design of the first 'faster than light' drive opened the possibility of exploration and settlement.

Tau Ceti was the first colony established outside of Sol. Tau Ceti 3 had long been determined viable for habitation with life already present (due to free oxygen detected in the atmosphere via absorption spectra) – through observation and probe data confirmed this. By 2159, the settlement was self-sufficient and able to elect a civilian administrator.

Other colonies followed soon after. Delta Pavonis, Beta Hydri and Altair were all explored and settled between 2190 and 2230, and an uncontrolled expansion followed, with corporations and all sorts of groups of private individuals heading off into the stars.

Achenar, Empire and War

In 2292, independent colonists from Earth landed on Achenar 6d. Marlin Duval was a disenchanted wealthy woman from Earth, who set off with her own colonising fleet to the system. Duval and her group of friends wanted to establish an independent settlement.

In 2296, Marlin Duval died in a speeder crash. Her brother Henson Duval immediately assumed leadership of the colony. Shortly afterwards, Henson Duval was proclaimed Emperor. This violated the colonial charter given to the settlers by the Federation.

In 2324, war erupted between the Federation and the new Duval Empire. Federation battlegroups tried to establish a beach head in the furthest reaches of the system, but with no breathable atmosphere amongst the far planets, they struggled to maintain supplies for the war effort. Rival corporate interests saw re-supply efforts sabotaged politically and by ambush. In the Council, Earth's position as Chair was rapidly becoming untenable.

The situation became even worse, when in 2325, Duval forces managed to push the Federal fleet out of the Achenar system for good. Earth relinquished leadership of the Federation and Mars took its place.

The ensuing skirmishes between the Federation and Empire lasted intermittently for more than fifty years. During this time, Henson Duval's rule spread from the Achenar system to many others.

A formal treaty was signed between the Federation and Achenar's ruler in 2380, confirming the Duval's hereditary rights to the system and formally recognising the title 'Emperor'.

After the War

Gradually Federation territory expanded and more colonies were chartered and achieved membership of the Federal Council. In 2403, Earth resumed its place as chair by popular vote. This was mostly owing to new supportive policies regarding colonial missions which had resulted in a third tier of settlements achieving their membership obligations more rapidly. Gratitude to the mother planet came in return.

The Rise of the Corporations

From the twenty-third century, corporations had become more and more involved in interstellar colonial expeditions. In 2339, the colonisation of Sirius was the first solely corporate mission. The company quickly rose to become the premier supplier of drive fuel to first the Federation and then the Empire. Later, other commercial organisations achieved different monopolies in freight haulage (Lakon), construction (Wreaken) and mining (Mastopolos), and robotics (Achilles). These corporations became economic brakes on further wars, holding the interests of both the Empire and Federation in balance. Sporadic proxy conflicts still broke out from time to time. Partisan privateers and patriots accepted commissions to stir trouble, with many organisations playing the interstellar powers off against each other. One of these conflicts was the war over Alioth, which raged on and off between the proxies of the two powers for more than a century.

A brief anomalous respite occurred when a joint Federation and Imperial fleet put down the Quaterson Revolution on Gordonworld in 2617.

Shortly after this in 2621, Federal agents discovered that Imperial scientists were pioneering some experimental terraforming techniques on New California in the same system. This quickly put paid to the truce.

The 'Birthright' Wars

Between 2621 and 2735, Federation member systems underwent a period of societal change. The original colonial charters of many settlements granted hereditary land and position to families

descended from their original settlers. Many of these birthright claims extended across vast areas of land (typically whole planets or slices of continents, divided amongst a handful of settler families) and encompassed massive resources. The old charters became a hindrance especially to corporations who wanted access to these assets and more and more pressure came to bear on the presidential administration to take action against this 'stifling anachronism'.

Gradually, asteroid belts, gas reserves, oil-rich sea beds, indigenous habitats were exploited to huge corporate gain. Some landowners that stood and fought were evicted through legislation, incurring the wrath and power of the Federal Navy.

One notable power struggle in the Ayethi system was between the Federation military and the Argent family, resulting in Walter Argent leaving the system with as much of the family wealth he could, and re-settling his family in Alioth.

The Birthright Wars were often cited as a primary reason for former member systems subsequently leaving the Federation, and, much later, the formation of the Independent Alliance.

The Galactic Co-operative

The rise of a rival hyper-drive fuel resource centred in the Lave system led to the emergence of a third faction, the Galactic Co-operative. This organisation attempted to bind together a collection of independent worlds into a set of mutual assistance protocols and treaties. This faction did not have the central administration of either the Federation or the Empire, but the prospect of cheap fuel trade attracted many colonies from across human controlled space. Some withdrew from their Federal colonial agreements and/or Imperial accords for this reason alone.

The establishment of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds charter amongst these worlds in 2696 introduced another rival to the political stage. The Empire promoted isolation of this quadrant, throwing more funding and resources to their own scientists to develop more advanced drive technology.

Ship Innovation

In 2700, The development of the Whatt and Pritney Python Starship signalled the start of a new renaissance for ship exploration. The first iteration of this sleek and graceful vessel is cumbersome by today's standards, but it was a massive step forward from previous designs. Working with other corporations, Whatt and Pitney developed a modular system of building and later upgrade that allowed additional upgrades, new drives, new systems to be installed easily, even by other manufacturers. This facilitated easy (and so low cost) servicing on shipyards with few facilities that could then simply hold a stock of the relevant spares and the automated toolkits to fit them. It brought in the idea of the standardised hull too – which reduced the cost of space travel in smaller vessels dramatically, while greatly improving their reliability. Interstellar travel was no longer the exclusive domain of the large liners and giant, slow cargo transports. It triggered a wave of innovation in small ship design, and a new era in travel. The age of the star-faring entrepreneur had begun.

The introduction of the Coriolis space station in 2752 along with the development of the Viper in 2762, manufactured by Faulcon Manspace at their orbital shipyard in the Reorte system built to the same modular system as the Python and others many years before instigated further change throughout known interstellar space. The ship quickly proved its worth as a short-range interceptor and rapidly became the most sought after in the galaxy. The Coriolis was its ideal home, providing a launch and re-supply base in each system they were deployed in.

In 2805, the first independent explorer pilots banded together to form a Pilot's Federation. This organisation was founded as a way of agreeing prices for ship parts, where members benefit from group discounts, but soon became much more, providing a system where trusted pilots could share route information and protect each other from a new scourge – also enabled by the proliferation of small starships – that of interstellar piracy. Over the years an unofficial tally of pirate kills amongst some members began as 'bragging rights' but soon members started showing their kills on their

online IDs, and before long those without such a rating were referred to as 'Harmless' – and by implication not so desirable to provide cover on a route known for pirate attacks.

Thargoid Contact

2849 is the first recorded contact between Human and Thargoid ships in the Galactic Cooperative sectors, though it was suspected there had been many earlier encounters, just with no human survivors. There was a short video clip of part of the encounter, before the human ship managed to jump clear. It required a great deal of magnification and in the blurred image there appeared to be the word "THARG" – though different people could see different things in the combinations of shadow, surface marks, whatever. Nevertheless, the name stuck ever since, extended to 'Thargoid' by most commentators.

Encounters continued for many years. Some were just disappearances where no wreckage was found in the vast tracts of space. More blurry video surfaced, along with rumours of encounters and audio signals. In 2853 the first small piece of a Thargoid ship was discovered lodged in a damaged human ship that managed to escape such an encounter, and other pieces would show up from time to time. Trade in 'Alien Items' became extensive, but a later study showed that more than ninety percent of these items were fakes.

In practice, most encounters were at the periphery of human space, and many were non-fatal.

In 2867, disappearances of several traders near Zelada prompted a Federal Navy response under the new President Olaf Smith. The task force soon found itself with more to do when further ships disappeared in Ququve and Aymiay in the same year, totalling thirteen ships in three months. It has never been determined that these disappearances could be attributed to the Thargoids.

Modular ship design continued to evolve with a variety of different manufacturing companies bringing a catalogue of prototypes to the commercial market. Some of the first included the Durn and Resner, Ophidian (2704), the Ace and Faber Gecko (2852) and the Paynou, Prosett and Salem Cobra Mark I (2855).

The Fourth Millennium

With the spread of standard Coriolis orbital stations across colonised space and the decreasing cost of purchasing ships, the fourth millennium saw the rise of the independent spacefaring merchant. These Starship commanders began to forge their own paths across the galaxy, pushing at the frontiers of known space.

Falcon Manspace consolidated with deLacy ShipWorks in 3034, becoming one of GalCop's largest megacorporations with facilities in the domain of all three galactic powers.

In 3100, the Pilot's Federation began issuing modified versions of its 'wings' badge that included the pilot's rating written across it in capitals, and made official the names for these ratings, starting with "Harmless", then "Mostly Harmless", all the way to "Elite".

Before long this small and highly respected group of pilots with these coveted badges became known as "The Elite". They received all sorts of offers - both commercial and personal – (including offers of marriage!). The commercial side became very valuable – whether it was transporting royalty or taking unknown items 'no questions asked'. The group was considered utterly trustworthy, and its members took this very seriously.

In 3114, the scientists of Nesbitt Landing in Alioth began demonstrating substantial innovations in robotic manufacture and production, known as 'the quinker process'. Some of the automated technology developed in this process flouted established laws and agreements on automated intelligence. The Emperor ordered the third fleet to Alioth, which prompted an equally heavy-handed response from the Federation. Another fruitless and expensive proxy war in the system concluded in 3122. By this time, the core group of scientists working on the quinker project had died or disappeared.

The 'Elite' Era (3125)

The first coveted "Elite" badge was awarded by the Pilot's Federation to Commander Peter Jameson, who wore it on the rear of his Cobra Mk III with pride for the rest of his life. It was around this time that several training colleges were founded, including one in the city of Ashoria on Lave.

Before long a small and highly respected group of pilots with these coveted badges became known as "The Elite". They received all sorts of offers - both commercial and personal. The commercial side became very valuable – whether it was transporting royalty or taking unknown items 'no questions asked'. The group was considered utterly trustworthy, and its members took their reputation very seriously.

The "Elite Federation of Pilots"

As their reputation spread, the small group became overwhelmed. There was no way they could satisfy anything like all the demands on them, so they formed *The Elite Federation of Pilots*. This was a sub-group of the Pilot's Federation and it ran its own systems to exchange offers between its members. It was quite secretive, and hugely respected.

The Decline of GalCop

After 3125, the influence Galactic Cooperative dwindled. Innovations in drive and fuel economy from Sirius gradually reduced the cooperative's economic advantage. Worlds and star systems left, one by one, each receiving major Federal or Imperial benefits.

In the years that followed, GalCop's position was further eroded. The formerly rich corporations that had based themselves in GalCop space, now moved their head offices elsewhere and focused their attention on Federal and Imperial markets. Faulcon deLacy, once the mainstay for GalCop's economy, became military supplier to the other powers too.

In 3150, the Independent Naval Research Arm (INRA) was founded as a collaboration between the different political factions of humanity to investigate all manner of alien activity. Much of the initial research data was purchased from the Galactic Cooperative. There had been rumours about the

alien threat having been neutralised and indeed, Thargoid activity ceased, but there was absolutely no discussion about what had happened or how this had been achieved.

In 3170, the last local vestiges of the Galactic Cooperative disappeared and the eleven 'old worlds' that remained accepted trade terms with the Federation and the Empire – marking the end of a once great power. In 3174, Lave's democratic government ended with the rise to power of a dictator, Doctor Hans Walden.

The Frontier (3200) – Birth of the Alliance

Born in 3205, Mic Turner grew up in Jones Colony in the Essafa system. After graduating with honours from the civilian pilot's school, he moved to New California in Alioth, just before the rebellion started.

In 3228, when the Federal corporations supplying New California attempted to raise their prices again, the citizens revolted, taking over the ships berthed in the space station and riding out to the Gas mining stations to assault the corporate workers. Federal and Imperial forces arrived within days, but fighters from Alioth and several neighbouring independent systems joined forces to repel them. Turner's pilot skills saw him amongst the first to fly out to the orbital platforms and he won a great deal of respect from his peers for his efforts. It was here he met Meredith Argent, a scientist who led one of the Caker cells on the gas platforms and was the direct descendant of Walter Argent, a wealthy industrialist from Ayethi in the 27th century. Argent and Turner were to become partners for life.

The Imperial fleet withdrew first. Alioth was too far from their supply bases and without the resources of the system, they did not want to fight a protracted campaign. The Federation's efforts were also deeply unpopular amongst its own citizens, media coverage of the war was tightly controlled at first, but enterprising Alioth rebels managed to smuggle out their own recordings and once the Empire had withdrawn, Imperial agents saw an opportunity and assisted them. Finally, in late 3229, the Federation was forced to withdraw. In the aftermath of the revolution, Argent and

Turner rose to prominence with their proposal for a safe political unit for colonies who wished to exist outside the protection of the Federation or the constraints of the Empire. This was to become the Alliance of Independent Systems. Gordonworld was renamed Turner's World in honour of Mic Turner's efforts in the revolution.

The Alliance was founded on Alioth in early 3230. Over the next two decades, more than twenty systems went on to join. Some were independent, others revolted from Imperial and Federal control. For nearly a thousand years, colonial settlements could only choose between Imperial tyranny or Federal interference. Alioth and the Alliance provided a third way, more supportive and less conditional on cultural alignment.

First Encounters

Early in 3250, an artefact, was stolen from the Imperial palace on Capitol. It is believed the value of the object wasn't important, but that Hengist Duval had cut his hand on the object only days before, meaning that the resultant bloodstain contained his genetic code. Despite the best efforts of Imperial agents, this object showed up in Beta Hydri briefly before being delivered to Federal agents on Mars.

Meredith Argent and Mic Turner continued to be a positive influence on the Alliance politically and economically. Alioth developed a solid economy and became the site for the New Rossyth Shipyard, owned by Argent Aerodynamics Amalgamated Incorporated (AAAI), the company founded by Argent and Turner to develop new space craft and pioneer space exploration.

In 3251, civil war broke out in Tiliala. The Dictator and leader of the Valhallan Democratic Peace Party, Augustus Checkin, was under threat from the Valhallan Liberation Front. 'Friends' of the ruling party put out a contract on the leader of the Valhallan Liberation Army (the armed wing of the VLF), Dentara Rast.

Over the next few months, the conflict gradually petered out, moving towards a diplomatic solution until other members of the VLA were assassinated. In response, Dentara Rast took to the holo-vid channels and swore revenge.

The chance discovery of Tantalum (a rare and valuable metal) on the planet drew Imperial interest to the situation. Covert Imperial ships were detected by local police, who appealed for Federal assistance and a battlegroup was despatched.

Later in 3251, the assassination of Dentara Rast, began a chain of de-stabilising events that would lead, in 3262, to an interstellar war in the system between the Federation-backed VDPP and the Imperial-backed VLA. Imperial agents were blamed for Rast's death despite their support, as were INRA and the Federation. The cancellation of the elections and lack of a clear perpetrator turned the once peaceful and wealthy Tiliala on its head. Competing corporate elements were after the valuable mineral reserves and were influencing both sides behind the scenes. Publically the Federation claimed it was 'supporting the stable government' (a brutal dictatorship), whilst the Empire claimed to be 'assisting in the liberation of an oppressed populace'. While true, the VLA were regarded locally as terrorists.

In 3252, the AAAI, began trials of the first 'Quest' class ships to search for Thargoids. It was during trials of the first of these ships, *Turner's Quest* that Mic Turner was killed in the Pleione system.

The shocking news spread around star systems quickly. In 3253, a requiem was arranged in Alioth and Meredith Argent met with several prominent corporations and space traders all arriving to pay their respects.

Days later an INRA military strike force appeared at New Rossyth, attacking the shipyards and causing terrible damage before Alliance authorities could arrive and drive them off.

In 3258, Meredith Argent elected to bring the business interests of Argent Aerodynamics Amalgamated Incorporated, the New Rossyth Shipyards and a variety of other small corporations owned by her under one organisational brand. Argent Incorporated or Argent as it is widely known.

Lave Revolution

In 3265, an Alliance fleet, led by Admiral Bryce Jander entered the Lave system and attacked the local defence forces. The system revolted and the dictator Hans Walden's regime was swept from power after his dead body was paraded on local network media.

The fallout from the coup checked the advance of the Alliance. Both the Federation and the Empire brought diplomatic pressure to bear on their new rival and this quickly brought results. After securing the system, Jander was forced to resign his post and disappeared into exile. Argent Incorporated, a co-sponsor of the mission floundered as contracts dried up.

The 'Dangerous' Era

To cope with additional demand for their services, the Elite Federation of Pilots began inducting pilots at the rank of Deadly into their organisation. This greatly increased their influence over human controlled space. The group did thorough tests of these pilots to prove they were every bit as good as one of the Elite. Once they had passed this process, they became full members with a ceremony, and a new badge, and a vow of secrecy. To deflect any controversy, this badge also carried the word "DEADLY" written underneath, and smaller than the word "Elite", but those pilots were full members of the "Elite Federation" and received all the benefits of membership of the group. Before long this was extended to those with "Dangerous" ratings too – and numerically they became the backbone of the organisation, and wore their "Elite: Dangerous" badges with pride.

Thereafter, the group went from strength to strength.

The Frame Shift Drive

Hyperspace technology had been refined and perfected over more than a millennium. However, in system travel often remained slow and cumbersome. Conventional propulsion acceleration through sub light engines assisted ships to attain incredible speeds. However, fuel inefficiency and collision risk would become significant factors over a certain speed. Therefore, the in-system journey would remain at fractional sub light speed and take days or weeks. Initially, this part of a trip would remain

a completely automated process, but as more and more incidents of piracy occurred whilst crewmembers were unconscious, other measures were adopted.

The 33rd century saw the widespread adoption of Stardreamer technology in ships. Stardreamer Time Control units were fitted as standard on all ships owing to regulations regarding Wilbron's psychosis. This condition is known to afflict the space traveller who endures lengthy, uneventful journeys. Boredom becomes so intense after all leisure pursuits have been exhausted that pilots have been known to fly their craft into stars or planets. This unusual piece of equipment places the pilot of the craft in a semi-hypnotic state at the wheel allowing the autopilot to take the strain while the pilot's brain stays on ice and forgets that hours, weeks and days are passing.

The advantage of the semiconscious pilot lay mostly in ensuring the security of a ship and its cargo. Stardreamer units offered little compensation for the lifetime lost in space by pilots and unsurprisingly many looked to find different solutions to the travel time problem.

Drive Skipping started out in the mid-3250s as a malfunction of Mark 2 Hyperdrive engines. When disconnected from computer control, short in system Hyperdrive hops could be plotted manually by a pilot. The chance of collision and miscalculation was high owing to the lack of a masslock safety cut out and many misadventures resulted. Risk taking commanders, chancing their luck against the odds, or the authorities, saw this as an acceptable gamble. The fuel cost of misusing Hyperdrives in this way remained high and the damage incurred inside the engine chambers meant any pilot adopting this practice place themselves at risk whenever they elected to use the ship's Hyperdrive conventionally as well.

3298 saw the arrival of Frame Shift technology with the Sirius Corporation's introduction of the first Mark 3 Hyperdrives. These drives were designed for in-system jumping owing to the multi-chamber arrangement within the engine and the more precise computerised navigation system attached. A range of plus-lightspeeds were suddenly achievable and reduced in system flight times drastically.

Automated in-system hops were now safer, owing to computer control, with a masslock cut out, although fuel expenditure for this practice remained high.

This system was based on the, previously discredited, fast jump system developed for the ill-fated Starship, Antares. By 3300 virtually all of the older drives had been decommissioned, with the loss of a number of ship types that could not be retrofitted with the new systems.

These new drives required large quantities of the element Tantalum as a raw material in their manufacture, causing something of a 'Tantalum rush' in the closing years of the 33rd century.

3303 AD – The Present

Humanity stands at the beginning of a new era of colonial expansion. The upgrades in drive technology and terraforming techniques provide new opportunities for people to make their own way in the galaxy. Recent ventures by the Empire and Federation into the new settlements of Colonia are an exciting opportunity for every pilot with a ship.

In the last year, there have been more sightings of alien ships. Could these be the Thargoids of the past? Or some new alien threat to human civilisation.

The Factions: The Federation

Culture

A Federal citizen is egalitarian, patriotic and capitalist. The link to Sol and Earth is a strong bond of loyalty even amongst the people from other systems. Social class is only determined between 'haves' and 'have-nots'. People are practical and materialistic, they have a great many convenience-aids in their homes, and are generally polite to each other. Clothing is practical, simple, functional, but *branded*. Culturally the people of the Federation are quite tolerant of some things (like religions) but utterly intolerant of drug-taking, political activism, slavery.

In the core worlds, a passion for the latest news, tech and clothes is motivation for all sorts. Media consumption is an hourly pastime, vocation and necessity. Federal citizens are sold a materialistic dream.

Corruption is not unusual – individuals defend it shamelessly when caught as ‘getting one over the system.’ There is a lot of poverty about, as well as conspicuous wealth.

Corporate influence in Federal space is strong throughout all tiers of society. Homeowners sell roof and wall space to commercial sponsors, watch adverts perform tasks and wear corporate logos. The advertising culture and passion for immediate materialism, quick trends and fashions, define social hierarchies and groups. Commercial organisations compete as aggressively as the law will allow for the time and attention of the Federal citizen, who goes through life bombarded by advertising.

However, unlike the corporate worlds, Federation space is a battleground of commerce. This makes the average Federal citizen a mixture of brand loyal and bargain basement consumer.

The media drives a culture of celebrity too. Top ranking politicians, social commentators, entertainers, entertainment creators and super-rich all command a great deal of media attention. This provides a massive distraction for the populace, to the extent that foreign wars conducted by the Federation on their behalf get little media attention. This has gone on for many hundreds of years, and there is no sign of it changing.

Society

The Federation is a federated democracy, made up of states and systems. A state can be part of a continent, a continent, a planet, or a whole system. The subdivision is based on elections and rough population of typically up to a few tens of million people or so. For all but a few core systems, a star system *is* a State – and in these cases, they are used interchangeably, so really is a federated democracy of states only. Each state has a number of congressmen, based roughly on population in theory, but in practice the core systems have more congressmen per citizen than the outer systems

as the outer systems' population is growing rapidly, but the core systems are pretty static, and there is huge resistance to getting the numbers redistributed.

To an outsider, the hierarchy of Federation society is based on democratic principles. However, corporate loyalty oils the machine. Citizens vote for the candidates their brands or celebrities endorse. Campaigns are funded by businesses looking to obtain a return through supportive legislation. Unfortunately, the profusion of competing business interests that are represented on legislative bodies can paralyse them, as each corporation manoeuvres to gain the best advantage.

Voting takes place within a system or state, electing Congressmen democratically. Voting also takes place federally, electing a new President every eight years, with a 'vote of confidence' after four years. This system evolved out of the United States system from the 21st century, with the presumption of a president staying on for two four-year terms.

Social class in the Federation is defined by capital wealth; whilst lineage and the exploits of previous generations do carry some weight, essentially money talks, and being 'self-made' is seen as important. For some, corporate representation is a lifelong commitment and sometimes even more than that. Families are known to support commercial organisations from generation to generation. Success within that organisation brings with it status, financial reward and security. However, other individuals divide their support, picking and choosing sides in the war of commerce that perpetuates Federation society.

The structure of advancement and competition often serves to cancel out any prospect of consensus or longer-term strategy. Corporate needs tend to override those of government bodies based on their influences, so most governmental bodies are in fact toothless.

Celebrity influence is perhaps the most effective route to wielding power, with strong invisible groups operating behind the scenes wielding this power. While not overtly corrupt, these groups get things done very effectively, without the lumbering Federal bureaucracy getting in the way.

Law

Federal law is based on an agreed constitution. People have rights and freedoms, enshrined by this agreement. A great many things are illegal, like slavery, cloning and certain narcotics. Local state law prohibits other trafficking to a greater or lesser degree. Things like ship-based weapons, personal weapons, other milder drugs and alcohol are banned in some systems.

federal law is controlled by the Mars government, and the sheer size of the Federation makes it very hard for a system to have any influence on changing it.

New colonies are approved by charter from the federal government. Each charter is different, offering incentives to the colonists if they can achieve the set objectives. The ultimate goal is to achieve full federal membership, by which point, the colony is free of further directive from congress.

The Federation's decision-making body is an executive, run by an elected president. Terms of office are eight years per term.

The president's position is above the authority of any local or federal judiciary, during their term of office. This frees the president to act with personal impunity, but with the clear understanding that they may be prosecuted for their actions once their term of office expires.

Trade laws in Federation space are carefully adhered to. Battle weapons are illegal to sell unless specifically authorised. Slavery is also illegal throughout the Federation, as is trade in nerve gas and many other types of weaponry used to kill en-masse classified as 'Weapons of Mass Destruction'.

A great many other offences are not federal, but subject to local state laws, though many are common to many states (e.g. narcotics and firearm laws)

Faith

The Federation is strictly secular, and this encourages tolerance without favouring any belief or superstition over another. A multitude of religious beliefs and superstitions exist within Federation

systems. The old Earth religions still attract followers and many new ones have emerged, some as offshoots of older faiths, others through finding enlightenment elsewhere.

Some of the more interesting sects in Federation space promote exclusion and a rejection of the commercial values that pervade the normal systems. Organisations like the Guardians of the Free Spirit on Van Maanen's Star have found a way to preserve their hermit-like existence. The tenets of their religion are closely guarded, but they utterly reject the capitalist values of the organisation that protects them.

Another religion, *Randomius Factoria*, the Lady of Fate is widely followed by space traders. The Lady is seen as a fickle spirit of the stars and pilots who believe in her, construct shrines in their ships, offering her a token on each trip.

The Church of Kum-Byar is a zealot faith in the Arexack system. A civil war between two sects of the church raged for more than one hundred years before an uneasy truce was called in 3261. The religious values of the church are austerity and the removal of all body hair.

Based in Aymiyat at a University, with two further institutions on Mars and Beta Hydri, the Revised Catholic Mission grew out of one of an older religion and has tried to update its tenets to reflect the changing nature of interstellar society. The 'revised mission', to bring an understanding of moral living, repentance and the need to earn a place in heaven became a more inclusive set of values that could be promoted throughout human interstellar society.

The Factions: The Empire

Culture

Imperial citizens value their place and privilege as contributors to their civilisation. The rules and hierarchy of day to day life on Imperial worlds, give a clear set of aspirations.

The Empire's society is status conscious. It is seen as acceptable – even expected – that people flaunt their wealth and position. People have grand titles, wear flamboyant clothes, have amazing

houses, space ships, offices. Everything oozes expense and extravagance. What they have is excellent at the job it is required to do, but not necessarily efficient in terms of cost or resource use.

Titles in Imperial society are common and considered badges. It is not unknown for families to register birth names of children to include titles from previous generations, so 'Tomas Galden of Lord Atlan Galden, Governor of New America' is a long form Imperial name. When individuals are written about in the popular press, long form titles are used.

Lineage is prized by Imperials; tracing a family's ancestors back as far as possible shows pedigree. Demonstrating how you raised poor genetic stock to the higher social classes proves diligence and provides a story. All are considered impressive.

Imperials value honour. Treating people well is a question of honour – this includes slaves. Having an unpaid debt is seen as utterly dishonourable – an honourable Imperial citizen would accept slavery to clear a debt.

There is remarkably little corruption on Imperial worlds. Where corruption is found, the perpetrator is treated harshly. Reduction in status or removal of citizenship (exile) are seen as tough punishments.

Service is an important aspect of the Empire, and there is no shame in it. People serve their masters with pride – even senior people will proudly say they serve their senator well.

Slaves are generally treated well, at least in the high-society cities of the Empire. Slaves can buy themselves out of slavery; it is normal for a citizen to reward a slave for a particularly great deed with his or her freedom.

Society

The Empire is based on a *cliens* system. Society is strictly stratified, with people being able to move between strata based on money, patronage and influence. The top stratum is the Emperor, then the

senators, the patrons, the clients and the citizens. Below them are children until they reach maturity, and slaves.

Senatorial appointments and powers differ. Some rescind in Achenar close to the Emperor's ear, others maintain influential positions in other systems. The noble families of Achenar jealously guard their areas of authority.

At each level, 'downwards' the person is legally responsible for everyone beneath them. They must find them healthcare if they get sick, provide them a minimum income and food if they lose their jobs, and provide them a home if anything happens to their existing home.

'Upwards' Imperial citizens get a cumulative vote of all the people they represent, and can raise tax (and conscript armies) from those people. Each individual can change their allegiance at will, given notice. It is a dynamic voting system – so if, say, a senator does something his patrons disagree with, he will lose his 'patronage' – as patrons change their allegiance to another senator in response. This means senators are very sensitive to the views of their patrons, and similarly patrons are sensitive to the views of their clients and so on. Different senators might have different tax rates, and correspondingly different levels of support for the people beneath them – and it is up to the patrons which senator they chose to support, and what level of support they get in turn.

Some senators in the Empire will gain popularity by having very low (or zero) tax rates, as they share the spoils of war with their patrons to keep them supportive. Some senators are warlike – wanting to take over systems, in the name of the Empire, to get the spoils, and they may get a good deal of support as a result. However, the games of high society are deadly and this power can be temporal, should you fall foul of the Emperor's will.

Periodically genetic screen census data is acquired. A patron or senator can lose considerable standing if their genetic profile does not meet a certain standard. Any perception of genetic impurity in a family generation can result in their loss of status. Armed with good records, the higher classes

of Imperial society are able to maintain their position owing to their superior access to positions of power.

Lineage data is acquired from regular registration checks. All Imperial citizens are required to submit a planet of residency and update their recorded movements every ten years. Living outside of Imperial space is permitted, but registration must occur on an Imperial station or settlement.

Imperial planets are highly capitalistic – trading is almost completely unregulated and many goods which are illegal in the Federation (e.g. narcotics and weapons) have no such restrictions in the Empire. Slavery is also commonplace.

In some Imperial worlds, genetic screening is common. Traders do not find themselves subject to this practice, but buyers may insist on DNA purification of goods that have been come from off world.

A great deal of latitude is given to Imperial station commanders over day to day matters concerning trade, but these commanders know, if they do not act when suspecting harm to their station's business, they and their family, will suffer the consequences. Items can be banned and impounded if any form of genetic side effect is discovered.

Interaction between Imperial citizens and people from other systems is usually cordial. The relationship between the Empire and the Federation has calmed in recent times. There is more cautiousness when dealing with people from Alliance systems. In general, Imperial citizens are bemused as to why these outsiders cannot see their way of life is wrong. They value the structure and order Imperial doctrine brings.

After the death of Hengist Duval, the ascension of Arissa Lavigny-Duval saw the first female Emperor since its founder, Marlin Duval.

Imperial Colonies

Outside the high-society areas there are large industrial complexes where huge slave workforces labour at mining, agriculture, heavy industry, for their Imperial masters, in less ideal conditions.

Slavers ply their trade without much honour too in the colonies – though are generally hated for it by the rest of Imperial society – mainly because such people are assumed not to be honourable.

'Slaver' is a derogatory term in slang Imperial-speak, used much like *'bastard'* in modern-day English.

High-status Imperial citizens would very rarely venture out to such places. It is these places that make the Empire wealthy. When exploitation is uncovered it is addressed, but only when it comes to the attention of nobles or the Imperial family.

Many colonies still have Imperial pretensions; the flamboyance, the status-conscious aspects, but honour is less prominent in their behaviour for practical reasons. There are frequently rebellions amongst the workforces and they are cracked down upon hard, with little sympathy shown. Many slaves are desperate to leave – ironically many want to go to the more civilised Imperial home worlds and not leave the Empire.

Law

Imperial law places the Emperor's decree at its heart.

Senators are responsible for enforcing the Emperor's laws, but the senators themselves are above the law. They can order executions, and can even kill people themselves, though sometimes (rarely) they may be held to account for their actions by the Emperor.

There are few trade laws in Imperial space. Radioactives and nerve gas are prohibited, but little else.

Some senators will not tolerate slavery, and will regularly speak out against it, but from the basis of honour, not suggesting it should not be legal. In the Empire, very little is illegal, but many things are frowned upon, like excessive use of narcotics.

Practical execution of the law in the responsibility of system leaders, settlement Governors, or station commanders. However, Imperial proctors sent from Achenar have wide jurisdictional powers and can make life very difficult for anyone who crosses them. It is very rare that a proctor will be sent to contradict the authority of a senator.

Faith

Imperial society is tolerant of all religions, but there is no endorsed faith. Occasionally, the trappings of a religion are embraced by popular families making them fashionable and part of their identity. Aspiring socialites will follow suit, until these trends collapse or are superseded by something else.

The Factions: The Alliance

Culture

The Independent Alliance of Systems arose out of a need for cooperation. Centuries of the Empire and Federation meddling in otherwise peaceful independent systems caused various small groups to form to resist this external pressure. Most of these were broken up by a variety of schemes and machinations.

The Alliance began with the rebellion of Alioth and this time, a series of quickly forged agreements between systems, lasted. The independent spirit and self-sufficient 'can do' attitude of individuals who resented rulership and meddling from afar created a common bond that has lasted and grown for more than seventy years.

The Independent Alliance is culturally very varied and leadership of the Alliance has been described as 'challenging'. Seeking agreement between the member systems is generally a tortuous process, usually ending up with a great deal of compromise.

Militarily, cooperation has been more successful. Each member system contributes a portion of its navy to the Alliance Defence Force – the total contribution proportional to its GDP. It is led by the six-strong Council of Admirals (one from each of the largest member navies), but they can act swiftly

without government approval, which has proved very effective, and over the years there has been little disagreement between the admirals. Contributed vessels generally bear the decals of their own navy, but have an additional Alliance Defence Force decal applied while they are with the group – so the culture of identity and independence (and rivalries) applies here too.

Individuals welcome and embrace the diversity of the Independent Alliance. The spirit of each of the previously independent systems is largely preserved intact. People are generally outspoken and often critical on political views, on how their system is run, on how money is spent, but they relish that freedom to be critical. It is why meeting in the Alliance Assembly are generally long and often inconclusive, involving a great deal of negotiation and compromise, but it is also why there have been remarkably few disputes between Alliance members that have resulted in fighting.

Within the Alliance, there is a strong emphasis on celebrating diverse cultures. Entertainment of all sorts is championed, from food to drama to ancient literature to comedy.

Corruption is common in some systems and almost unheard of in others, but is generally small-scale.

Society

Alliance society is diverse. The loose affiliation and support given by membership offers no model of governance that systems must subscribe to, other than the core values of freedom and human rights.

Since the establishment of the assembly, the Alliance has acted to defend its members and oppose the political and military actions of its interstellar rivals in a quiet and intelligent way. The populist appeal of its core values remains strong and this loyal commitment from its citizens provides a vibrant energy and zeal unmatched by its rivals.

Within the Alliance structure, working groups of different planetary systems form to champion particular causes or actions often under the auspices of the assembly, but not only. Where these

ideas do not conflict with Alliance core values, they are permitted, creating many permeable structures and organisations that exist on a temporal basis.

The disparate governments in Alliance systems mean that there are no unified positions of authority. Station commanders do not wield political influence in the same way as they might in the Empire, instead they are working jobs appointed by the local navy and the Alliance Defence Force is not even involved. Elections for local government positions are generally free and fair, and corporate endorsement of individual candidates is outlawed.

Law

Each Independent Alliance system must adhere to a basic code of freedom and human rights.

The system must have an elected civilian government. Although on some systems the definition on this is stretched to its limits.

Free trade with other Alliance members must be guaranteed.

Alliance members must come to the aid of another member in times of distress either via the Alliance Defence Force or directly.

Citizens from any other Alliance member system must be granted full rights of abode and citizenship in all other Alliance members.

There are some trade items that are considered illegal in Alliance space, but the enforcement of the law in these matters is left to the local authorities.

Alliance Assembly

The Alliance Assembly is the central body for the Alliance as a whole. The Assembly lacks the law-making powers of other similar historic councils. In main it functions as a means for establishing common policies and treaties rather than laws.

The assembly also acts as an arbitration body between member states and depending on votes, can enforce sanctions or corrective measures. The member states have proven that they will band together for a common goal if needed.

The assembly maintains the funding for the Alliance Defence Force, though direct control is delegated to the Council of Admirals.

The assembly is led by a Prime Minister. The current Prime Minister is Edmund Mahon.

Navy

Barring the small Alliance Defence Force for defending key components of the Alliance bureaucracy there is no central Alliance Navy to compare with the other major powers. Instead a headquarters organisation exists staffed by the Council of Admirals and their support staff.

The Alliance Defence Force is essentially a small rapid deployment force made up of ships from the member navies, and is maintained under the command of the Council of Admirals to respond to any crisis – humanitarian and military. Ships, crew and troops within this force are provided by member navies on a rotating basis.

The force is typically quite small and generally only used within the Alliance. It is roughly equivalent to a Federation or Imperial battlegroup although it isn't as tightly knit.

In an emergency, additional forces would be provided by member navies if the Council of Admirals makes an emergency appeal to the assembly.

Generally speaking the Alliance lacks the power projection capabilities of the Empire and the Federation, but has proved capable of defending themselves. The continued rapid expansion of the Alliance means that economically and politically it is now equal to the Empire and Federation in most other aspects.

Faith

The diversity of Alliance systems is reflected in the diversity of Alliance religions. The old earth religions still attract followers and many new ones have emerged, some as offshoots of older faiths, others through finding enlightenment elsewhere, though as a rule the Alliance population is generally atheist.

One religion, *Randomius Factoria*, the Lady of Fate is widely followed by space traders. The Lady is seen as a fickle spirit of the stars and pilots who believe in her, construct shrines in their ships, offering her a token on each trip.

The Factions: Corporate and Independent

There are a variety of reasons why planetary settlements, space stations and remote outposts elect to be independent and unaffiliated to the three major factions in human controlled space. Some are dictatorships, others are corporate worlds, whilst even more are beset by conflict as rival groups compete for control.

The variety of these different places means a traveller is likely to encounter all sorts of cultural expressions, society models, religions and parochial laws. The Galnet database is a good port of call to research a system or planet before visiting. Additional data can also be purchased by speaking with other visitors, locals or travelling officials.

Notable independent systems include Sirius, Ackwada and Shinrarta Dezra. The former two are corporate, the latter is the fabled Founder's system, so named for its colonisation by a loose conglomeration of old Earth organisations. There is also Van Maanen's Star, an independent system right in the heart of Federation space, which can only be visited by those with a valid permit.

Measuring Time in Elite Dangerous

With the constant use of faster than light travel, across incredible distances, it is difficult for individuals to make sense of different time states across the vast regions of human occupied space.

The recording and measurement of time in the fourth millennium has had to evolve and adapt to different and separate considerations that reflect the needs of travellers. This meant three related systems were developed to accommodate these requirements.

1. Galactic State Record (GSR). This is anachronistically measured from the old Earth AD calendar and is consistent of itself. This time is displayed on all space station news outlets, events and bulletins. Starship commanders are very familiar with this record and use it for day to day travel calibration. Workers on stations and outposts also tend to keep to GSR, although this can vary depending on their assignments. For example, those who work with planetary trade often keep hours that reflect the local stock markets, etc.
2. Personal Chronology. This is a record kept by most space travellers to ensure they know their own age as, owing to travel distances and times, the GSR will not accurately record the time they experience.
3. Local Time. This is the accepted planetary system standard and will change based on the conventions of day and night. Most settled planets operate a regional segmentation system that is similar to Earth's old GMT (Greenwich Mean Time), but these regions vary based on different orbits, rotation speed, etc.

The individual units of time measurement generally remain the same. There were some attempts to re-standardise units in the early days of the Empire, but these were quickly abandoned when the ramifications on interstellar trade were considered. Some local times do make use of different measurements, but these tend to be very isolated settlements who have intentionally withdrawn from interstellar society.

Elite Dangerous Current

The cold and dark expanse of space in which most star ship pilots spend their time, gives many an individual appreciation for the comforts of planetary settlements, a bunk in a space station or even the chance to socialise with other travellers in a bar or club.

Interstellar society functions on asset and value, so anything that is deemed of worth to someone else, attains a value in credits. Colonial living is hard and initially, very demanding, so the need for resources and equipment can be constant. Obtaining these supplies is a necessity as humanity reaches out further into the galaxy.

In AD 3303, power is an affordable commodity. Portable generators, micro energy packs and more allow for a vast array of personal technology and enhancement.

Technology Similarities/Variations

The diffuse civilisations of humanity across the stars means there are substantial differences in the availability of technology in each society. Spacefarers only see a limited amount of this, as the tried and tested ways of managing all aspects of space travel are maintained for long periods of time, so long as they prove reliable.

Medical Advances

Age, illness and disease have held back humanity throughout the ages. In the fourth millennium, these have become different challenges, which science strives to overcome.

Lifespans of humans vary greatly. Technological advances have led to individuals being capable of reaching their one hundred and thirtieth year, with some even approaching two centuries. However, the disparate and sporadic nature of environments, access to health care and other factors mean that these achievements are not universal.

On more advanced worlds, bio and health scans are common and are done by devices in the home. Most commonly such devices are fitted to toilets in higher class homes.

In addition, automated scans are done as a matter of course as part of the customs process in high population core systems. Such scans can also occur when entering space stations and space ships.

They are less regular on frontier worlds, but these increase as the colonies develop into cities. Some

cultures particularly religious ones, eschew such technologies, believing their god or gods or spirits will protect them.

Most cuts and gashes are attended with a foam that that fills and seals the wound. These foams have antiseptic and anaesthetic properties. Breaks can be fixed with conformal splits that reset and hold the injured limb. Small medical units can be used to apply drugs and monitor health.

Surgery

Organ and limb transplant technology has advanced significantly since such procedures were first attempted in the twentieth century. The ability to store the genetic record of an individual and grow replacement body parts has changed the relationship between a person and their healthcare.

Similarly, the advancement of micro-electronics and power storage has led to opportunities for cybernetic enhancement. Sometimes this is an option of functional necessity, assisting an individual to perform work related tasks. At other times, it can be a fashion statement.

The outdated concept of 'normal body identity' is fragmented across a vast diffusion of cultures. Advancement in technology and social acceptance mean the aspirations of people to be as they choose to be are empowered. Individuals establish identities for themselves depending on their preferences, skills, talents and needs. Prejudices do exist, but tend to be culturally formed in different planetary societies.

In situations where a combined approach is needed to help a person communicate, socialise and achieve the life they want, there are a variety of options available to assist them.

Developed psychoses are more common amongst space farers. This can be attributed to the high stress situations and long periods of loneliness.

Outbreaks of most known diseases can be cured and advances in the understanding of them aids doctors when encountering new threats. However, exposure to exobiological organisms can hinder this process. Even relatively small hospitals are able to treat most injuries and ailments using on site

medical care. Advanced casts (often called 'doctors') can be placed over wounds and they will repair any tissue damage. These devices are self-sterilising and can be used by someone with no experience. They are placed over a small wound, and in-built scanners and miniature robotic fingers will knit together the wound using a special tissue 'glue' based on material using the patient's own DNA.

Aliens

Humanity has encountered a variety of alien life in its galactic expansion. For the most part, this life has either been preserved or supplanted. There are shameful incidents, dating back all the way to the colonisation of Tau-Ceti 3 in the 22nd century, but also some successful integrations too. Many of the current tradeable rare items and popular tourist destinations make a good profit for the consumer out of preserving exobiology.

The existence of an alien known as a "Thargoid" is still disputed. The appellation is believed to have been given to these legendary creatures by the explorers who first encountered them. It is said these rival space farers have the ability to pull unwitting star ships out of hyperspace and render them helpless with some sort of electro-magnetic pulse. Many hundreds of missing ships have been claimed as victims of encounters with these aliens.

Artificial Intelligence

Humanity's research into this area has resulted in major catastrophes. The Third World War of the 2040s was protracted by the use of adaptive intelligent networks and neural webs, which modified their own programming to beyond the control of their makers.

Artificial Intelligence (in the context of machine sentience, not expert systems) is illegal. By treaty all major human factions have agreed not to research, to suppress and actively destroy AIs.

Computer systems are designed to prevent emergent sentience. However, there are corporations who push the boundaries of this restriction in their work.

Over the centuries, a few AIs are known to have escaped human space. There are myths and legends of Androids living amongst people and robot civilisations that exist in harsh environments, beyond the threshold of human tolerance.

Very powerful computers now tend to have more specialised functions and are designed in a way that supports regular feature updates and uniformity and verifiability rather than emergent self-modification.

Characters in Elite Dangerous

There are many people who have attained celebrity status on the countless civilised worlds of AD 3303, but only a few are known and wield interstellar influence.

After the death of Hengist Duval, **Arisa Lavigny-Duval** became the current ruler of the Empire. She is a pragmatic and assertive leader who has quickly moved to consolidate her position and deal with the issues facing her people. She chooses her words carefully, but has already developed a reputation for delivering on her promises.

Princess Aisling Duval is the eldest child of Prince Harold Duval. In the aftermath of the death of the Emperor, Hengist Duval she attempted to assert her right to the throne due to her direct lineage. However, after the Senate came out in favour of Arissa Lavigny-Duval, she moved to support her.

Archon Delaine is otherwise known as “The Pirate King” He claimed leadership of the Kumo Crew at fifteen years of age and built them up into a vast criminal enterprise. The majority of his activities remain in the Pegasi Sector.

A Senator from Eotiensens, **Denton Patreus** is an Admiral of the Imperial fleet. He has a reputation as a political dealmaker and aggressive expansionist.

Prime Minister **Edmund Mahon** of the Alliance has been a member of the assembly for most of his political life. His long service has helped him understand the difficult intricacies of humanity’s third faction, earning him a reputation for achieving things.

With the recent disappearance of President Halsey and the earlier murder of Vice President Nigel Smeaton, **Felicia Winters** ended up in charge of the Liberal Party and became shadow president of the Federation, the lead position of opposition to the president. She acts to consolidate her position and rebuild the liberals as a political force.

Chief Executive Officer of the Sirius Corporation, **Li Yong-Rui** is as much a political player as a businessman, through the subsidiary organisation Sirius Gov. Money is the chief weapon of the corporation, but has proved just as effective when deployed to take control of planets, stations and star systems.

Leader of the Utopian Commune, **Simguru Pranav Antal** managed to keep the organisation together after the fall of Simguru Rishi Antal, the master of transcendental technology. The Commune has emerged from a period of introspection and begun expanding its political reach.

Zachary Hudson is the current President of the Federation. He is a Republican of the old school, a believer in small government, encouraging businesses and low taxation. His rise to power came in after the emergency election called when his predecessor, Liberal Party President, **Jasmina Halsey** disappeared in AD 3302. Some months later, Halsey was found in an escape pod and placed in an induced coma. She was discharged from the Clearwater Psychiatric Centre and claims to have seen a vision of a strange paradise.

Imperial Senator Zemina Torval comes from Synteini and divides her time between her political duties and running the huge Mastopolos Mining Corporation. She champions the traditional values and ethics of the Empire and has become a strong conservative leader in this time of transition.

Yuri Grom is the leader of the independent faction known as the EG Pilots, which rose to galactic prominence following their victory in the Dangerous Games.

Revolutionaries from Valhalla, Tiliala, **Dentara and Katia Rast** fought a war against the Valhallan Government for control of the planet. The conflict drew in Imperial and Federal forces, threatening to spiral out of control before an uncomfortable truce was declared. Both Dentara and Katia were

assassinated. Their granddaughter, **Kendra Rast** is the last surviving family member. Her whereabouts are unknown.

Meredith Argent rose to fame with the late Mic Turner as the leaders of the Alioth rebellion and a founder of the Alliance. In AD 3230, She founded Argent Amalgamated Aerodynamics Incorporated, later renamed to Argent Inc. Argent has not been seen in public for more than thirty years as the company has gone through turbulent times.

Professor Ishmael Palin founded and ran the Palin Institute, a Federation research organisation until his projects and funding were abruptly cancelled. Since then, Palin has set himself up as an independent expert on unknown artefacts, meta-alloys and any alien technology.

The former dictator of Lave, **Doctor Hans Walden** was deposed in AD 3265 when the system became a republic and later joined the Alliance. Walden was publicly executed on camera, but rumours continue to circulate that he was a 'nested clone', one of several versions of himself and that the others have since gone into hiding.

Walden was an expert on genetic research. Much of his academic work in the field is the basis for modern cloning techniques.

The position of Imperial Chancellor is a powerful executive office. **Anders Blaine** held this post under Hengist Duval and continues to do so under Arissa Lavigny-Duval despite a series of political scandals and the temporary loss of his home system Facece to an independent faction. Imperial control has now been re-established.

The famous interstellar rock band who have been performing across the galaxy for more than a century, **Jjagged Bbanner** are known to stop entire star systems when they turn up to play.

The famous detective **Divas Segondli** runs the **Maenads**, an independent investigation team that have been able to solve huge syndicated crimes across Imperial, Federal and Alliance space.

Retired Alioth minister, **Kyle Merion** remains influential on the Alliance assembly. His sister Jo Merion attempted to rescue Mic Turner.

'Peter Jameson' is a name that been famous for more than two centuries. The original Jameson was a poster boy for the rags to riches dreams of independent traders. After him came **Naomi Jameson**, his daughter the explorer, who in 3163, crashed into a planet in the Zearla system while chasing a comet and bankrupting the family in the process. In 3200, Peter Jameson II, grandson of the famous pioneer followed the same crazy dream as his grandfather and this time, the money stuck. The Jameson family spread out across the stars, adventuring their way into legend.

Infamous **Commander 'Javelin' Saunders** was allegedly responsible for the death of Mic Turner in the middle of the 33rd century. Since then, his name has surfaced as some kind of interstellar boogieman, responsible for all the unsolved crimes assassinations and mysteries of space.

Appendix D: Phoenix Point Stories

These stories have been written for a new project with Snapshot Games that builds on the same world development structures that were used for *Elite Dangerous* and *Chaos Reborn*. The stories have been used to develop the world background for potential players, prior to the game's release in 2018.

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1. Short Story: The Old Man of the Sea

It is 1995 and I'm told my Grandfather has passed away. I am twenty-seven years old.

We called him Grandfather, but he wasn't my Dad's dad, or my Mum's for that matter. I was never really told what he was to us, only that he was 'Grandfather' and that we should respect him. I was never told his real name.

As a child, I got used to his regular visits. He would always come at our house on the same day every year, bringing presents for all the children who'd come over. The day before, people would start to arrive, choking up our little street with their cars. Dad said they were all our relatives, but we never saw them any other time. The front room would be crowded with old people, who I guessed were Grandfather's friends. Mum would ask me to help make lemonade for them and I'd play with all the different boys and girls.

I never remembered their names.

Eventually, some guests would leave, while others stayed the night in our house. Some slept on floors, a few in chairs. I always had to give up my bed and sleep in my parent's room.

Grandfather would arrive early in the morning. Sometimes, I would try to stay awake and catch him, but there was never a car or the sound of footsteps on the street. He would just appear in the room, just before the sun came up and start talking to people. He treated everyone equally, young or old, as if he was everyone's grandfather, asking after what they'd been doing and taking time to listen to their answers and shake their hands.

I remember his face. Old, tanned and weathered. His hands and arms rough like tree bark, some of his skin was scaled and patchy. At times, it caught the light and glittered. He had a tattoo of an anchor on his left wrist amidst the worst of it.

His eyes were blue like the sea, his hair, a straggled mass of grey that ran around his bald head and over his ears from front to back. He didn't walk well, as if moving around on two feet was awkward

to him, but he never seemed weak, like many of the old uncles and aunts. He kept a cool distance from us all, not offering help with the cooking or the cleaning up after. He knew all the preparation was for his visit and didn't want to lessen our effort by mucking in.

After breakfast, he'd sit with all the children. A big canvas bag would appear and out would come the presents, all individually wrapped in a delicate paper and tied up with twine.

At first, when I was very young, it was like an extra birthday, but as I grew up, I could tell the difference. I never got a present I wished for from Grandfather.

Instead, I got shells. Every year a different one. Some were big with whorls of colour, others plain or patterned. My parents didn't live near the sea so, to begin with, I didn't understand what they were, but got excited along with everyone else. All the adults would make a fuss over each one unwrapped, as if they were some sort of special prize.

Over the years, the gatherings became smaller. The boys and girls I played with got older. Some disappeared and we didn't talk about them after. The old people disappeared as well. But Grandfather still came and with a flourish, presented me and those who remained with new shells each time.

I pretended to be excited out of courtesy to it all, seeing the trouble everyone had gone to and how much they valued this annual event. I thanked him kindly as I always did, being too well behaved to do otherwise.

After he left, the new gifts would join the others in an old shoebox.

Between visits, my parents didn't say much about Grandfather. Any questions I asked were answered in ways that cut short any conversation about him.

Occasionally, I would get out the shoebox from the bottom of my wardrobe, open it up and unpack all the shells. I studied the collection for a long time, trying to work out why I'd been given them. Some were big, some small, some colourful, some plain, but no two were alike, or of the same type.

There seemed to be no pattern to it. Sometimes, I would try to look them up in books at school, but I could only find the first few, given to me when I was very young.

The last time I saw Grandfather was when I was eleven or twelve I guess? Only three children remained amidst the small group of adults and elderly aunts and uncles. I was the youngest. He leaned down and took my hand, making me blurt out my question.

“Grandfather, what are the shells for?”

He smiled, his wrinkled face becoming even more wrinkled. “They will be your guide, dear one, when you are ready to follow me.”

When I became interested in boys, the box stayed, taped up in the wardrobe and the visits from Grandfather stopped.

I finished school and went to college. English and Drama were always my interests and slowly, I forged a career out of my gifts, qualifications and opportunities. I moved out of my parent’s house when I went to university, leaving most of my belongings behind, including the shoebox.

When I came back to collect things after graduation. I left the shoebox where it was.

The first house I owned, where I still live, was a little terrace in Bournemouth near the beach. When I first moved in, I thought about Grandfather and his presents. I always liked the sea. Swimming in a pool never felt the same. Each time I went back to my parents’ house, I thought about taking the box with me, but for some reason, I never did.

Only now, with Dad on the telephone with the news, am I thinking about those shells.

“You probably don’t even remember him...”

“No, I remember,” I reply. “All those gatherings of people when I was young.”

“Oh... Right...” Dad sounds hesitant, as if he wants to say something, but isn’t sure how to say it. “He left a will and some instructions.”

"I can't imagine that'd be anything to do with us."

"Actually, it is. I was wondering if you would come here and we could talk about it?"

The drive to my parent's in the Home Counties takes just under an hour. On the way, I'm going over what's been said and the strange, nervous words. What should I expect when I arrive?

What I didn't expect was to see the old shoebox on the middle of the dining room table.

"Your mother is at the shops," Dad tells me. "She'll be back in a bit."

"And you have some reason to keep this from her?" I ask.

"A few reasons," Dad says. He sits down and traces a finger around the cardboard lid of the box. The tape holding it is worn and yellow. "I didn't open this, they were given to you." He pushes the box towards me.

I scratch at the loose end of the tape and it comes away. I open the lid and carefully, take out each sea shell. Thirteen in total, at least one I don't recognise. I glance at Dad and frown. "Thirteen?" I say. "I don't remember that many visits."

He shrugs. "You were very young and later... well, you weren't here when he came."

A little part of me regrets the missed opportunity, but that's in the past. "Are you going to tell me what this was all about?" I ask.

Dad runs a hand through his thinning hair. He looks older today than I ever remember him being. He's leaning forward on the table, looking tortured by what's not been said. "We should discuss what's happened and what you need to do," he says. "Grandfather kept a little house, out in Portland. You have to go visit and organise his affairs."

"Shouldn't that be up to someone else?"

"No, it must be you. His wishes were clear."

I frown at Dad. "I don't understand why you can't just tell me what's going on."

“Please, this has to be done right, for your own safety,” he says. “I don’t want you put in danger, unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you choose that”

I stare at him, but he’s not saying anything else. I cannot ease his burden. “Let’s do it your way then,” I decide.

An hour later, I’m on the motorway. The shoebox is on the seat beside me next to a lunchbox with sandwiches in that my Dad prepared. I’m driving, but my mind is on the conversation and on what I need to do.

The journey to Weymouth and Portland takes a bit longer than before. The roads are good, but it’s a distance to go. While the world goes by, I’m thinking about what Dad said and what he couldn’t say. I have directions, a route drawn in an A to Z in biro, a street name and house number. I’m not great at finding places and this is a difficult place to find.

Portland Beach Road is the only way onto the island without taking a boat. There used to be a railway line, but that was closed a long time ago. The view is beautiful, with the sea on both sides of the causeway and not much traffic. Today, the sky is overcast and a stiff breeze whips up the water, bringing little foaming dips and troughs. Ahead, is the old naval base, the only reason I know much about where I’m going as it was on the news when they closed it earlier in the year.

A roundabout, then another. Portland is a small island, little more than a collection of villages. The castle looms over everything. I finish off the last of Dad’s sandwiches and stay on the main road, heading towards Southwell and Portland Bill right at the bottom, near the water’s edge, turning left into a short street and following it all the way to the end and then further.

The roads aren't so good here and the local traffic is a bit thicker. The island's pretty flat for the most part and gradually, fewer and fewer houses either side of me.

The 'Bill' lighthouse is ahead, distinctive with its red and white stripes that everyone remembers from the children's cartoon. I turn off the road and towards a bungalow set apart from everywhere else.

Grandfather's home.

I park up on the verge in front. The house has no garage or abandoned car, just the little one storey building and a tiny shed beside it. The bungalow is totally different to everything else on the island. Faded white paint and a checkerboard of wooden planks, like some of those old pubs you see, but not kept and preserved with the same rustic charm.

I get out and walk towards it. The sea is very close, not far from the fence around the back garden. Dad said he'd inquired as to the property's worth and was told coastal subsidence made the whole place completely unmarketable. "Why am I going then?" I asked him. "Why not just lock it all up and let it fall into the channel?"

"Because we owe Grandfather."

"Owe him for what?"

"I can't say."

I pick my way through the unkempt garden. Everything's been let go. Bushes stray over the path and the grass either side is as tall as me. Stinging nettles, brambles and thistles lurk in the lawn. The earth is churned and uneven, as if someone's dug it up a year or more ago.

I'm on the porch and facing the door. The long brass key is in my hand. It looks far too big for the lock, but it slides in and clicks as I turn it.

The door opens and the first impression I get is a musty smell, like old damp, mould and neglect. The walls are moist under the plain painted wallpaper. I can taste the air and gag at first, but quickly get a hold of myself. I could be in worse places.

I walk into the front room and draw back the curtains. I open every window I can find, reaching up on my toes to the small ones. Some of the catches have been painted over, but they'll not defeat me. Eventually, the outdoor breeze invades to battle the stale air.

As I explore, I discover more shells. They are everywhere, on every sideboard, shelf, dresser and table, covered in dust. No two are alike and none are the same as those from my box. I clean and examine them with my fingers, quickly making my hands filthy. A few are damaged and I find thin glue lines where someone's repaired them. Grandfather must have spent ages collecting these. Not for the first time, I wonder why.

Grandfather has a dining table in the middle of the back room. One of the chairs is half turned, as if someone sat on it and left recently. On the table is a battered book, open and filled with scrawled handwriting. Next to it, I find a chewed pencil, clearly sharpened with a knife.

I sit down and take a closer look, gently turning the pages. There are drawings of the shells and of people too with lines connecting each to one another. I can barely read what's been written, but one word stands out.

Cordelia.

My name on a page, with a drawing of me.

I stare at the journal. I flip back to the beginning. Slowly, I start to recognise the letters and make sense of it all.

I came to these lands in AD 787. Three boats, delivered by Odin onto this barren arm, jutting into the deep. We were lost, souls left to the whim of the sea and rescued by the All Father for his own hidden

purpose. We came ashore as survivors and beaten men, our hopes and dreams of trade and plunder broken by the waves we had failed to tame.

We made camp upon the sands of what is now named Freshwater Bay, tending to our wounded as any defeated army might. Olaf, our priest made sacrifices and called on all the Gods, but they did not hear his exhortations. Day and night our enemy harassed us with great waves and rain that washed away our camp and supplies.

Olaf came to me then and said, "I sense a foul hand in this wind. We are besieged by an ancient power that claims us for its own."

"Is it the Christian God?" I asked.

"No," said Olaf. "Much older. As old as the bones of this land."

"What of your prayers?" said I. "Surely the All Father protects his own?"

"The All Father helps those who help themselves," Olaf replied. He drew back his sleeve and turned his wrist to show me his arm. Scales puckered the skin, as if grown from his flesh. "A gift from beneath the waves. I know not what it means."

"We should ask Odin," I say.

"We are on foreign lands and our words are whispers to him. Much closer is a strange god of the sea who knows we are unbelievers."

"What shall we do then?"

"We will placate this old god," Olaf said. "We must make a sacrifice to him, so he will let us live."

"I cannot renounce my faith," I said.

"Nor I, nor anyone of us, but if our enemy is not appeased, we will never reach Valhalla."

That night, I heard the words of the water. Harsh and bitter curses for us in a tongue I do not understand. We are the invaders of a land long claimed by another. I could not sleep, but gather with

others around Olaf as he slit the throats of two lambs, casting them into the great fire to slate the god's anger. "It may serve for a time," he said. "Though I fear our foe will demand a greater offering from us."

The next morning, the breeze calmed and we moved inland, away from the ships.

It was there and then that the island folk found us.

There is a noise in the house, as if someone is here. I stop reading and look up. The sun is lower in the sky and the ivy near the window casts long finger-like shadows into the front room. I stand up and wander towards them, peering out of the bay windows. No-one about. Must have been the wind.

I peer around the room again, taking in the rows of old books behind the shells and the discarded tea mug on a small table next to the sofa. I pick it up and take it out to the kitchen sink. The pipes make a grinding noise as I turn on the tap and the water spits a little before settling into a constant stream.

I clean the mug, find a kettle and fill it. I flip the power switch, but nothing happens. The electricity must be off.

I take in the kitchen. Old gas cooker, covered in rust, a fridge I dare not open and a few cupboards with assortments of plates and eating utensils. A few of them are unfamiliar to me. On the walls are broken and rusted knives, swords, and axes. Some of them are very old. The edge of an axe blade crumbles in my hand as I touch it.

I go back to the book and look at the words, examining the pages I've read and the ones I've not. The spidery writing is the same. One person has compiled these stories. Whether they are real or not, they are all taken down by one person. I find no crossing out or rubbing, as you might expect if they were being made up. Everything's right there on the page.

I sit down and read on.

The villagers spoke strangely, but after a while we made ourselves understood and laid out our trade offerings to them. They had watched us make land and endure upon the beach, waiting until we chose to move inland before revealing themselves to us.

A rider was dispatched to their lord and whilst we waited, we exchanged words and food. Olaf asked them many questions about faith, but struggled at first to make his meaning clear.

“What other idols do you worship?” he said at last, pointing to the wooden cross around the neck of a man robed in white.

“None but Christ and his Father,” the man answered. “We abandoned heathen ways long ago.”

Olaf pointed out to sea. “Then how do you appease that god?” he asked. “We have felt his wrath and it is terrible. How do you answer him?”

“We do not seek passage through his domain,” the white robed man said, “and so he leaves us be.”

The two men fell into further talk of the mysteries. I left them and wandered along the shoreline. Far from our camp, I found broken white stones, arranged into steps and crude walls. Upon them, I saw the pictorial writing of some ancient tribe with crudely drawn figures bowing in front of etched waves.

These ancients had known our enemy, it seems.

Shouts drew my attention. Horsemen had arrived, their mounts lathered from riding hard. Their leader dismounted and introduced himself as I hurried back to the camp.

The newcomer’s was named Beaduheard. He held their King’s favour and the post of Reeve. His beard was brown, braided and plucked and he spoke to us in our own tongue. “You’ll come with me,” he said. “All merchants have to be recognised by law.”

I eyed my shipmates and their captains. None had the stomach for a long walk to wherever the riders had come from, but the Reeve didn't seem to care. "You'll submit or we'll cast you back into the sea," he warned.

One by one the villagers shrank away, leaving Beaduheard and his soldiers with their spears. We were too many to be surrounded, so they contented themselves with shouting and jeering in a language we did not understand.

I do not know whose blood was spilled first, but I saw a bright fountain of red and heard a gurgled scream. My axe was in my hand then. I marched up to one of the Reeve's soldiers pushed aside his spear and chopped at his neck. The man's collarbone shattered and he wailed as he fell, knowing he was powerless to save himself. I stood on his throat and turned, grabbing a second by his leather jerkin and leapt on him. His breath came in a gasp as we slammed into the dirt. I hacked and hacked at his face, denting his helm and cutting through his eye socket until brain and eye were a puddled mess upon the earth.

I sat up and looked around, the battle rage fading from me, leaving behind a heaviness in limb and mind. The fighting had ended quickly. Beaduheard and his people lay dead and dying in front of us.

A hand gripped my shoulder. Olaf, his beard flecked with blood, grinned down at me. "A sacrifice to the old sea god after all! Perhaps now we will see our homes again."

"Aye, perhaps," I said and stood up.

I stand up from the table. My eyes are drawn to the wall of the kitchen, the ancient rusted axe I looked at before. Could it be... *No... Impossible.*

All of this is a distraction. The sun is setting and I've no wish to stay here overnight. I go back to the car and return with a pen and a notebook of my own. Starting from the front windows, I begin writing down everything I can find, along with a comment on what it might be worth. Most things

like the shells and battered weapons are given a question mark. Only a specialist could identify all the different types. It feels like a violation of my childhood even thinking about it. I'm not sure if I'm ready for that.

I pick up an old white stone from the shelf with three wavy lines etched into it. I remember the stones from the story with the drawings of people worshipping the sea. Underneath are a stack of faded photographs, most of them black and white, or yellowed with age. Children and adults crowd around Grandfather in the centre. He always looks the same – old but not the oldest and he's always sat in the same place with the same smile.

I turn over the pictures and find dates written in pencil on the back. *1924, 1932, 1946...*

The books are a strange collection. I read the names – *Lovecraft, Derleth, Leiber, Bloch, Howard, Holdstock*. None of them are authors I'm familiar with. The volumes are all hardbacks, old and well used. Some of them have marked pages and lines circled with pencil marks.

One phrase leaps out at me.

That is not dead which can eternal lie, and with strange aeons even death may die.

A shiver runs through me. I put away the book and make for the sink. I'm washing my hands even before thinking about it and I don't know why.

Get a hold of yourself!

I turn off the tap and wipe my fingers on a dish cloth. A gust of wind makes the house creak around me. How old is it? Truly? *How old are all these...*

"Hello?"

The voice startles me more than it should. "Who's there?" I say, turning around and eyeing one of the swords on the wall.

The head of a middle-aged man pops around the door to the lounge. He's wearing thick glasses and sports a flat cap and bushy brown moustache. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. Just, we don't get a lot of cars up here."

"This is my grandfather's place," I blurt out. "He died. I'm just sorting his affairs."

"Died?" The man frowns. "I thought no-one lived here."

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Oh right, yes, Sam Bradley." He thrusts out a hand. I hesitate, but then take it in mine. His handshake is weak and cursory, a contrast to his enthusiastic grin. "Been in Southwell for eight years, but most people still think I'm an outsider."

"Is that why you think you can walk into people's houses uninvited?"

"Sorry I..." His smile disappears and he wipes his face with a hand as he tries to work out how to reply. "Look, not a lot that goes on around here without folk noticing. I thought it best if I—"

"Well you thought wrong."

We stare at each other for a few moments before he flinches and looks away. "I'll go then, glad all's well."

"Yes, so am I."

"You really shouldn't be alone out here. If you need anything I—"

"I won't. Thank you."

I follow him to the hall, noting his lingering glances at Grandfather's things. When he's outside, I close the door and lock it from the inside. *Good riddance.*

To the right, I spot the fuse box and open it up. Two of the breakers have tripped. I flip the switches and the porch light comes on. That'll make life easier. There's a phone on the wall next to the box. I lift the receiver to my ear, but get no dial tone.

Damn.

I take up my pen and notebook again. This time, I go through the books, ornaments and furniture methodically, listing everything. I head into the bedroom at the back and note down all the old clothes and anything else I find. There's a collection of old newspapers in a drawer, some of them stiff and brittle. Articles have been cut out of the pages and more pencil marks ring words and letters. More mystery to it all, more puzzles to mull over when I'm back in my own home and far away from here.

It's dark outside when I finally take a break. I boil the kettle and make tea, using stuff I brought with me from Dad's.

I sit down at the dining table again and turn to the book.

After the battle, the villagers do not return. Instead, they lock themselves away in their homes. Olaf walked down the hill to their settlement and asked to speak with the white robed man again, but he is met with silence and no doors open at his request.

The captains meet and decide to abandon this place. We shall sail home, with only the poor spoils taken from Beaduheard and his soldiers to be distributed amongst us. For my part in murdering two, I am given a wrought silver armlet from the Reeve himself.

As I placed the device on my wrist, I found rough patches of skin near my palm. They are similar to those Olaf showed me.

I too am cursed it seems.

The longboats are readied and all are aboard. We launched off into the water as clouds gathered in the east. A stiff breeze sprang up against us, trying to turn us back into land, but we were sons of Odin and bent our backs to the oars, driving onwards through the sea god's waves and wind.

Muscle, sinew and bone work as one with the boat. I pulled upon my oar in time with the drum, as the wrathful spray of our enemy drenched me. The skin on my arms itched, but I dared not attend to it without giving up my work and revealing the curse to my shipmates.

“Thor is angry with us!” The man next to me shouted.

“No!” I told him. “Olaf says it is an older god of the deep who hates us for being strong!”

“To the crows with Olaf!” My oar mate cursed.

The sky was black with hate. The sea, a wall that rose and fell in our way. Each time the breakers came, I thought our boat would founder, but we held true and fought hard as warriors born to tame the sea.

If only our foe had been as mortal as us, with the same weakness of mind and body, the same doubts and cares that make men and women of us all. A heartbeat late upon the stroke, my grip slipped from the oar and the boom came about, crashing into my chest, dragging me from my seat.

The last I remember were Olaf’s words over the wind. “One of ours given! Now, grant us passage dread lord!”

The kitchen window smashes inwards, drawing me out of the book and away to the other side of the room. I’m staring into the darkness, a sword in my hand. I don’t recall lifting it from the wall, but the heft of the blade is reassuring.

I spot a stone on the table, a few feet from where I was sat only moments before, with paper around it, held on string. I want to pick it up, but I can’t. There’s black hole where the window was, watching me, waiting for me to move, to breathe, anything that gives away I’m there. If I stay still and silent it can’t see or hear.

I gaze at the wrapped stone and remember the parties and the seashells. It's the same string from my childhood. The realisation helps. I can move now. I go to the broken window and peer into the dark. I can't see anyone out there, but...

I put down the sword and turn to the stone. The string comes apart quickly, as if my hands are used to untying knots like this. The paper is wet, but the writing clear and legible.

Don't follow them. Don't read the book.

I stare at the words, trying to understand them. Whoever is out there is warning me off, but my Dad and Grandfather both wanted me to come here, wanted me to deal with all this. The question I asked about the shells all those years ago, if the answer is anywhere, it will be here.

Waiting for me.

I awoke next upon the sand, seawater lapping at my face. I got up and stumbled back into our abandoned camp. I ate what food I could find and tried to make a fire from wet wood.

For three days I lived like that, unable to get dry or warm as the sky poured out its rage. No-one came down from the village. No-one dared.

The strange scales on my arms spread quickly. I found patches on my feet, fingers and neck before I became too weak to fend for myself.

At the time, I believed the fever came from exposure on that beach, but I know differently now. I had been sacrificed to the sea god and was undergoing a transformation to become his instrument.

Hands carried me from the shore. A soft bed, a warm fire and hot, thick broth gave me back something of myself. I remember kindly eyes and quiet words, though I understood little of what was said.

Later, there were loud voices, shouting and screams. Determining which came from my fevered nightmares and which were real, remained impossible as does so to this day.

I don't know how long I slept in that bed or how long it took me to recover. When I regained my senses, I found my body covered in the scaled sores. I sat up. Another person lay in the corner of the room. I crawled over and gazed upon a sightless face. It was a woman, long since dead and with the same scales about her skin.

I went outside and discovered more bodies. Some had been dragged from where they died and burned in a smouldering pyre in the centre of the village.

I was the only one left alive.

I lived in that place alone for many days while rain and wind beset the island. When people came, at last, venturing forth from the northern settlement, the storms had washed the earth clean. No-one knew me, but I managed to make them understand, telling them to stay away, else they would catch the plague that had killed the others.

I lived alone like this for years.

It's dark and I'm cold. I don't want to go outside. The adult in me says I'm making the choice because I don't trust myself to make the drive back on unfamiliar roads, but I know what the real reason is. Whoever threw the stone could still be around, watching for me trying to leave.

I pick up the book and the sword and make my way into Grandfather's bedroom. I pull off the sheets and take out new ones from the cupboard. For all I know, he could have died here, in this bed. I remember what Sam Bradley said – *I thought no-one lived here*. Surely, someone would have called an ambulance? There must be some record of the old man passing away, otherwise how would Dad know?

I shut all the doors in the house and turn off all the lights. The little bedroom has no windows and a door with a lock. I take advantage of that and sit on the bed next to a reading lamp, which I flick on.

I take the sword in both hands and look at it. The blade is rusted and pitted, but the wooden hilt has symbols carved into it that are still visible. Centuries ago, this was a beautiful weapon. I wonder if Grandfather found it where the men from the story made camp? If the story is true...

I put the sword on the floor in easy reach and lie down. I stare at the book's battered cover. Should I read more? Best not to. This is no bedtime tale.

I turn out the light.

Time passed by. People returned to the village. I stayed away, living on the edge of the land, listening to the waves. The noise of it comforted me and it became my companion. There were words in the water, words that spoke of a purpose that would be revealed in time.

I collected up all I could of my old life. The broken swords and axes, the clothes, the discarded trinkets. I kept them safe around me, at first in the shelters I built, but later in my home.

I swam in the sea and hearkened to the call of the strange god who had claimed me for his own. I could dive far into the waters, pushing myself further and further underwater, where his words became loud and clear in my mind, but still I could not make sense of what he said.

I took shells from those depths, bringing them back as a reminder each time of where I had been.

In the reclaimed village, folk lived and died, leaving me to witness them from afar. I aged slowly by comparison and stayed distant, at times helping, but mostly being apart. They had names for me and made up stories about my life. I watched them and smiled, just outside of their firelight.

The sea always called to me back and for a time, I felt more at home in its embrace than I did on land, but I sensed my time in the deep had not yet come and I returned to retain something of humanity's touch.

For a while, a woman came and shared my life. Agnel was her name. Before the sickness took her, she gave birth to a child who I sent back to live in the village.

Years later, the girl came to visit. She sat in my home for three days until I revealed myself. When I did, she stroked my hairy face and named me Grandfather. More time had passed than I realised. She was the daughter of my daughter with Agnel. She stayed the night and we talked, but I made her leave after that, afraid that the plague that lives in my skin would claim her too.

Sometime after that, a boy came to see me. I kept away from him too, but then relented and spoke to him for a night. He was my great great grandson. He told me I had many relatives, all living on the island and the coast nearby.

There were more faces and names. I wrote them down when I learned how, but there wasn't much to write things on. I took to etching marks on stones, the same as the ancient people who dwelt here long before me once did.

Years went by and the sea god grew quiet. More ships came to Portland and two lighthouses were built. Descendants of mine lived in them and I visited on occasion, never staying too long, else I infect them, but there was never any sign of this that I could see. I never told them anything of the curse that killed the villagers and how I survived it, all that time ago.

Paper became cheap and I was able to record more of my life. Typewriters and computers were never something I felt comfortable with, but pencils and exercise books were soon easy to obtain and use. I wrote down everything I could remember in a hundred or more of them, with drawings of every family member I met.

Later, when many people moved away, I received invitations to visit them. After a while I began to accept.

*Which is when I found you, **Cordelia**.*

I open my eyes. The book and the sword lie on the floor where I placed them. Did I read all that? I'm not sure, everything is a blur of images. Grandfather's kindly face, his voice, words on the page and in my mind. I can see the moments described, the faces, all of it.

The room is lighter than before. The door is open, its key lies in front of me. *Someone has been here...* I reach for it and notice the fraying skin on my knuckles. The exposed flesh beneath glitters in the light. I bite my lip when I see it and there is a sudden sharp pain. I'm up and in Grandfather's little bathroom. I dab at the blood with a tissue and it quickly stops.

I look at myself in the mirror. Wild tired eyes stare back at me. My face has a greyish cast to it. Did I sleep? The words and images from the story are a jumble with what I remember from before. They won't straighten out. Was it real? Was any of it real?

I turn on the cold tap and get the same grinding as before. My hands are shaking and a roaring, thumping fills my head. *Get a hold of yourself!* A splash of water on my face brings back some kind of poise. No-one's here to see me like this. I can take a moment or two.

I shut the door and sit down on the toilet. Here in this little room I'm safe. Whatever happened before doesn't matter, I'm awake and I can see all around me. This is all happening, the throb of my mouth as the cut dries, the wetness of my fingers, the seat under me. My breath, in and out, in... and out.

In... and... out.

I wait out the storm. Let it calm and subside. Only then do I start to think about what I read and what I remember. This time I concentrate on the words, the things said and described. The shells, the broken weapons, the chafing skin, they all fit with what's in the house. If the story is fiction, it's elaborate and woven with references to things I have seen in the house. The little comments about things and visiting people match my memories too. They all make it feel like I've discovered an explanation.

My Grandfather is more than a thousand years old.

I'm laughing at the thought, the peels come instinctively, bursting out of me and opening the wound on my lip again. Quickly the laughter becomes a dry cough and I'm back over the sink, retching uselessly. My stomach growls to remind me I haven't eaten since yesterday. There won't be any food in the house.

I run the tap again and wash the drool from the basin. I can't stay here. Maybe I should just drive away?

No, I can't do that. Not when I'm so close.

I open the bathroom door and go back into the bedroom. I pick up the book and return to the dining table. The pencil is in the same place, along with my inventory.

I glance at the broken window. The view outside holds no surprises in the morning light. I can see uncut grass and dull grey clouds.

I sit down and open the book, going to the part I remember reading last night before the stone broke the window and examine the next two or three pages. The story picks up where I left it, but not in a nice neat summary. Instead, I find detailed family trees, little sketches of people in the margins and annotations all over the place. I flip back over the bits read and see none of these additions. Good, at least I'm not completely mad.

I hear a voice and glance around. It's coming from outside. I can't make out words, but I definitely heard it. I'm on my feet and nearly out of the house before I even think about it and stop. What if I'm being—

No! I need answers!

The door handle is wet and slips in my hand, but that barely slows me. I hurry around the house to the right, until I'm standing in the grass opposite the window.

No-one here.

“Mister Bradley, I know you’re out here. You threw the stone into the house last night,” I say loudly and wait.

No-one answers.

I look about me. If there’s a person hiding, then I don’t know where. Grandfather’s fenced garden is overgrown, but around it are flat fields, with little else. I listen to the sea and the cries of seagulls. I glance that way and hear the voice again, elusive, like a conversation you’re too far away from to make out, but you know you’re being talked to.

There is a crash, I turn around. Someone is in the house, they passed me as I walked outside. They’re in the front room— no, now they’re by the dining table, where the book is.

“Mister Bradley!”

I’m running back to the door, I fling it out of my way and tear through the living room to confront him. He’s facing me as I enter, his cap on the table and a cold sweat on his balding brow. The book’s in his left hand, his right outstretched as if to ward me off. “No-one needs to get hurt,” he says. “I just want this.”

“Why?”

“Because he’ll have written it all down for you – how it all works. My need is more urgent than yours. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

I frown at him. Then I realise what he means. “You have cancer.”

“Leukaemia actually, but the outcome is the same. I have five months to live. Your friend here has the cure.”

“His curse is not a cure, it won’t help you.”

“Trained medical practitioner, are you?” His face reddens as he speaks. He’s angry and desperate, trying to justify himself. “Breakthroughs like this need to be examined in a laboratory, under proper conditions!”

"I agree," I take a step forwards and he takes half a step back, keeping the table between us. "Look around you. Do you think this is the home of a scientist? My grandfather was an eccentric who loved the sea and old things." I lower my voice. "Living with what you have must be hard, but this isn't the answer."

His shoulders slump and his gaze flinches from me. I make a choice and move around the table, putting my hand on the book. "This is mine," I say.

His expression hardens, he snatches it away and grabs the collar of my blouse, pushing me back against a cabinet by the wall. "You think I don't know about the shells, the presents and all that? I even remember you, *Cordelia*, sitting there with your fatuous smile, so sure of yourself as the chosen one!"

"*Chosen one*? What do you mean, I didn't know anything I—"

"Yeah right, of course you didn't!"

His hand is on my neck, his grip tightens and I'm struggling to breathe. The voice is loud in my head, demanding, urging, even though I can't understand the words. I reach behind me and my fingers get hold of one of the shells, a big one. I pull it out and bring it down on his head with all my strength.

The shell shatters against his ear. He grunts, his glasses fall off and he drops to the floor, releasing me.

There's blood on the carpet and the table. Bradley is lying slumped amidst shards of something that once lived in darkness and water. A tough and brittle outer skin, ancient and discarded, now broken in the aftermath of new purpose. All those years waiting and growing for both of us, to finally meet and become part of the same purpose at this one moment in time.

I run outside.

I hurry away from the house, across the field to the cliff edge. The sea is right up against the rocks below, foaming as it crashes against them. In amongst it all, I see a man, naked, swimming. He looks up at me.

“Grandfather!”

He’s paddling in the surf. The waves could take him at any moment and smash him into the sharp stone cliff-face, but he doesn’t move away, he just looks at me.

It’s a thirty-foot drop at least into the water. I could die from the fall alone, but the answers are down there, waiting for me, my Grandfather is there. He can’t come back, not after last night. He wouldn’t survive on dry land anymore, he’s too far gone. If I want answers I have to go to him.

This is the danger Dad warned me about. They can’t make the choice for me. *I have to choose for myself.*

I kick off my shoes and take the last few steps to the edge. The mud and grass is warm under my feet, but that isn’t the feeling I crave. I yearn for the sea, the salt and the spray. Somehow, I know I always have.

I leap...

2. Phoenix Point Faction: New Jericho

We are the last of humanity and we must unite.

The virus came here and broke us because we were divided. The politics of nations, the racism and prejudice, the hubris and selfishness. All of it, left us weak and vulnerable to something unexpected.

They came at us and defeated us. Individually, we are lucky to have survived, to continue to exist as a species.

I refuse to accept survival. Earth is ours, I will not forsake it. We can rebuild and create a future for our children if we raise our heads and work together, accepting our lot and our common cause.

In rebuilding and resisting, we must be vigilant. The alien is subtle and twisted. The blood of the xeno runs in the veins of the weak. Many have accepted corruption in order to live, but they aren't really survivors, inside they are already dead.

We must liberate them with the gun, the knife and the sword.

Across the world, there are secret bases where people can find safety. We test everyone, screening blood and DNA to ensure there are no infected amongst them. Those who come to us have a chance at a future. Life is hard, but fair, children learn about the what we once had, what we will have again.

I have a plan to defeat the alien. I have faith in the ingenuity of our species. Humanity has defeated every challenge it has ever faced. This is the ultimate test, to defeat an enemy that wishes to supplant us. Only through our collective will can we overcome what seeks to destroy us.

The night is coming, but we will not go quietly. Only by being brave and loud will we pass through the dark and onwards into a brave new dawn. If we can't win, we will make an end that carves our fate onto the flesh of our foes, taking them with us into hell.

Tobias West.

Phoenix Project Comment:

It was to be expected that in a moment of crisis, those without hope or understanding would gather around leaders who project confidence and some sort of solution to the world's problems.

An external enemy provides a focus to distract from division and in this sense, the concept of 'New Jericho' - a united human nation, created to oppose the alien threat, is in itself a romantic vision of resistance; or would be, if it wasn't a risk to our very existence.

The leaders of this movement see warfare and military technology as the sole solution to our predicament. Many of them refuse to accept that blunt solutions failed in the past, during the Third World War. There is a cult of personality around them, a belief that they will succeed with the same tactics as others who failed before them.

Tobias West rose to prominence during the 2020s. His security and technology firm, Vanadium Inc developed a respected reputation escorting the world's largest shipping containers as they crisscrossed the globe. West's people were amongst the first to encounter the mist and its inhabitants. Survivors from Vanadium Inc expeditions quickly became consultants for different countries as they tried to resolve the issue, but, according to West, they weren't listened to, as national governments preferred to blame and turn on each other instead.

West is American by birth but has cultivated an international reputation, anchoring his business interests in India, East Africa and China. It is this broad cultural experience that makes him charismatic and appealing to those who see no other solution. He served in the US Army before the secession and war, completing two tours in Syria, reaching the rank of Major. After this, he resigned his commission, founded his business and spent much of the next decade abroad. His voting record was right leaning and Libertarian, and he made significant donations to senatorial campaigns prior to the 'big egg' incident of 2027, which his company were peripherally involved in, having supplied two security guards to the Halpine-Mcallister oil rig, Echo Gamma 18.

The rise of the New Jericho movement in the last five years has seen West return to people's attention. His radio and video broadcasts are distributed via any means possible. Live transmission is dangerous, but still something his organisation chooses to risk. Otherwise, recordings on portable formats are taken from settlement to settlement, bringing hope to those who thought they'd been forgotten and abandoned.

At its core, New Jericho retains the Vanadium Inc objective of enhancing humanity's capacity through technology. Much of the developed resource and research was lost during the war and the difficult years that followed, but the principles were retained and a new generation of scientific thinkers are being drawn to the central hub of the movement.

The aims of New Jericho are useful to us, but there is a need to be cautious when dealing with them. Their manufacturing base for a variety of conventional military hardware is extensive and they have begun research and development into deploying innovative technologies on to the battlefield. However, the wide base of the organisation means a wide spread of conflicting ideas, some of which threaten to splinter them before they can achieve their aims. Their appeal for a 'united humanity' hides a prejudice against those they do not define as human.

3. Phoenix Point Faction: Synedrion

For centuries, humanity has fought itself in some strange corrupted mockery of Darwin's theory. The arrival of the alien changed all that and provided us with an opportunity to unite.

We believed we were the Earth's masters, that we knew better than nature. In our arrogance, we exploited the resources of our world, striving to dominate the ecology that birthed and supported us. It was only a matter of time before we were supplanted, just like the animals before us.

Now we must form a new society, learning from our wounds and the scars of our world. The alien is not our enemy unless we choose to oppose it. Our existence is not determined by this, nor defined by the destructive capacity of our predecessors.

So, we must begin again and go back the start. We must look at biology, chemistry and archaeology with new eyes, taking into account what we've learned.

The work has begun. Already we have made inroads, identifying weaknesses and sources from fragmented records. Collecting the knowledge of the past is essential to us finding a place in the future.

Whatever bred these creatures and destroyed our civilisation came from our oceans, the most remote parts of our ecology. Nature evolved answers to germs and viruses. It is in nature we must look for answers. Life is diverse, resistant and powerful. Life evolves and finds strength in subtle ways, but this process is slow and wasteful. We don't have thousands of years, we have hours, days, weeks and months. Only by experimentation and ingenuity can we shortcut this process.

Life has always found a way. In flora and fauna, we will seek out answers that will allow us to defend ourselves, establishing safe territories where we can build new settlements for future generations.

The destruction of our past is an opportunity for us to learn humility, to find a new path that leads us to co-existence with whatever comes next. We cannot seek to dominate this world, we must learn to accept being a part of it.

Phoenix Project Comment:

Synedrion represents an intelligent and articulate ideology that has found its voice amidst the devastation of the past. The old ways are lessons of history for a new path and a new society. Great thinkers, ignored in previous struggles between neoconservatives and neo-liberalists are redeemed in the Synedrion vision for a different future.

In many ways, Synedrion is our competitor and a potential colleague. Much of its vision is an enlightened alternative that looks to make a new civilization out of what remains of the old that accommodates the changes to our world. These people intend to press forward in creating a new global nation that seeks a partnership with its citizens and its environment.

Synedrion shares our goal in preserving important knowledge from the past, but looks to adapt this knowledge into a new ecological equilibrium with our world. This equilibrium extends to the alien, who they believe should be accepted as part of their new environment and incorporated into a wider plan of co-existence. Essentially, the alien threat is seen as one amongst many ecological imperatives, which up until now, humanity has attempted to tame or ignore in much the same way as it has attempt to define itself in a subjugated hierarchy.

In practical terms, the decentralised but interconnected organisation of resources and knowledge that is part of Synedrion's philosophy relies on stable communication networks. Where these don't exist, the individual settlements become more fragmented from the whole and prioritise self-sufficiency. It remains uncertain whether the political and economic structures of Synedrion will prove capable of dealing with both the alien threat and their more aggressive rival factions.

If we choose to work with Synedrion, we must keep in mind that their decision-making processes can be frustratingly slow, and that their previous experiences with structures of authority may lead

them to be overly cautious. That said, their philosophy of preservation and sharing can be advantageous to us, unless we are seen to contradict their cohabitation strategy and are perceived as regressive. If this happens, it is possible they will no longer work with us.

4. Short Story: Recruiting

The Veterans Association café is never crowded. Some days you wish it was, so you can share. Other days, it's nice to be alone with your thoughts.

The television in the corner is on. The news reporter is outside a quarantined hospital. She's talking about some kind of viral infection, spreading down the Canadian eastern seaboard. I'm sort of listening to it, but not over much.

There's a coffee in front of me. I'm holding it with my right hand, watching the brown liquid swirl and feeling the warmth through the cardboard cup.

I don't get the flashbacks when I'm here in the early mornings, it's too cold and green. The place smells different too, there's a sharpness to the air that wakes you up. That all makes the thirty-minute drive and hard walk up the hill worthwhile. I try to be here whenever I can, it settles me down, gives me balance for the rest of the day.

I've been back here in Clinton for three months, after six weeks in a military hospital and physiotherapy ward. I'm still adjusting, but I'm getting there. People are friendly and sympathetic, but sometimes pity isn't what you need.

There's a man sat at my table. He hasn't bought a drink, I guess he isn't staying. He's in a suit and he's carrying a briefcase. I don't know him. He's not seen the things I've seen – what people are capable of when they're pushed.

Or perhaps he has? I don't know.

"Lieutenant Harlson, I came up here to offer you a job, working with our organisation."

I can hear the words, but I don't believe them. I raise my head and look him in the eye. "Why in God's name would you want to employ me?" I ask.

The man smiles, but there's no humour in the expression, it's just a quirk of his lips. His eyes are cold blue grey, his hair, thinning and clearly coloured dark brown. He has that just turned look of someone in their mid-thirties or early forties, where the edges have started to sag and fray. "You have a unique set of skills, Lieutenant. You served your country with distinction and bravery, plus you still have two years left on your security clearance."

"That make me valuable?"

"Yes indeed, it does."

I frown. I can't read this guy. All I have are the words. "I've done my time and given enough for my country," I say.

The man nods. "Yes, you have. No-one could deny it, but this all depends on what you want, not on what you're obligated to do, Lieutenant."

"Who do you represent?" I ask.

"The organisation is called Vanadium, Lieutenant. We specialise in private security and high tech military solutions to problems that our clients encounter. I've been sent here today because my employers believe you could make a significant contribution to our work and in turn, working with us would benefit you, greatly."

I raise my prosthetic left arm, the electromotor responding to the little muscle twitches I can make in my shoulder and bicep. The plastic fingers close into a fist on the table. "I'm not much suited to a desk job, Mister...?"

"Siennes. Albert Siennes."

"Well Mister Siennes, as you can see, I'm about done with personal security too."

Siennes gazes at the prosthesis. "That's a Hyland model four. Really good work they do in helping improve people's lives."

"I guess," I reply.

“It’ll never be a part of you, though. Nothing ever will really be a part of you like your own skin, flesh and bone.” Siennes reaches out and taps a finger against the hard plastic of my hand. “Might be technology could eventually make you feel that. Maybe get the motor control hardwired into your cortex and nervous system, but you’ll still be a man with a replacement arm. Not the same as before.”

“You trying to make me angry, Mister Siennes?”

“No, just being honest,” he says.

I think about that. He’s completely right, but these aren’t the words I hear from most people. From them, the emphasis is on ignoring change, not even mentioning it. People in the street think I can’t see the little glances when they’re being polite to my face. Old friends treat me like I’m broken and altered, but put a front on it. They’re not really accepting me for what I am now, learning my new strengths and weaknesses.

They just see limitations and that can be infectious, making me just see limitations, leading me to a dark place.

Siennes leans forward. “Lieutenant, you have a perspective on the world which we need. We aren’t looking to cure you, coddle you or do you some kind of pity fuck favour. We want you as you are, for what you are, to work with us.”

I’m staring at him again. This time I can read something – sincerity. Maybe I don’t have all the information, maybe I don’t know what these people are up to, but I think he’s being honest.

“You do this a lot?” I ask.

Siennes nods. “This is what I do. All the people I get sent out to find are profiled individuals with specific abilities and experiences.”

“Like me?”

“Actually, no. That’s the point. You’ll see if you join us.”

I think some more. What am I doing that's keeping me here? Maybe by staying I'm making myself part of the problem, trying to return to something that isn't me anymore. Maybe I need the change.

"What will the job involve?" I ask.

"Leaving this town," Siennes says.

"When?"

"Now."

Siennes is up and leaving. I follow, shuffling awkwardly between the tables on my crutch. I'm still getting used to using it. Outside there's a grey SUV and a dark-haired woman standing beside it. She's all business too, but smiles and salutes as she sees me.

"This our ride?" I ask.

"Yes, it is," Siennes replies. He opens the back door. "Your personal affects and anything else you want from here can be brought up later. First priority is to get you where you need to go."

I hesitate a moment, drinking up what's going on. These people have selected me. I don't trust them all the way, but there's an opportunity here and a purpose.

My gaze falls on the SUV's private number plate New Jericho 16. "What does that mean?" I ask.

"It's just a name," Siennes replies. "We'll talk about it on the way."

I shrug, and get in the vehicle. The driver and Siennes join me and pretty soon, Clinton is left behind in my past.

5. Short Story: The Claimed Idol

Early morning in the rainforest. There's never true silence out here. The undergrowth teems with life, each individual competing for their time to eat, breed, fight and die. This is nature undiluted, at its apex.

It's five in the morning and I'm sweating as I walk. I'm always sweating out here, even now, when the heavy tropical air is a little cooler. My glasses cloud and slip, unable to maintain their customary perch. There's no respite for my pale European skin in this oppressive heat. The exhausted feeling it brings as you move makes everything a struggle.

Ahead, the flashing machete of my guide, Laura rises and falls. There's just the two of us out here. She's a local and I'm the adventurous tourist keen to see something 'off the track'. We've been away from our camp, just off the Piura river, for about three hours. She says there are old things out here, idols and artefacts left behind by a forgotten civilisation from thousands of years ago.

"Matthew, hurry up!"

I think she likes me. She's attractive, unmarried and speaks good English. A strong independent woman who's made a life for herself and her family. Am I the handsome foreigner, who comes to town and sweeps her away? Hardly. Twenty-five years ago, perhaps, but then she would hardly have been alive back then.

"Matthew!"

She's out of sight. I struggle into a run to catch her up. She's cut a path, but you still have to pick your way through. My backpack jostles me and I stumble, nearly falling face first into the living earth, cursing myself as I do.

"Matthew!"

I push through the brush and find her, standing on a rock, pointing.

Wow.

In front of us, covered and claimed by the jungle, a huge arch, carved from a single slab of stone. Its three times my height, covered in creepers and carvings. I move closer and I can see pictures and words in a language I will never know how to read. This is old, very very old.

“Look up there,” Laura says.

I gaze where she is pointing. There’s a carving decorating the lintel – the image of a woman holding a staff in each hand. There’s something strange about the shape of her body. The proportions aren’t—

“You got here just in time,” Laura says. She beckons me over and I climb up and onto the stone to join her. The top of the slab is perfectly flat, as if it’s been placed here. It has been placed here.

“Watch.”

I look at the arch. The sun bathes the interior as dawn’s fingers creep through the jungle. The stone carvings on the inside are made gold by the power of morning. I see depictions of men, women and children, all facing away from us towards the light. I realise the construction has been perfectly aligned by its maker for this, to let long forgotten idols renew themselves in the glow of our eternal life giver.

“That’s amazing,” I say.

“It happens once a year,” Laura explains. “In this moment, we are one with the ancient people who stood here and witnessed the same beauty.”

“What happened to them?”

“Like all things, they had their time. Only the forest remembers them now.”

After a few minutes, the moment is over. I walk down to the arch, examining the workmanship. Long forgotten faces stare at out of the stone. I see flecks of paint, all that remains of their outer skin.

Every person looks toward the same spot, the moment of light. It must have taken incredible skill to align every gaze perfectly like this.

There's one figure that's different. A twisted body dressed in robes, turning away from the sun towards the others. Its larger, perhaps twice the size, its hands and arms outstretched. To embrace the crowd or give warning?

The robed carving's face is obscured by bright green suckered tendrils that grow out of the wall. I reach into my pocket for my penknife, dig it out and flip open the blade.

A hand closes over my wrist. It's Laura. "Do not," she says.

"Why not?" I ask. "No-one's going to notice."

"The forest has claimed that one. We do not interfere with what the forest wants."

I laugh and look at her. "I'll just remove the growth around his face. I just want to see what he looks like. A tiny cut. It'll grow back in a day or two."

She stares at me for several moments, then turns away. "It is your doom," she says.

I focus on the carving and the bright green plant. The latter is unusual. I can't see anything like it anywhere else. I trace the shoots back to a carved hole. They are twisted up amongst others, like the cables behind a television set.

I put my knife to the growth around the figure. There's resistance at first, but then the life beneath my blade gives way and the creeper is gone, revealing the face beneath.

There is no face. There are no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Instead a mass of tendrils erupts from beneath the folds of that hood, all sculpted in horrible detail.

This is no human being.

There is a loud wailing cry somewhere in the distance. I'm suddenly cold and shivering. I look around. "Laura?" I call.

There is no reply.

I walk out from the arch, back from the shadow into the sun's balm, but it fails to warm me. "Laura!"

I shout again.

In response, the ground erupts. Vines, thicker than my legs vomit from the earth, screaming into the light. They swirl, as if tasting the air, then they reach for me.

Now I scream and back away, running for my pack and the stone slab. I make it, but I'm pursued. I feel the touch of a finger against the skin of my bare leg and I scream again, turning, slashing wildly with my knife, but three inches of sharp metal will do nothing against these ancient roots. Suckers clamp onto my legs, needle-like feeders within them tear through flesh and feast greedily on the blood beneath. I feel my life and freedom drain away, taken by a power older than I can comprehend.

Sometime later, the remains of what I was, is dragged into the earth as punishment for my crime.

6. Short Story: Fragments of Knowing

We turn our thoughts and prayers all to those affected by recent tragedy. At times like this, we feel alone and question our faith. If our God is a loving and caring God, why are we suffering like this? Why are people losing their lives, their loved ones and their homes? When hardships come, things we cannot control, we lash out, we question the existence of a creator and we question whether we have a purpose in some grand fate and destiny.

Some ask me for answers, but there is no truth or revelation that I can offer to heal the mind, soul and body of its own wounds, without all three wanting to be healed.

We seek to know the intentions of our creator, but we must ask ourselves, is it our place to know such things? A glimpse of God is not what we were made for. That we are born, live and die are accepted events. What more we become part of might be our reason for being. Any small thing may be connected to an unfathomable plan of entities we must not presume to comprehend...

The first thing I remember is opening my eyes and being here.

I look around. I'm in a toilet cubicle. I recognise the wooden stall walls, the commode that I'm sat on and the cistern behind me. There's a tissue dispenser on the wall - all familiar things.

I can hear people outside and see feet moving the other side of the door. Thankfully, the latch is drawn across. I must have done that when I came in.

I don't remember my own name, why I'm here or even, where here is.

I pull a tissue from the holder and dab at my face. A mixture of sweat and blood comes back. A nosebleed it seems. No idea if this is anything to do with my loss of memory. I tilt my head back and try to stem the bleeding. With no mirror, I can't be sure how successful I am, but the fabric is quickly soaked. I replace it with another and another. Maybe this is why I came in here?

Someone knocks on the door. "Hey buddy, you gonna be long?" growls a male voice.

"Out in a sec!" I blurt in reply, more instinct than anything, although I sense I don't need to use the toilet.

I stand up, take a deep breath, flush away the bloodstained wipes, unlatch the door and walk out, to find there is no-one in the restroom. I've been sat in the third cubicle along; the two other cubicles are empty.

Weird.

In front of me are three sinks a wall mirror and a hand dryer, one of those rolling towels that encourages users to wipe their filth on the filth of others. I make use of everything, examining, and cleaning my face and hands. The dryer coughs a little as I yank it around and there's a stale odour to the air after it's done.

I don't recognise the person in the mirror. The face has that ageless mid-thirties quality to it, weathered with recent lines, thinning brown hair and grey-blue eyes with crow's feet at the corners.

But it isn't mine.

I'm wearing a torn shirt and jeans, both are oversized. Either I've lost a lot of weight, or they don't belong to me.

This face doesn't belong to me either.

I recoil from the mirror, my hands clutching and feeling my cheeks, chin, nose and ears. The bruised skin, the flesh, bone, organs, all wrong. What did I expect to see and touch? I don't know, but it wasn't this.

Who was I? Who am I now?

My heart is thumping, my breath comes in great gasps. I lean against the wooden stalls, trying to calm down. I'm staring at the chipped edge of the sink.

Strange feet refuse to obey me at first, but I force them forward, stumble to the door and out into the darkened corridor beyond. Wooden walls and floorboards, yellowed peeling paint that was once white and new. At the end is a rectangular arch that might once have contained another door, but it is wholly absent now.

A large lobby greets me, a bar of some kind, long since closed and again, empty of people. I blink several times as my eyes struggle to adjust to the muted daylight from the bay windows. There is a sickly-sweet smell to everything, as if the sun is disturbing something.

"Mister Jansen?"

On hearing the rasping voice and I turn. A man crouches behind the wide wooden counter, leaning upon it, drawing strength from the rough wood. Why didn't I notice him before? He looks at me, his bloodshot stare is an accusation. "Your room's ready. You need a hand with your things?"

"No I..." I glance around, panicked but grateful for the new information. I have a name, it'll do for now. My gaze rests upon a suitcase and a rucksack near the staircase to my left. "I'll manage."

"Good," the man says. He throws something at me, which I catch. A rusted key. "Room 428," he announces, his lips quirking into a sinister smile. "Right at the top."

I sense something unsavoury about the man. I am the subject of a joke that hasn't been shared.

"Thank you," I say. "I'll make myself at home."

The ascent is difficult. The rucksack proves no issue, but the wheeled suitcase is not designed for these old winding stairs. What makes it easy to transport on the road is no help to me here and I'm quickly out of breath again. I'm out of condition, sick with something perhaps? Everything aches and I'm bruised all over. There are marks on my wrists and ankles as if I've been bound or chained.

Do these bags contain the answers I crave? It is hard to struggle on when such discoveries are so near at hand. Although, I do consider my circumstance of ignorance. Am I not in a paradise right

now? unburdened of the cares of life that a return of my memories will bring? are Mrs Jansen and some Jansen children waiting for me? Will I find them at the top?

Each floor has a small landing, providing me with a brief respite from manhandling the case. Instead, it trundles across to the next set of stairs, near a window that overlooks the bleak street below. I take a moment to peer out, hoping that I will recognise something, but I don't.

By the third landing, I'm dripping with sweat. I spot a figure on opposite side of the road, only its movements, betraying it as being anything but a pile of clothes. A long grey fisherman's coat and thick hood, both covered with other layers hide any feature I might recognise. The hood turns in my direction and a shiver runs through me as our eyes meet. I break away and hurry on.

I find no-one else upon the stairs.

Room 428 is near the end of the hall. I take out the key, which has a tag with the word 'Gilman' printed on it in a curious font and '428' scrawled over this in thick black ink. The door opens easily, but I am disappointed to find no-one waiting for me inside. There are two windows, an adjoining bathroom and minimal furnishings. It's been divided from a larger space, the partition wall at the far end is a little whiter than the rest.

I go to the window. The view below is of a bleak courtyard and drab roofs, stretching out into a fog-drenched countryside that reveals no more to me of my past.

I sit down on the bed and turn to my baggage. The rucksack comes first. The zip has tags on it to make it easier to use. I open the main compartment and tip the contents onto the bed.

Wallet, mobile phone, a set of keys, a pen and some receipts. A bag with a bottle of shampoo and several pill containers. Anti-allergy tablets, vitamins, an electric toothbrush, toothpaste, a small towel. More remnants of a life I don't recognise.

I open the wallet. Mr. Paul Hatchall, is says on the credit card tucked in the front slip. Is that me? I thought my name was Jansen.

Like everything else, the name Hatchall means nothing to me.

I get up and run the faucet in the sink, filling a clouded glass. The pipes whine a little and the tap spits, but I step back and manage to avoid soaking my trousers. I take one of the anti-allergies and a vitamin pill, washing them down. There's a salty taste to the water and it lingers after I'm done.

Something to tell the management?

The receipts are for petrol and some books. The petrol's from a station outside Rowley, the books from 'The Book Castle' on the high street there. There are three volumes, a total price of \$18.45.

I turn to the mobile phone and power it up. There's a full battery, but no charger in the bag. The screen flashes and I access the contact list. Names scroll past, Matthew, James, Casey, Jason, Hannah, Emma, on and on, but no surnames that would give me a clue as to who they are. Nothing triggers a memory. I select Hannah and press the call button. I get a weird whining sound, like an old analogue radio trying to tune in and then the attempt to connect fails. There's no signal it seems, despite the five bars and '4G' symbol listed on the top row.

The web browser is the same – no access.

I turn to the suitcase and unzip it. Inside I find clothes for at least a week's trip. No tags or labels. Three pairs of underwear have been worn. Everything's the same size as the t-shirt and jeans, too big for me. There's deodorant and all the other things you expect to have packed, only I don't remember packing them or owning them.

I don't remember anything before being in the toilet.

I put the suitcase down and lay back on the bed, staring at the cracks in the ceiling. Who am I? Am I 'Paul Hatchall', or 'Mister Jansen'. Are they both the same person, both me? Or am I someone else?

I close my eyes, trying to remember something from before. Perhaps being relaxed will help, perhaps then I'll...

Appendix D: Phoenix Point Stories

A dark tunnel, the stink, palpable. I'm running fast and blind through filthy water, breathing hard and feeling that burning sensation in my chest. Ahead, there is a light. I must reach it.

There's something in my hand, my fingers clenched into a fist around it. A scrap of paper. It burns my palm, but I cannot let it go.

"Come on, faster! I warned you!"

A woman's voice in front of me, I'm not alone.

They're behind us, running as fast as we are, if not faster. We have a lead on them, I don't know why, nor why they are chasing us.

I glance back and see nothing, but I know they are there, ambling after us on all fours as fast as they can. Their eyes are better suited to darkness, to them, the gloom is perfect daylight and these passageways, familiar territory.

"Hurry!"

I can see her now, fast moving shadow illuminated by faint light from above. She stops and climbs up the wall, reaches above her head with both hands. The scraping and grinding sound of metal being moved echoes in the cramped space.

I catch up to her and stop. "Can I help?"

"No!" she shouts through clenched teeth. The metal screams and then gives way.

Light illuminates us both and I see her face.

It's dark when I wake up. I'm lying on a bed, the room shadowy and quiet. The woman's face remains in my mind.

How did I get here? I don't recall—

There's a knocking and I'm sat bolt upright, my hands shaking. "Who is it?"

There's no answer. I go to the door and find it locked with the key on the floor. I listen and hear voices – sort of watery, but I can't make out what they're saying. "What do you want?" I ask.

The voices go quiet.

I pick up the key and open the door. I look out into the hallway, left then right. There's no-one—

"Mister Jansen?"

To my left a twisted looking man walking towards me down the corridor. How did I miss seeing him?

"That's me, yes," I reply.

The man grins. "Horace Gilman, Mister Jansen. There's been some trouble with your bill. If you could pop back downstairs to reception, we'll get it all straightened out."

"Of course, I..." I glance back into the room. "I won't be a moment." I walk back inside and shut the door.

Someone warned me this would happen. I remember, but I don't know who. They won't let me out of the town with anything that might arouse suspicion. Gilman's request is a pretext to separate me from my luggage, so they can search through my things and make sure I haven't kept anything, any evidence of what I've seen.

What have I seen?

I'm leaning on the wall, my head pounding. It's hard to remember. Something in me doesn't want to, but fragments come back. Night time. The smell of salt in the air, the high tide and the chanting. The words slip from my mind, as I hear them again. A collection of sounds and syllables that should mean something but I can't...

"Mister Jansen?"

"On my way!"

Appendix D: Phoenix Point Stories

I'm staring at the suitcase. There's something in it, something I need to make sure they don't find.

What was it? Where was it? I need to make sure I escape with the evidence, but my mind crawls away from the memory of what that might be.

The books, I need to look in the books!

I'm emptying the suitcase. The three books are at the bottom. The thick hardback is a list of births and deaths from 1841-1851, including the plague of 1846, the two paperbacks are local history guides, that detail events and legends from settlements all along the Manurey river. I'm drawn to the hardback, there's something tucked into the pages, I have to...

My fingers stop before I touch the paper and take it out. I recall something about it. Something dangerous.

Where can I hide the book?

I stumble into the bathroom and tuck the book behind the pipes at the back of the toilet. There's something there already but I haven't time to find out what it is.

"Mister Jansen?"

"Coming!"

I was talking to Hannah when I made the decision to go to Lyme.

The sun glittered over the hills, bathing her veranda in beautiful orange. We were sat in deckchairs sharing a bottle of red wine and gazing out over the garden.

"You know it could be dangerous, right?" she said softly.

I laughed. "Locals out to murder me you mean?"

She leaned forward and I realised she was actually worried. "It's a close-knit community who hardly feature on survey maps. There's no news articles about them, next to no local transport services and a whole lot of rumours. Paul, you need to take this seriously."

I sipped my wine. "There's a lot of places around the country with patchy records. These people aren't forgotten about because they want it that way, they're forgotten about because of cutbacks. Plants close down, workers get laid off. The state and federal government ignores them in their hour of need so they turn inwards, clench themselves together, hard against the world that they think doesn't care."

"And you're going to change any of that?"

"I'm not naïve, Han. What I do is a drop in the ocean, but at least they'll see a friendly face trying to help and do a job. It's a short land survey to update what we have. Two days and I'm done."

"What if you get told you're trespassing?"

"I won't, I'm careful. I talk to people first, get them onside and make it clear it's just a job. I hardly ever have to show a badge or get out the permits. No-one's bothered."

"But what if these people are? They aren't going to call the cops on you. You'll be at least an hour away from any help."

"I'll be fine. I have to do my job. That's what pays the bills."

She scowled at me and stared silently for quite a while. "All right," she said eventually. "But you take your phone and you call me if anything gets strange."

I smiled at her and drained my glass. "I'm sure it'll all be strange, but I'll call if there's any trouble."

I don't recall arriving in the Gilman House Hotel. I recall getting off the Brayton-Almsport bus and wanting to find this place, but...

There's a clammy hand on my shoulder. Horace Gilman shepherds me down the stairs. They're a wide and impressive switchback, with landings after six or eight steps between each floor and large dirty windows. The carpet's worn and fraying but looks like it must have been expensive when it was new.

"Glad you decided to pay cash, Mister Jansen. We always have trouble with the credit card machine," Gilman says. I turn towards him. He's crabbing down the steps awkwardly as if the effort's not one he usually makes. He's a strange looking fella with wide oval eyes and thin straggling hair stretched over a bald scalp into a ponytail. "Your name, that Swedish?"

"Danish."

"You from Denmark then?"

"No, Wisconsin."

"Oh."

It takes a while to get to reception. The room with my stuff is on the fourth floor, right in the top corner. While we're making the descent, I check my pockets. My wallet's there, a stack of bills in the sleeve which'll cover two nights. I just wish I could remember how I got here from the—

"You married, Mister Jansen?"

"No, I travel a lot, doesn't leave room for a family."

Gilman frowns. "Want to be careful. Nothing's more important than family."

We reach reception. My host shuffles around the desk and pulls out a pen and a ledger, licking his thin fingers and turning the pages. "The problem is, Mister Jansen, for the last two days, we've had a guest named Paul Hatchall staying in Room 428." He flicked the book shut, leans forward and gazes at me. "And that guest looked just like you."

I stare at him, but I can't match those strange eyes. "I—I don't know what you mean."

Gilman smiles knowingly. "Perhaps I was wrong," he says, but his smirk tells me he plainly doesn't mean it. "Two more nights will be one hundred and twenty dollars." He holds out a hand.

I open my wallet and pay him.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Mister Jansen," he says.

I turn away and head back up the stairs.

The bus ride wasn't pleasant. Few people bothered traveling to Lyme, they said, so an old sixties Hillman was left to service all the stops. The driver hunched over his wheel and ignored me as I got on, brandishing my ticket.

I took a seat. A dark-haired woman sat across from me caught my eye. She leaned over, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Lyme," I replied.

She stared at me, biting her bottom lip and with a pinching of her forehead. "Why?" she said.

"Because I..." Those eyes made me hesitate, but I swallowed and pressed on. "I'm here doing government census research."

She nodded. "That sounds... intrusive."

I tried to smile, but succeed only in twisting my lips. "Not really. I just ask people a few questions, fill in some gaps in the records." I sat back in the chair. "What about you?"

"I'm not going to Lyme," the woman said, "and if you know what's best, you won't be either."

"I didn't catch your name."

"No, that's right. You didn't." With that, she turned away.

The rest of the trip passed slowly. I remember taking out my phone and doing the usual scan of social media and messages, but as we got further away from Brayton, the signal became weaker and weaker.

I can't read on a bus, so without my phone, I took to looking out of the window. It was then I noticed just how slowly we were travelling and the poor condition of the road. The juddering wasn't only because of the Hilman's ancient suspension. Potholes outnumbered flat sections of tarmac and the verges were completely overgrown. In places, I could see grooved tracks and tyre marks where other vehicles had got stuck. I remember wondering if we would suffer the same fate and be forced to get out and push.

I saw a house in the distance, its once white walls invaded by vines and weeds. The roof torn apart during the siege. The whole place seemed surrounded by growth. Who could have lived there?

Clinging on whilst mother nature reclaimed what had been taken from her.

The bus stopped, pitching me forward in my seat. Two people shuffled off to stand in the dirt as we pulled away.

Surely, they couldn't be—

"Your stop's next," the woman said to me. "That is, if you haven't changed your mind?"

I turned to her again and forced a smile. "I haven't."

The engine growled as it pushed up hill. Over the top and for the first time, I saw Lyme, the coast and the shadow of the reef out in the distance. The road wound down towards them all and we bumped our way along, the driver hunched over his steering wheel. The bus gathering speed and momentum, hurtling towards the buildings ahead. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

And that is all I remember.

I'm cold, naked and in pain.

My arms ache at the wrist and the shoulder. My legs at the ankle and hip. My whole body hangs from them, face down. I'm naked and I can feel a fiery ring of rope around each limb, abrading my flesh.

I open my eyes. Darkness writhes beneath me. Gradually, my sight adjusts. There are people down there in the black. Hundreds of them, moving, crawling over one another, their mouths gaping open, as they writhe and twist.

"We know what you stole."

A voice echoes off stone walls. I glance around, but cannot place the speaker. "I don't know what you mean!" I shout out. "Please, just let me go."

"There is nowhere to go. All paths lead to this place."

There is something amidst the people. A large creature, aware of me, aware of them. Its feelers wrapped amongst struggling bodies, drawing from them as they yearn towards its embrace. Grey mouths and teeth clasp and clutch at flesh, biting, consuming. The people and their symbiotic matriarch, consume each other slowly, in a languid and visceral dance.

"You will join us," the voice says. "In many ways, you already have. In time, you will beg to join the others beneath you in full knowledge of the fate that awaits you. Consummation of your flesh, your experiences and memories will sustain those who seek to return. Those who deserve to rule over humanity and save it from its own ignorance."

There's a rustling noise and a slight breeze. I shiver instinctively and know the speaker has left. There will be no respite from this torture. No end until I agree to the oblivion that awaits me below.

I close my eyes and scream.

"Shit! Be quiet!"

Hands on my shoulders, shaking me. The dark-haired woman from the tunnels and the bus. She's crouched over me as I lie down, her face twisted into a scowl. "You need to shut up and lie still," she hisses. "If you don't we're both dead."

"How did I—"

"End up here? By being very very stupid and very very lucky."

I prop myself up on my elbows. I'm lying on a concrete floor in pre-dawn light. My movements echo in this room, it must be a big space. I'm wet, cold and in pain. There's a sense of soreness in my limbs, as if I've not used them. I've been wrapped in a blanket. "Where are we?"

"In the old fish market," the woman says. "No-one comes here anymore."

"I need clothes."

"We'll find you some."

"You never told me your name."

She looks at me and smiles. "If I had, you probably wouldn't know, would you?" the smile fades and she stares out into the dark. "But they would know. They would have taken it from you."

"The only memories I have of you is running through tunnels and when we talked on the bus."

"That was where we were earlier, after I got you out and before we stopped here."

I remember being suspended over the pit and shudder. "You cut me down?"

"I dragged you out, you'd been lying in that filth for days. I don't know why you're still alive."

Her answer terrifies me. There's another hole in my mind, a gap where the memories should be. I can't recall anything between the moment hanging above that writhing pit and running through the tunnels. Only this conversation suggests the order of things, that my escape followed my imprisonment. All the rest are disjointed, pinpricks of light in a fog that will not let go.

The woman grabs me by the shoulder, forcing me onto my knees. The concrete is harsh and unforgiving, cutting through my bruised and battered skin. “Why do you think you can’t remember things? Why is everything so broken up in your mind, like shards and dreams? That’s what they’re all like. Dying by inches in there. Everyone coming here with some strange notion and getting sucked into the darkness. All for something nameless that doesn’t even know they exist.”

I take a deep breath and stare at the concrete floor. “My name is Paul Hatchall, I’m thirty-three and I work for the Land Surveyor’s Office in the Bureau of Land Management. I came to Lyme to fill in some gaps in the land designate records, not to get kidnapped!”

Hands release me and I almost fall, but I catch myself and stay there, in the penitent’s position. “All over the world, people go out hunting for things, seeking knowledge, wealth, fame and whatever else,” the woman says. “They never realise ‘til it’s too late, where the real gold lies.” She taps the side of her head and in the half-light, I see an angry red scar trailing out of her hair down around her right ear. “Knowing who you are, what you are, that’s precious. People around here can take that away. You can’t let them.” She glances down, drawing something from a holster at her hip. A gun, an old six-shooter, by the look of it. “Well, this time, the beast will have to stay hungry. We’re getting out of Lyme for and we ain’t gonna be stopped!”

“I need clothes,” I say again, “and food. Perhaps then I can—”

She rounds on me. “We need to be on the edge of town by sun up, otherwise we’ll never make it. Now’s the time to tell me what you did with it.”

“Did with what?”

“The paper fragment you stole. Where did you hide it?”

“I...” My hand is burning. I open it. There’s nothing there. I distinctly remember a piece of parchment, torn from a book, running with it, escaping, but these flashes in my mind don’t fit together. They aren’t a sequence. There’s gaps all over the place.

I focus on the woman and stare into her eyes. The memory is there, nearby, I can almost taste it.

There! Yes, there it is! "In the hotel, Room 428, behind the toilet."

The woman sighs and her shoulders slump. "We'll have to go back," she says.

I open the door to Room 428, close it behind me and sit down.

Horace Gilman knows who I am.

I know who I am.

I know why I am here.

I have to get out.

I look around. My rucksack isn't where I remember leaving it and the suitcase has been opened. The clothes have been pulled out and strewn all over the bed and the floor.

I walk to the bathroom and reach behind the toilet. The book is there and behind it, a fragment of paper, old, layered and thick, the kind you don't get made in a modern factory. It's been torn out of a book.

I tore it out of a book.

There's writing on the parchment. Writing over writing over writing, some in between the layers.

Words jumbled and patterned in different directions. I can make out some letters, but nothing coherent. Some of it isn't English, isn't any language I recognise. The ink is thick and florid, red and black stains on ancient beige. Just looking at the marks, makes me dizzy and sick. The act of violation, stealing this from where it belongs, in bound pages, is something I did. Something that prompted retaliation.

Why? Why would I do such a thing?

I sit down on the bed. My memories don't join together neatly. I need to get out of here, but I've no idea what I'm supposed to do, once I leave the hotel with the parchment. I remember the figure I saw on the street. Was that... Yes, it was! She's waiting for me, waiting to escape with—

There's a knock at the door.

"Mister Jansen?" – it's Horace Gilman again.

"Yes?"

"Best I come in Mister Jansen, then we can talk."

I stare at the door. Its old and won't keep out a determined intruder. Besides, he'll already have a key. There's painted over holes where a bolt might have been, long ago.

I glance around the room. There's no other way out.

"All right then," I say and tuck the parchment into my pocket.

The door opens and he skitters inside, leaving it ajar. I see movement over his shoulder, more people. Guests? Or...

"This isn't where you need to be, Mister Jansen," Horace says, standing over me.

"I know that," I reply. "I need to leave."

"Yes, you do," Horace says. "But you can't go home."

"Why not?"

"Because you're part of our community now, wedded to the town, like all the rest of us. You've become part of the flock and I'm here as your shepherd to guide you back to where you belong."

He's standing in front of me, his protruding gut level with my face. I can see faded stains on his white shirt and there's a stale smell about him I hadn't caught before. He's got his hands behind his back.

Might be he's concealing something?

"What happens if I don't want to stay in Lyme?"

"Everyone wants to stay, Mister Jansen. Some people just don't know it yet."

I don't reply to that, letting the silence extend for a while. I've missed my chance to get away.

Horace wouldn't have knocked before everything was in place. There'll be people on all the exits and in the street waiting for me if I make a move to resist. "Why do you keep calling me that?" I ask.

"You know it's not my name."

Horace smiles, a crooked gesture that lifts the right side of his face. "Who's to say that? For all I know, you're Mister Jansen pretending to be Mister Hatchall, or Mister Hatchall pretending to be Mister Jansen? Or perhaps you've lived before an' an old life is coming back to you, hidden beneath it all."

"You don't care about me," I say. "You want the page from the book I stole."

Horace sighs. "Bad business that. Got people angry about it all over the town. Some'd like to skin you for what you done. To them, it's like you stole a part of their lives."

"Just like you've done to me."

"In what way?"

I tap the side my head. "By stealing parts of my mind."

Horace leans back. "What if I told you you're not alone? That everyone volunteers a little bit of themselves to those who are more than us, more advanced and more deserving."

"I'd say you were mad."

"But you can't disprove it. You spend nearly half your life asleep, like most people. In that time, you dream all sorts of strange things. You only have your recollections and the recollections of others as evidence of what you've really done. Those memories fade. Why not give them away to someone who can use them far better than you?"

I frown at him. "Someone, or something?" I ask.

Horace rolls his eyes. "Many people dream when they come here. There's something about this place that helps them see the world differently. Who's to know what you actually saw or experienced?"

"I know what's real."

"Do you?"

I can hear raised voices in the hall. A woman is shouting, she sounds familiar. I start to stand up, but Horace drags me back and pushes me down. I struggle, but I'm too weak to resist him and he pins me to the bed.

"Where is it?" he rasps. "Give it up now, or I promise it'll end badly for you!"

There's a loud bang and more shouting. Horace's hands are tearing at my loose-fitting clothes, trying to find the page. I'm fighting him, but it's no use. He flips me over and rips the parchment out of the back pocket of my jeans.

There's another loud bang and a splash of something against the back of my neck. Horace coughs and then he's on top of me. I thrash, but he's a dead weight and slides to the floor. I struggle to my feet and stumble past him to the door, running for the stairs, not daring to look back.

"This way!"

The woman from before is standing there, a smoking revolver in her hands. There's another slumped figure further on, a man whimpering and clutching at his guts while blood pools around him on the threadbare carpet. I don't see much of his face, but there's a similarity to Horace, I guess the two of them are related.

"Move!"

I'm pushed down the stairs, I slip forwards, my numb fingers grab for the bannister, but my feet slide out from under me and I'm falling towards the bay window. My hands fly up in front of my face, my elbows bounce off the wooden frame and I collapse into a heap on the floor.

Footsteps thunder towards me, hands grab my arms, lifting me up. "Come on!" the woman breathes in my face. I struggle to help, to move and get to my feet, but everything's too much. I fall again.

"I can't do this," I say. My hand goes to the back pocket of my jeans. I pull out the torn page. "Here, this is what you wanted."

She hesitates, but then, takes the parchment from me. "I'll get this out," she says. "People will be warned. What you've done, it'll make a difference." She hands me the revolver. "There's two rounds left. I'm sorry."

I don't know what she means. I'm too tired to care. My hand closes around the smooth wooden handle of the gun and I shut my eyes.

Her footsteps fade away.

At dawn, we reached the hotel. Our journey from the abandoned market had been tortuous, my companion determined to avoid any chance we might be spotted.

She told me her name, or at least, a name I could call her. I can't remember it. I guess they took that away.

"Wait here. I'll open the door, then you go inside, make your way up to your room and get the parchment."

She left me crouched at the corner and went to the door. A sunlight flashed on the blade of a knife that she thrust into the gap around the frame. It took her a long time, but eventually, the old lock gave way and she beckoned me over.

"Hurry! Get what you need and meet me back here."

I went inside and walked towards the stairs, but then I heard someone coming down, carrying something. I ran back into the lobby and then down a passageway, into the toilets. I went straight to the middle cubicle, sat down and locked the door.

It's dark when I come to.

I'm still lying on the stairs. I still can't remember all the details of my life. I know they've taken things from me, robbed me and violated me in a way that I cannot accept. My mind has been invaded, scoured and sifted through without my permission or acceptance.

Or at least, without any memory of either.

Flashes come to me from before. Walking around Lyme taking photographs, people watching me, being asked questions, people watching me. Asking questions and getting strange answers.

People watching me.

Chanting coming from a church as I listen by the window, opening the door and finding it dark and empty, going inside, to the lectern, finding the book, ripping away pages – two pages.

Being awakened in the dead of night, a hand over my mouth, being dragged out to a chanting mob, My hands tremble, I can't make them stop. I'm cold, but that's not the reason for the shivering. My body aches, yearning for something. My throat is dry and parched. My stomach throbs. Is this how addicts feel when their supply is cut off? There's a pain behind all the other hurts, it's constant scream tells me something is missing. I'm incomplete without it, but I don't know what it is.

Someone is here. I can feel it, even though I can't see anyone. I hear voices below, in the lobby.

They'll make their way upstairs and find me. Then the pain will end.

"You're feelin' withdrawal aren't you, Mister Jansen?"

The voice is little more than a whisper, but I recognise it. Horace Gilman has hauled himself to the staircase. He coughs, a wet, throaty and painful noise. His eyes glitter in the dim light, staring at me.

“You’re missin’ bein’ where you belong. We all do when our turn comes. You don’t belong here anymore. You belong with them in the depths, as part of the one you were given to. You can’t live without it now, you’ll die just by being here, being apart.”

I shake my head. “You’ve lost. The parchment’s gone. You’ll never find it.”

Horace laughs painfully. “Doesn’t matter. Your friend’ll take it to people. Eventually, one of ours will find her and bring it back. You can’t escape, the believers are everywhere.”

“If that’s true, you wouldn’t have come after me.”

“Like I said before, I’m a shepherd, here to guide you back to where you belong.”

The voices from below grow louder. The people are much closer. They will discover me soon. I shift my weight against the wall beneath the window, resting my back against it. “If what you did to me is so wonderful, why aren’t you down there instead of running this rotting hotel?”

“Some of us have work to do before we’re granted the privilege.” I see Horace shuffling down the stairs towards me. Each step brings forth a wheezing, painful breath. “Shot me in the guts,” he says.

“Probably means I’ll be joining you in paradise, if they’ll take me.”

“Paradise?”

“What else would you call it? All your cares taken away as you accept your rightful place. I mean, are we really so special? Look around your world, we fucked it up, but we can’t see it. They understand better, they always have.”

He’s almost at my side now and I can see flashlights below us. People are coming up the stairs. I lift the gun, aim it at Horace, he grunts, but doesn’t stop moving. He’s sitting down next to me, leaving dark stains on the chipped paint of the wall.

“In Anu’s kingdom, the worry and the pain all disappears. Just shut your eyes, close your ears and open your mouth. Suck on the teat as they take away your life and make it into something useful, greater, eternal.”

Appendix D: Phoenix Point Stories

I point the gun at the darkness down the stairs. They'll be coming soon. There's two rounds left, she said. My arm is shaking. I've never...

Horace's hand closes over mine, turning the revolver back towards us, towards me. "Why fight it, little lamb?" he says. "Just let go. Make your end. Rejoin the flock or accept the cull."

I can feel his breath on my neck. His fingers on the gun steady mine. The barrel is pointed at me. I turn my wrist, then slide my fingers out, so my thumb rests on the trigger.

I open my mouth.

7. Short Story: Launch Codes

My name is Ravi Chaudhri.

I'm twenty-eight years old and I don't want to die.

11th of May, 2023. The Pokhran-III nuclear programme signalled the start of renewed tension between India and Pakistan. We resumed underground testing as a response to threats from the new hard-line regime across the Kashmiri border, but really, we could have made a different choice.

We should have made a different choice.

My grandfather was eighty-one back then, and was asked to attend the test. He'd been one of the scientists involved in Pokhran-II, a member of the Bhabha Research Centre team. The pre-event reception was a wonderful opportunity for him to meet up with old friends while in the background, a new generation of experts prepared another weapon of mass destruction.

I accompanied him to the event. I was twenty, about to start my engineering degree, and a patriot. I could see the scientific research opportunities behind our government's interest in nuclear technology and I wanted a part of that.

Back then, I wanted to be like my grandfather.

Fate provides each of us with opportunities and setbacks. This is part of karma. I achieved good grades at the University of Rajasthan, but not good enough to be selected for the successor laboratories that were to take on the work of my grandfather and his peers. Instead, I became computer engineer, responsible for designing and maintaining the control system for our missile deterrent.

My grandfather passed away in 2029. The outcome of my life has meant I am more involved in India's nuclear programme than he ever was.

Today is the 2nd of January 2032. It will be remembered as being cold and cloudy, here in Pokhran.

At eight in the morning I'm driving down the Jaisalmer-Jodhpur Road to the missile base where I work. I left before seven, my pregnant wife, Saanvi stayed in bed, asleep in our little house in Lathi.

I make this drive four times a week. The soldiers on the gate know my face, but go through the usual procedure of checking my pass and scanning the car number plate. We're all being recorded on security cameras, so it's important everyone is seen to do their jobs correctly.

I park the car and walk into the office, swiping my card as I go through the doors. Only Padi is there, staring at his computer monitor. He doesn't notice me. I can hear tinny Bhangra pop coming from his headphones.

I reach my desk and sit down, flicking the touchscreen with my hand to wake up the computer. The Times of India website appears, just where I'd left it the night before. There's a selection of articles, mostly about the mist incident and the disruption to maritime communications across the south pacific. We are very lucky it wasn't closer. The Chinese aircraft carrier, *Shangdong* and its support fleet have been deployed to the border of the cloud. The Americans aren't happy with that. They've issued a warning to Beijing and promised to defend civilian shipping. The fact that they have an armada the other side of the fog seems to be irrelevant.

Total hypocrisy.

There's a whole set of other worrying articles. Refugees are flooding into West Bengal from Bangladesh, outbreaks of what the international press are calling 'the Samudr Virus' after where it's supposed to have come from. It's a typical western misappropriation of words, but some of the reports are suggesting there is a link between the epidemic and what started in Canada and Alaska four years ago.

The world is becoming a dangerous place. It's hard to reconcile what's happening with what I'm used to. I don't want my children to grow up in fear.

I love my country. Being Indian is part of who I am. I love cricket, I support the Rajasthan Royals, but the chest thumping pride I share with people watching them or watching our national team is different to what I do here. For me, being a patriot is about working to better the lives of people all around me and protecting our way of life. That means more than a flag or a game. What we do here is dangerous, but we do it to ensure people respect our culture and society. Sometimes these are things you have to do. Not everyone out there is rational or right thinking. People who aren't respond only to threats and intimidation.

The late A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, scientist and president, understood things best. We are a proud and intelligent people. He stated India's nuclear deterrent would not be used first, but its existence would prevent anyone attacking us with the same weapons.

I've believed in that philosophy all my adult life, but now, with everything that's going on, I'm not so—

The phone on my desk rings, making me jump. It's a wired landline, a rarity these days, but the whole facility here is designed with redundancies.

I pick up the receiver. "Hello? This is Doctor Ravi Chaudhri."

"Doctor, we need your expertise in the control room."

The words are spoken in English. The voice is a woman's. I don't recognise her. These kinds of requests aren't common, but I know what I need to do. Quickly, I get up and empty my pockets onto the desk, leaving behind my wallet, my mobile phone and a collection of till receipts. I'm slipping through the door and Padi hasn't even noticed. I head back down the stairs and across the concrete yard. There's a lift at the end. I get in, swipe my card and press the button for the bottom floor.

In the three years I've worked on the base, I've only been to the control room twice. The first time was during my induction and tour of the facility, the second time was to brief an operations team. I'm not sure why I've been called down now.

But then military people don't give you reasons.

The lift opens, I make my way along a concrete corridor, lamps illuminating my way as I disturb them. Another swipe of my card and another door to go through.

My destination is dimly lit. The main screen on the wall to my left is inactive. There's a row of desks in front of me. A figure is sat at the second computer terminal, a woman. I don't recognise her.

"I'm Doctor Chaudhri," I say. "Did somebody call me?"

The woman turns towards me. She's dark skinned and dressed a black suit. "I need your help, Doctor," she says. I recognise her voice from the phone call.

"You're not the assigned duty operator," I say.

"No, I'm not." The woman moves away from the console and I see a man slumped in the chair behind her. There's blood on his forehead.

I take half a step forward, but halt when I see the woman is holding a pistol in her right hand and aiming it at me.

"What have you done?" I demand. "Who sent you?"

"Neither question is helpful to answer," the woman replies. She speaks English with an accent that I cannot place. Is she African? "I need your assistance in rendering the launch network inoperable."

"What? Why would I—"

"Doctor Chaudhri, you're wasting time. If you assist me, you will live, if you do not, you will die."

"Are you threatening me? Are you going to kill me?"

"I won't kill you Doctor," the woman replies. "Your own country will cause your death in just over twenty-four minutes if you don't help me."

"Why would my—" I stop talking mid-sentence. Her meaning is clear, it's the only explanation for her presence here. "The government has ordered a pre-emptive nuclear strike," I realise out loud.

The woman nods. "Someone in your administration has come to believe you are under attack by your envious neighbours. They have received evidence that there are weaponised bacteria causing an epidemic in your towns and villages. Your intelligence officers have identified a laboratory complex over the border which they believe is being used by your enemies to attack you. They are mistaken. At this moment, your military are completing their plan to launch a missile to destroy that location, killing thousands of innocent civilians. The order will arrive here very soon."

"How do you know this?" I ask.

The woman sighs. "We are wasting time. I need your expertise. I can disable this facility, but that will not stop the launch, only delay it. We must lock down your systems completely, so that your country cannot make use of these weapons."

"You want to make us defenceless?"

"Nuclear weapons are not a defence." The woman taps on the console. "You helped build this as a deterrent. In a few moments, it will no longer be a deterrent, it will be a catalyst."

I'm breathing hard and sweating. I blink and rub my eyes with my hands. Perhaps this is a dream and everything will disappear? But when I look again nothing has changed. "What do you want me to do?" I mumble.

She raises her left hand. She's holding out a flash drive to me. "You will log into the system with your maintenance permissions and transfer the contents of this to the root directory of the console. Once that's done, you will activate the executable file."

"You're asking me to commit treason."

"I'm asking you save lives, Doctor Chaudhri. It is moments like these that define who we are."

I hesitate. Humanity's past is littered with examples of patriotic self-sacrifice and moments of self-recrimination. Oppenheimer's famous quote from the Gita speaks to me – I am become death the

destroyer of worlds... In his moment, he opened the way to this power, his research and achievements made it possible for Americans to destroy our world.

What does that make me?

Now, in my moment, my thoughts linger over matters of pride, survival and destruction. For Oppenheimer, there was no possibility of retribution, but for me, I know unleashing such force will bring retaliation.

It is here, in the nadir that I suddenly understand the emptiness and impotence of power.

I cannot be party to the destruction of our world.

I step forward and take the drive from the woman's hand. I plug it into the machine and log in. After a few moments, the program is running. I recognise what's being done. The software is designed to encrypt our machines and all the systems connected to them. By the time it is finished, every device on the network will be talking in a different language to every other device. It will take six months or more to dismantle everything and rebuild all of it from first principles.

I think about my grandfather. What would he think of me? What would he think of this choice? Our family's reputation was built on his work. I have betrayed him and betrayed my own work. I think about Saanvi and our plans for a family. She will understand, but will anyone else? I cannot burden her with this.

"My life here is over," I say. "What should I do? Where can I go?"

The woman shrugs. "Anywhere you want. The room's security cameras have been disabled. No-one in authority here will learn of your part in this, unless you tell them, but the project will know and the project will be grateful."

"The project?"

"I'm sorry, I can't talk about that."

I sigh and run a hand through my hair, trying to think. "I can't stay in India. I won't be able to live with myself."

"You shouldn't be ashamed," the woman says. "You've just saved millions of lives."

"The world is falling apart," I say. "There are so many nuclear weapons. You cannot stop them all."

"Not alone, no," The woman concedes. "But you're forgetting something."

"What?"

"Human nature." The woman smiles. It's an honest expression without humour, but with conviction.

"Do you think you're the only person who's had to make this kind of choice in a moment like this?"

"You mean other countries have been—"

"Some have. Others were forced to disarm by their people. We're standing on a precipice of self-destruction. The sooner we can take our collective fingers off the red button, the sooner the real work can begin."

As she speaks, the program finishes. I notice a set of new files have appeared in the drive's root folder. The woman reaches for her device, but I get there first and close my hand over it. "Why should let you take this?" I ask. "There's a set of encrypted files on here. That means whoever have this drive will be able to reverse the process and reactivate these weapons."

The woman frowns. She steps forward, pressing the barrel of her pistol against my chest.

"Circumstances may change," she says. "One day we may need them."

I shake my head. "No. The world will never need nuclear missiles. I know that now. You can kill me if you want to."

We stare at one another. Time is pressing on us both. I sense her conflict, a struggle between orders and conscience. "What's your name?" I ask.

She hesitates. "Abayomi," she replies.

“There should have been six people in this control room,” I say. “You didn’t kill any of them, did you?”

“Hopefully, no.”

Slowly, I pull the flash drive out of the machine. “Abayomi, you’ve asked me to make a hard choice. Now I ask you to do the same. Kill me and take what you came for or trust me and leave, knowing you’ve prevented a nuclear war.”

Abayomi holds up her left hand, palm outwards and steps back. “Very well, Doctor Chaudhri, as I said, no-one will learn of your involvement from me.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“It is I who should thank you, Doctor.” Abayomi is retreating, moving back into the shadows at the other side of the control room. “It was good to meet you. I wish it had been under different circumstances.”

“As I do,” I reply.

My words remain in the air unanswered. I am alone.

I stare at the unconscious man slumped over the console. I want to help him, but if I do, my presence here will be confirmed. I don’t know how Abayomi got in or how she will get out. I can only hope she wasn’t lying to me about the security cameras and being seen.

I make my way quickly back to the lift and select the top floor. The use of my swipe card will have been registered. As soon as the authorities discover something is wrong, they’ll look into the records, see I was here and start asking questions. I’ve two choices, either I claim it was stolen or I disappear.

I’m walking back across the yard to the office. I’m through the door. Padi is still staring at his screen. I glance at the clock on the wall. Its thirteen minutes past eight. So little time has passed, so much has changed.

I pick up my wallet, keys and phone. My hands are shaking and I nearly drop them before putting them back in the pockets of my trousers. Everything is quiet and calm. I keep expecting an alarm to go off, or someone to walk in and grab me.

A minute later and I'm outside, getting into my car. I drive to the gate and smile at the men who let me through only minutes ago. "Forgot my wallet," I tell them. "Need to go home and pick it up."

The soldier nods. "Okay Doctor Chaudhri," he says and the barrier opens.

The drive takes an hour. One hour of isolation from the consequences of my actions. My mind races through a whole series of plans. I need to get out of the country as quickly as possible. We live eight hours drive from the nearest airport in Jaipur. There are others that are closer, over the border in Pakistan, but there are no roads and I cannot take Saanvi through such unforgiving country.

We will have to go by car, trusting that we can remain out of sight. If we get to Munabao, we may be able to cross the border and get a flight out of Pakistan.

I've no idea how to do any of this.

I get off the main road and make the final turns to our house. As I leave the car, my phone starts to buzz in my pocket. I ignore it and run up the stairs and into the house.

"Saanvi? Saanvi, where are you?"

"In here."

I burst into the dining room, a confession on my lips. Saanvi is sat at the table. Across from her is an Asian man in a dark suit. He stands up and turns towards me as I enter, holding out his hand.

"Doctor Chaudhri? My name is Akemi. I believe you met my associate?"

I stare at the hand and then at its owner. "What more do you people want from me?" I ask, coldly.

Akemi withdraws his hand and glances at Saanvi. "My apologies if I've caused offence. I've explained what's going on to your wife. I'm from the Phoenix Project. I'm here to get you out."

8. Short Story: Soulstealing

I raise my camera and *click*.

The girl looks up from where she crouches. Her face is dirty, she is dressed in the black and white of a maid. "Why are you doing that?" she asks in hesitant English.

I lower the camera and look at her, squatting amidst the ruins, glaring at me. "Because you're beautiful," I say. "Beautiful, surrounded by the ruined beauty of someone's work."

"You're a thief," she says. "You've stolen part of my soul into your magic box."

"It's just a photograph."

She frowns. "Not if you think I'm beautiful, as you said."

I blush and try to change the subject. "I'm not from round here. Who built all this?"

"The Master's ancestor. They call her the Matriarch. She came from the sea."

"From another country? Like me?"

"No," the girl points at the ring of stones behind her. "Underwater, from the deep."

I frown and take a step towards her. She stands up. "This is no place for tourists," she says. "You should not be here."

I smile and laugh. "I don't want to break anything. I just want to look down there."

"Down where?"

"Down the tunnel, the well."

The girl sighs. Her shoulders slump. "The Master won't like that," she says.

"Why?"

"Because you might see something. The Matriarch doesn't like to be seen."

I take another step. "Surely it won't hurt? How will they know?"

"They'll know," she says. "They always know."

For a moment, we stare at each other. Then, she turns away and disappears up the steps. "You were warned, soul stealer," she says.

I'm alone, but I don't feel alone. The light is fading. I step forwards towards the stones and peer over the lip. Was this once a well, or some sort of passageway? Shadows cling to the rocks. They are an endless swirl into the void. I raise my camera and look through the lens.

The darkness moves and something looks back.

Click.

I stare into the depths, holding the gaze of whatever lurks there. I can make out nothing of it, only that it is aware of me, curious at my curiosity. The moment lingers, extends, becomes uncomfortable.

A shiver runs through me. I blink and the creature is gone.

I put away my camera and lean over the edge. I can't make out the bottom, but whatever I saw, isn't there now. Perhaps I'll see something in the pictures instead?

I walk away from the ruin and back up the steps, the way the girl went. I'm on holiday here in Balchik by the sea. These ancient ruins lie in within the grounds of a twentieth century palace, famous for its flower garden. According to the guide, who I was half listening to, before I wandered off, this place was the home of Queen Marie of Romania. Back then it was called 'the quiet nest'.

I assume the name applied to her.

I pass through an archway and find myself back on the gravel path. The world brightens as the afternoon sun finds a way through dark brooding clouds. The warmth banishes my lingering chill. I bet I was seeing things – faces in the fire and all that, projecting what we want to find on something altogether innocuous.

I glance up at the buildings above me along the cliffs. Balchik Palace is a strange collection of villas and other residences. The royal family homes in London are much larger and more impressive, but Balchik has something watchful about it. The single minaret on the side of the sea front house is particularly attractive.

I consider wandering a little more and catching up with tour party, but my heart isn't in it. Instead, I make my way back to the hotel and my room.

I've been in Balchik four days. My agent, Thomas recommended this place as a writer's retreat and so far, it's been brilliant. I'm thirty-five thousand words better off in my new novel and I've been able to sit on the terrace and relax with some lovely wine and beautiful views, letting the story evolve in my mind.

I'm ahead of schedule, and today, I decided to venture out and soak up some culture.

I'm not sure if that's what I got.

The laptop is open on the table. Instinctively, I'm doing what everyone does these days – an internet search into the history of the Balchik Palace gardens. There's a whole host of pretty pictures and tourist information, some of which I read before I came here, but I'm looking for something specific, something related to what the girl said.

She came from under the sea...

The residency was constructed between 1926 and 1937, but there's nothing about the older stone walls and the ruined well. The tour guide didn't mention them and led the group the other way. I took a left turn when everyone else went right.

How strange.

I take out my camera and plug it into the laptop. The picture folder appears. I start copying the files over. I didn't take many today, fourteen images, all in gorgeous digital detail. All the better to zoom in and enhance if I need to.

I reach the pictures I took of the ruin. The young girl stares resentfully at me out of the image. The beauty I saw in her is still there, that moment of surprise and unguarded emotion. She isn't a model, posing for the camera, she's a person unexpectedly caught in a moment.

There's something about her eyes...

What was she doing there?

I zoom in, moving the image to her hands. She is holding something in her fingers, something I didn't notice. She must have concealed it from me. Her fingers are stained red. I never noticed that before either.

She's holding a human heart.

Three years ago, as part of some book research, I was allowed to 'sit in' a hospital ward and watch three doctors perform surgery on a man who needed a transplant. Their professional manner and the skill with which they managed such a difficult job made me rethink my opinion of humanity.

I still remember what I saw; that live squirming organ between ribs and flesh. The stained metal of the rib spreader. The bright red blood slurping out of a living chest cavity. At the time, I felt ashamed that I couldn't look away. I justified my paralysis with the reason I was there. I needed to see so I could write from experience.

Again, now, I can't move. I'm staring at the screen, staring at her hands and recognising their bloody burden. I don't know what to—

My phone rings. I blink, stand up and fish for it in my pocket. It's my sister. "Hi, Natalie," I say.

"Hey Jim, everything okay?"

"Yeah fine, going well actually."

"Oh. You sounded a bit rattled."

"No, I'm all right. What's up with you?"

Natalie laughs. I can hear the sound of a busy office in the background. My sister is teacher and an army lieutenant in the Territorials. "I've been called up again," she says. "Another outbreak, This time its Liverpool and Chester."

"Christ, that's the third time this month. Are they paying you overtime?"

"No, just the usual rate."

"You're too good for them."

"I know."

The line goes quiet. Mum died last year. She was the bridge between us all. Nat still hurts, I can tell. She's thrown herself into work so she doesn't have to think. Lord knows why she rings me. I guess because Dad won't take her calls.

"It's good to hear from you," I say and mean it. "Things get a bit lonely out here."

"Isn't that the point?" she says and there's that laugh again. "Otherwise you'll miss your deadline."

I laugh too. "They'll wait," I say.

"Better if you give them no option and hand in on time," Natalie chides.

There's a pause. I know she wants to say something else. She lowers her voice. "People are worried up here, Jim. They say there's no cure."

"The vaccine not working?"

"No, it is, but... well... we're seeing cases after inoculation too. They're rare but..."

"Christ Nat, you make sure you look after yourself, won't you?"

"Yeah... will do." Natalie sighs. "I was going to suggest something?"

"Go on."

"Maybe you should stay where you are? Book an extra couple of weeks? Or a month? You got anything you need to be back for?"

"Is it that bad?"

"It might be."

I run a hand through my hair. Natalie doesn't overreact. If she's worried, there's something to worry about. My eyes stray to the computer screen again. I blink and turn away.

"I'll think about it," I say. "Thanks for the heads up."

"Least I could do. Will you tell Dad?"

"Sure. I'll text him."

"Great."

I hear noises in the background and the line goes dead. That isn't unusual when Natalie calls, something will have needed her attention.

I look at the laptop screen again and the girl's bloody hands. Somehow, I manage to reach forward and press the button that moves the preview onto the next image.

The picture down the well.

The photograph doesn't show anything. Whatever I saw through the lens isn't in the shot. There's just black and shadow at the bottom of that hole. Something about that comforts me. I'm breathing freely, easily, as if a weight has lifted from my body.

I shutdown the laptop.

One thirty in the morning local time. I've showered and I'm ready to go to sleep.

These hotel beds are big. There's no duvet, instead we have blankets and sheets. The lights have old style filament bulbs, not LEDs or energy saving ones. I've settled in, the heavy curtains are shut and I turn out the lights.

We're two hours ahead of UK time and I'm still struggling to adjust. Still, my social calendar is intentionally empty and I write better when I'm tired. Somehow, my thoughts align and coalesce into images and scenes, I stop editing before I'm typing and just let the words flow.

I've left the terrace window open to keep air circulating in the room. I can hear the waves outside. It's a wonderful sound, unfamiliar, but so relaxing and therapeutic. Water will have lapped upon those sands day after day for years, decades, centuries.

I wonder what Queen Marie saw? Is she the Matriarch the girl spoke of? The name doesn't seem to fit. The ruins were old, far older than the palace. The stone had been piled and bound together, not shaped as later stonework might be. Whoever lived around here back then, lived long ago.

I'm thinking about the book I'm writing. It's a crime novel, with multiple murders and an alcoholic detective. Can I squeeze in a trip to Eastern Europe and a strange old well, complete with...

The floorboards creak and I'm sat bolt upright in bed, breathing hard, heart pounding. "Is someone there?" I call out.

There's no answer.

"Hello?" I call again.

A breeze stirs the curtains, leaking the outside into my room. The sea air stirs the hairs on my arms. I glance towards the terrace. A sliver of moonlight cuts through the darkness like a knife then disappears as something obscures it. The curtain creaks as it is drawn back and I see a shadowy inhuman figure in front of the window. I know who it is.

I know what it is.

"You're the Matriarch," I breathe. "You were down there, staring at me."

The figure doesn't reply, but takes a step forward into the room. In the moonlight, I can see eyes and a humanlike face, definitely female, but the body, impossibly tall and powerful, with no rise and fall of movement. She glides towards me, mouth open, filled with fangs. "You stole something from me," she says in a slow, sibilant growl.

Instinctively, I recoil, shuffling back in in the blankets, as if they will be a defence. "I didn't... I didn't mean to—"

"Nevertheless." The Matriarch is close now, leaning over the bed. A limb snaps out and claws press into my chest. I feel strength, strength that I struggle against, but cannot match. "Lie down, shut your eyes and dream your ignorant stories. This flesh is not for you. It must be remade for another purpose."

"I don't understand, I—"

"The body understands, but the mind has obscured it. The first of your kind were given a commandment. You remember the word, but your ancestors corrupted it and now you rebel."

I am pressed against the mattress. The claws make shallow cuts in my skin and then lie flat against my ribs. My heart is thumping, willing me to escape, but I cannot move. I can feel something wormlike in the Matriarch's palm, squirming against me. It's wet with my blood, writhing between us.

"You will be remade," the Matriarch says. "But first, we will *feed*."

The worm enters me, biting into my flesh. I scream as it burrows into the centre of my chest. I cough and struggle to breathe as it severs connections, feasting on what it finds. I taste my own blood and bile

But I do not die. Instead, I am linked and remade. Through our bloody connection, I become part of the Matriarch and I start to understand.

You were given autonomy, but you have wasted that gift, so it is withdrawn.

I hear the words, but they are not spoken aloud. I feel other minds next to mine, names and faces through the ages, crowded together, seething and crawling within the Matriarch. Their memories and voices are part of her, bonded and subjugated as they were consumed.

Is this what will happen to me?

In time. But first you will become a host to our new flesh. Your memories will be added to our knowledge of your kind.

In this moment, I realise my mistake. The Matriarch does not consume hearts, it consumes lives! The very essence of humanity, our experience!

I embrace despair. A writer never wants to forget, or be forgotten, that is our narcissism, our hubris and flaw. We write to remember, to be remembered.

I can feel my thoughts being sifted and examined, flowing like blood into the collective whole of a living ancient, forgotten in our history and religion. In becoming part of it, I too will be lost, scraped and diluted into a sea of insignificance.

Your sense of self-importance is a corruption. It must be purged. Your obsession with your own individuality is a flaw.

I glimpse moments of my past as they depart. I see myself running down a hill after my parents, my legs are short and I am small. I fall and cut my knee. I'm crying, great heaving sobs that seize my entire body.

Now I'm crying, staring into the face of the Matriarch as I am unmade, remade, restored as a herald of her will. I understand her purpose now – my purpose. I am a herald, a harbinger of the harrowing. Those who accept us will survive, those who cling to their wasteful selfish society will die...

I am falling, hurtling towards I know what I am supposed to—

A shrill scream cuts through everything and suddenly I'm...

Awake?

I blink and darkness has enveloped me. There is no weight upon my chest, no presence in my room.

Was it a dream? Some strange nightmare vomited up from the depths of my soul?

Where is this place?

What is my name?

An alarm clock shrieks at me from the bedside table I turn on the lamp and get up. The blankets and sheet are a twisted mess, as I've been at war with them. I walk into the bathroom and stand in front of the mirror.

I flick on the light.

My face and chest are a mess of wounds. Where my heart once lived, there is a bloody gaping hole. I can see white rib bones and torn flesh.

I should not be alive, but I am.

Something quivers in that space, pulsing, twitching amidst the remains of my humanity. We are bound together, living as one, until the time comes when...

No! I don't want to think about that!

There's a shirt hanging on a rail over the bath. I reach for it, take it down and put it on. In a moment, the horror of my flesh is concealed. I can forget this, just as I have forgotten everything else.

Who am I, damn it!

Some memories return. They are recent. A girl squatting in the ruins of a castle, captured in my photography. She was beautiful, is beautiful. There was something about her eyes, a shining presence captured there in my camera lens.

There's something about her stare...

I can see the image in my mind. There's something else looking out of those eyes, as if they are two windows to two souls. I glimpsed them in the lens, stealing the knowledge of what she was, what she is, a host to young alien flesh. The heart in her hands was her own heart, removed in the same way.

She and I are the same.

I stare into my own eyes and I see another presence staring back.

I look down. In the sink is a bloody mass of flesh. My own heart, removed to accommodate my new companion. Space has been made in my mind and body.

I feel a voice in my mind. It is quiet now, but it will grow, feeding on my flesh, my knowledge, my life.

When it is done, it will transform. Abandoning me to finally die.

9. Short Story: Harbinger

I'm sat in a dark canvas tent by the door, listening to the rain. It's absolutely hammering down, but I'm still considering waiting out in the street. That way I could avoid the resentful looks and whispers.

She shouldn't be here, they say.

Maybe they're right.

There's a soldier standing just outside. He's wearing a waterproof and holding a rifle, while he stares out into the street. If I wasn't dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, I'd join him.

The sullen faces around me are thin and pale. I can see signs of the virus here and there. Others are struggling with life ending conditions. Most people wouldn't be visiting the emergency health centre on a day like this if you had a choice.

I look away and stare into the world we're sheltering from. Black clouds piss on the smouldering remains of the old doctor's surgery across the road. Rioters torched it a week ago. That was when they had to call in the National Guard. How much difference three hundred teenagers and twentysomething's in army fatigues will make is anyone's guess, but for now, Greenville isn't tearing itself apart.

"Miss Owen? The doctor will see you now."

I get up and walk into the depths of the tent, feeling those angry eyes judging me with every move I make. I know what they're thinking – *she's not ill* – and they're right. I'm not.

Not anymore.

"This way Miss Owen." The girl escorting me is in beige army camo. She can't be more than nineteen. She's wearing an ID badge that says 'Miller'. That could be her name or just the jacket she pulled on this morning.

I'm taken through a flap of canvas into an empty space and through there into a temporary office. There's a man sat behind a desk. He's also dressed in army gear with a hazmat suit over the top. His hood is pulled back to reveal his balding, sweaty head and face. The breathing mask is on the table. The man looks up at me and smiles as I enter.

"Hello Miss Owen, I'm Doctor—"

I hold my hand up, cutting him off. "I don't care. Where's Doctor Grant?"

"We've taken him out of town. The situation out here is... a little too demanding for a civilian, general practitioner."

"Okay."

The doctor picks up an envelope from the table. "I have your final blood test results for you." He holds it out. I take it and tear it open. The letter inside is short and sweet, with numbers, percentages and technical details. Doctor Grant would have sat me down and gone through this, but I doubt I'll get the same treatment from the military. The words "remission" and "all clear" should make me feel happy, but instead I'm numb. I know what this cure cost.

"Congratulations, Miss Owen," the doctor says. His eyes flick to the entrance. "It's nice to be able to give someone good news these days."

I don't reply.

He bites his lip, as if he wants to say something else, but reconsiders and waves me out.

I leave as swiftly as possible, keeping my head down as I walk back through the tent. It's mid-afternoon. The rain has eased off, but the clouds remain dark and angry. It's foggy on the street. It's always foggy these days and there's a stale smell to everything. The authorities say we shouldn't panic. The media points to falling temperature averages and every channel takes turns to slag off climate scientists who preach Armageddon from the sea.

Whatever man. Deal with your world, I have my own issues.

My house is three blocks from the National Guard encampment. The windows are boarded up, but we got off lightly. My parents left three weeks ago. I decided to stay. I'm thirty-three years old and four months ago I was diagnosed with terminal cancer, so they couldn't really argue about how I wanted to spend my last days.

I shouldn't be alive and in a way, I'm not.

The old sofa is where I've always sat to watch television. Dad used to kick the arm when he thought I was being lazy or he wanted something. After they found the tumour he let me be. We had an argument about it where I told him I didn't want his pity.

He cried. I'd never seen him cry before.

I'm sat in the chair again now, staring at the blank screen. There's no point in turning it on. The stories will all be the same. Variations on, 'this is the end of times'. It's funny how people get religious when they contemplate death.

There's a knock at my door. I sigh and get up to answer it. A man is standing outside. I recognise him from the medical tent – one of the sullen faces. He's carrying his son in his arms. The boy looks thin and weak. There are lesions on his face.

I know the signs.

"Are you Lisa Owen?" the man says.

I stare at him. "Please go away," I reply.

The man shakes his head. "I can't... my son needs you."

"You don't know what you're asking," I say.

"I need you to heal my boy."

"What I do for him won't heal him."

"It will. I have faith. I've seen it."

“You’ve seen what you wanted to see. Please, don’t ask me to do this.”

“What other choice do I have?”

I stare at the man, but his desperate question can’t be denied. I open the door and step aside. He enters the house and carries his dying child into the living room, laying him down on the couch.

I retake my seat. I can hear the boy’s rattling breath. Its six-thirty in the afternoon. He’ll die before morning unless someone intervenes. “What’s your name?” I ask the father.

“Roger,” he replies.

“Well, Roger, there’s beer in the fridge. Best you bring two for you and two for me. We’ll be needing them.”

When you have cancer, they suggest all sorts of expensive therapy. The whole healthcare system in this country is shot to shit when it comes to incurable diseases. That ‘buy now pay later’ philosophy you see in car show rooms is basically how it works these days. Only difference is, you’ve only got one body, so you can’t shop around.

Medical insurance isn’t worth crap, unless you’ve been identified as a ‘priority citizen of the New American Republic’. They say things are better over the border in Independent California, but I doubt it. We still get their news channels and nothing looks better. In fact, it all looks worse, closer to the sea.

I got diagnosed four months ago. Like most people who get cancer, I went on chemo. I started losing my hair two weeks in. For some people, it grows back when the body adjusts, or afterwards. For me, I know it’s never coming back.

All part of the ‘cure’.

Roger comes back with the beers. He cracks one open and offers it to me. I take a swig and ease back in my chair. Roger sits on the end of the couch, stroking his son’s hair. “What’s his name?” I ask.

“Matthew.”

“How long since he got infected?”

“A few days I guess,” Roger says. He’s blinking hard, trying to keep back the tears. I guess it’s taken a lot for him to come here and beg me for help. “We probably tried to deny what it was.”

I nod and we sit in silence for a while, sipping from the bottle. I need to give him the speech. I’m working up to it. The alcohol should help, but it doesn’t. I just feel even more dislocated from who I was.

“You need to understand what you’re asking, before I’ll agree to do anything,” I say at last. “You have to let me explain what I know and accept what’ll happen to Matthew.”

“Okay,” Roger says. “Anything you want.”

I sigh. They’re always like this, fixated about what’s in front of them rather than what’ll happen after that, but I have to try. “A month ago, I was a terminal cancer patient. I contracted the Pandoravirus, collapsed and was taken into intensive care. My body’s immune system was shot to shit, so the medical diagnosis was that I’d last about forty-eight hours.

“No-one expected me to get better.”

I take another swig of beer and lean forward in my seat. “They flew some of the top doctors in the country to my bedside and took every sample they could from me. Even bone marrow, which, trust me, is not something you ever want people doing. I was cat scanned, x-rayed, the works. Once they had every piece of data they could get, they discharged me and sent me home. I’ve had regular blood tests ever since. The tumour in my gut literally got eaten by the new bacteria, but after it was done, it didn’t stop.” I point at Matthew. “Only difference between me and him right now is that for some reason, my body accepted the changes and let it all happen.”

Roger is looking at me and nodding, but I can see all this is washing right past him. He can't think further than his son right now. but I still need to tell him, otherwise it'll come on me back later. "I heard you healed a little girl called Rebecca," he says.

I shake my head. "That's what I'm trying to explain, she isn't better."

"I spoke to her mother, she said she is."

"What's walking around now isn't Rebecca, it's something else in her skin."

Roger doesn't reply to that. Instead, he flinches away from my stare, swallows and looks at his son. Maybe I've got through to him?

I continue my story to fill the silence. "They found a new strain of the virus in my body. According to the scientists, it's like the stuff Jenner found when he was looking for a smallpox vaccine. Only difference is, they don't know what it does. They tried injecting samples of my blood and bone marrow into other patients with the virus and other patients with terminal diseases. None of it worked, people were dying overnight. After that, they discharged me. A day later, people like you started showing up. Seems somebody in the CDC decided to blab about me and what happened. I'm a freak, nothing more."

I can hear Roger quietly weeping. His tears run down his face and on to his son's. "I have to believe you can help us," he says in between shuddering sobs. "We've nothing else to try."

I sigh. "You have to understand what you're asking. Rebecca's mother Jacqueline can here with her three days ago. She put her on that couch just the same as Matthew. I went to the kitchen, got a syringe and took a sample of my blood. We injected it into Rebecca. In less than an hour, she was awake and could sit up and talk to us. After three hours, the lesions had begun to fade. Jacqueline and Rebecca left soon after. I don't know why she survived, but she did. I've seen them since and I've looked into her eyes. You might think she's recovered, but she hasn't. She's changing, just like I am. She's not Rebecca anymore."

Roger raises his head. "You healed her. You can heal Matthew."

I shake my head. "No, you're not listening. I didn't heal Rebecca I—"

Abruptly Roger stands up, looming over me. "I heard every word you said. I just don't draw the same conclusion as you. My son means everything to me. I want him to live. Are you going to help us or..." he leaves the sentence hanging.

I look at his hands, they're clenched into fists.

Damn.

"The syringe is in the kitchen," I say. "There's needles in a sealed packet in the fridge. You'll need to put the kettle on and properly sterilise both, then bring them in here with some tissues."

"You do it," Roger says. "I'll watch you."

For a moment, I consider resisting. I've a half empty beer bottle in my hand. I could finish it, get up and use it as a weapon. Knock him out and get away.

Where would I go? How could I do that to a man who is just about to lose his son?

Right now, he has hope. Maybe I'm being a coward by fanning those flames in his heart, but I've tried to explain.

I'm in the kitchen. The kettle has boiled and I'm washing what we need. He's right behind me. The sobbing's stopped. He's committed to do whatever's necessary. I've seen that look. It's the moment where civilisation ends.

"There's a box of tissues on top of the fridge," I say.

I turn around and silently, he hands them to me.

"Thank you." I take one from the top and jab the clean needle into the crook of my arm. The pain is familiar. I pump my fist and the vein quickly yields a syringe full of blood. I wipe the wound with the tissue and hand him what he wants. "Make sure you hit a vein," I say.

“Thank you,” he says. His hard expression crumbles. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, you did,” I say. “What’s done is done. Just remember, if he survives and you tell anyone, the army will take Matthew away from you.”

“Okay.”

He leaves the kitchen, going back to his son. I’m feeling light headed, but I can’t stay here. First Rebecca, then Matthew. I’ve been lucky that it’s only been two of them, but that won’t last. Roger will talk, Jacqueline will talk. They’ll all come now and I’ll end up dead.

I need to leave.

Roger doesn’t hear me slip out the kitchen door and walk away down the drive.

Twenty minutes later and its getting dark. I’m on the highway just outside of town, walking south.

I haven’t prepared for this, but in that moment when I handed Roger the syringe, I knew what would happen if I stayed. I remember those looks in the tent. Once it gets out, no matter what I tell them they’ll come for me. I’ll be bled dry as a martyr to false hope, creating new horrors out of the diseased decaying flesh of those who should be left to die.

This world is going to hell. The only option we have is choosing how we meet our end.

The road is quiet. It used to be busy, but no-one’s moving around anymore. The mercantile wheels of society are grinding to a halt. The panicky exodus further inland happened weeks ago, all that’s left are the army and the people who haven’t given up and accepted their fate.

Is that me? Am I still fighting to survive? No. I just don’t want to accept what’s planned for me.

There will be a checkpoint up ahead. They’ve been trying to establish a quarantine zone around the town. Helicopters go up every day, shooting animals in the woods, while barbed wire fences go up

either side of the roads. If I want to get through, I'll have to get off the road and think of some way to avoid all the security.

I think back over what's happened. I haven't really recovered. I don't feel the same as I did before the cancer. Something changed after I got the virus. There's something cold about how I see the world now. I'm disconnected and not me. I know what I should care about, the miracle I should be grateful for, but instead, I feel empty and hollow.

I know I've passed this curse on to those children. If Matthew survives, he won't be the same. Rebecca's already gone. All three of us are changing into whatever comes next. Nature has to evolve to survive, perhaps we're what's to come?

I hear an explosion in the distance and turn around. It came from back down the road, near Greenville. Another explosion, then another. There's an orange glow on the horizon. I don't know what that means.

The rain starts again, soaking through my t-shirt, but I'm not cold anymore. The water feels like silk against my skin, the despair and exhaustion washes away. I remember being a child, splashing through puddles, swimming in the sea, holding my breath and diving down and into the murky black. I loved all that. How could I forget? How could I—

Headlights cut through the evening mist. I hear the throaty growl of a large engine. Truck or SUV I guess, or maybe an army APC? Doesn't matter. I stick out a thumb. There's a change in the engine tone as driver passes me and brake lights confirm that whoever it is has decided to stop.

It's a big eighteen-wheeler with a canvas covered trailer. As I get close, the back opens up and three people jump out. They are wearing long coats that reach down to their ankles. Light from inside the back makes them dark shadows in the fainting sun. They are walking towards me.

I stop and hold up my hands. "Hey," I call out. "I just wanted a lift through the checkpoint. You can drop me off at the next gas station. You mind your business and I'll mind mine, that okay?"

“Are you Lisa Owen?” A women’s voice, one of the three.

She knows my name. Not a good sign. I take a step back, trying to keep some distance between us.

“Look, forget it, I’ll walk or wait for the next car. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“We cannot leave you,” the woman says. She stops, about a yard away. She’s wearing gloves and a hooded coat, almost like a robe. She carries some kind of long walking stick and her face is covered by a decorated steel mask. Her companions are similarly dressed and wait behind her.

“Sure, you can,” I reply. “You just get back in your truck and carry on driving.”

“You must come with us.”

I take another step back. “Please, just let me go,” I say.

“Miss Owen,” the woman says. “Our people have been searching the country for you. There were two cars on the road, following you. We have dealt with them, but more will come. The checkpoint ahead will not let you pass. The only way you will escape is if you accept our help.”

She kneels in front of me. Her companions do the same.

There’s a flash of lightning and a moment later, thunder booms from above. I’m tempted to run whilst their kneeling on the wet tarmac, but where would I go? How would I live?

“Where do you want to take me?” I ask.

The woman looks up and gazes into my eyes. She reaches a hand to her chin and removes the mask. Now, I can see her face. Her skin is wet and shining and she’s breathing hard. There are marks on her – a strange whorl of tattoos and fresh scarring. I recognise the signs, she’s been infected.

The robe she wears is bloodstained and torn. There’s an open wound along her right shoulder and down her arm.

“We will deliver you to a sacred place,” she says in answer to my question. “You will find nowhere safer in this world.”

“What’s the catch? You want me to cure you?”

“No. I need no cure. The worthy survive the blessing of Anu.”

I swallow passed the lump in my throat. “I don’t know what that means,” I say.

The woman stands up and reaches out her hand. “You must learn to accept what you have become,” she says. “You can guide us all to salvation.”

“You’re insane.”

“What is insanity? Is it insane to cling to a decaying world without hope? Humanity has put its faith in all sorts of answers to our doom. We offer you a haven from all that you fear. All we ask is that you join us and learn to belong.”

Thunder rumbles again. The rain is glorious, but I can’t stay out here alone without food or shelter.

“Take me as far as the gas station, like I asked,” I say. “I promise I’ll listen to whatever your selling, but if I want out when we get there, you have to let me go.”

In response, the two other figures stand up and join the woman. They are men, similarly clothed and masked. “We agree to your terms,” the woman says. All three of them hold out their hands to me.

“Now, will you come with us?”

“I will,” I reply. Before they can react, I march straight past them, ignoring their strange welcome and make for the cab of the lorry. I yank the passenger door handle and clamber up. The bearded driver looks around at me in surprise. “You’re not supposed to—”

“No-one said I had to ride in back,” I say, waving my hand dismissively. “You people want to recruit me, fine, but do it here. Be honest about what you want.”

The driver shrugs and laughs. “Sure, okay,” he says. He has the same whorl tattoo on his neck as the woman, but he’s dressed like me. His white shirt is also stained with blood. “I ain’t a pretty talker anyway. I just do what I’m told.”

“Suits me,” I reply. I glance around the cab. The windscreen is cracked and there’s broken glass everywhere. I brush some away and sit down. “Let’s start at the beginning. My name’s Lisa Owen.”

“I’m Jed Ganns.”

“Good to meet you, Jed.”

“Likewise.”

10. Short Story: Colony

I’m jostled awake and my eyes open to shadowy darkness.

It’s after midnight. I can’t tell where we are, but the camper van must have bounced over a bump in the road to rouse me.

From my seat in the middle of the vehicle, I can’t see much. Our driver is hunched over the steering wheel. Headlights shine into thick cloying fog. Shapes pass us on either side. I don’t recognise anything.

It stinks in here – an odour of cold sweat and fear. I look around. There’s more people packed into the seats than when I fell asleep. We must have stopped a few times and picked them up. There are men, women and children. The van is full – more than full, with some forced to sit in the aisle. Every face flinches away from my gaze. No-one wants to talk. We’ve all got baggage, everyone has, after all that’s happened.

I can hear sobbing and soothing words coming from the back. Maybe things will be better this time?

Somehow, I doubt it.

What makes people abandon their lives? No-one chooses to run away from everything they’ve known, leaving behind all their worldly goods for a seat on a broken bus heading into darkness, unless their other options are worse.

Stay and die. Run away and live.

I can see the driver in the mirror. He's an ugly, sweaty man who's past his best years. Thin streaks of hair straggle across his balding head and there's open sores in his scalp. His bulbous eyes catch mine occasionally as he looks up. He's humming something under his breath. I don't recognise the tune, but then I'm no music expert. When I got on, he smiled, showed me his broken teeth and asked me to call him Joel.

I nodded, but didn't reply.

A damp thigh is pressed against mine. A man in the window seat, leaning away from me, his face against the steam covered glass, looking out into the dark. He's snoring gently, breathing onto the wet pane. His shirt collar is turned up, but I can see sores along the side of his neck.

We all have the mark. We've all survived.

That's why they want us.

"We need to stop, please."

I glance in the direction of the voice. It's the woman who'd been comforting the child at the back. She's stood up, shuffling forwards, picking her way over sleeping bodies, trying to get the driver's attention.

"He's sick, we need to stop and get some air, just for a minute..." one or two voices murmur their agreement.

"No stopping!" Joel, the driver, yells back over his shoulder. "We can't stop at night, it isn't safe!"

"He needs the toilet!"

"Hold it, or don't hold it. If we stop, we die!"

The boy starts wailing, making the situation worse. I know what people are thinking. I'm thinking it too. Just a short stop for some air. What can it hurt? The danger doesn't seem real, this fetid prison, does.

A man in the seat across stands up. His face is scarred and twisted. "Joel, listen. Maybe we don't need to stop, eh? You slow down and we'll bring the boy to the side door. We hold him out there while he does his business. When he's done, we shut up shop again, sound fair?"

Joel ignores him, but then the camper starts to slow down. The man takes that as agreement and gestures to the woman to pass her child to him. The sobbing kid is handed over people and I shuffle away to let him past, jostling my sleeping neighbour by the window. He grunts and wakes up.

"I'm so sorry, I—"

"No, it's okay, don't worry." The man winces as he stretches his neck. Then he rubs his face with his hand. "I'll sleep when I'm dead," he says and smiles, gazing at me. "How long was I out?"

"A couple of hours, I guess. I fell asleep too."

"Well, it passes the time." He wipes the window and stares out. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere south of Warren, I think."

"It got crowded."

"Yeah."

A chilly breeze steals into the van as the side door is rolled back. The fresh air is lovely. I find myself smiling and the man beside me is smiling too.

"I'm Daniel," he says.

"Jess." I hold out a hand, he takes it, squeezing it briefly. "You got on outside Pine Bluff. What was it like?"

I shrug. "Same as everywhere else I guess. Panic on the TV, followed by panic in the streets, then sickness, quarantine and gradual collapse. Creatures came out of the water, the army attacked them, but ran out of ammunition and retreated. Once they were gone, the last survivors started getting out. I was walking when Joel picked me up."

Daniel nods. "Pretty rough, eh?"

"Rough on everyone."

Three of the passengers hold the boy out over the road. He's crying, but starts to do his business. I can see scars on his legs, evidence of his infection and recovery. It's rare to see kids survive the Pandoravirus. The new smell makes my stomach turn. I clench my teeth to hold down what's left of my breakfast. When the child's done, they pass him back in and down the line to his mother. The man who spoke up, grabs the door, hauling it shut and the van starts to pick up speed.

"How long until we get somewhere?" Daniel shouts.

"A night and a day," Joel grunts over his shoulder. "Maybe more if you need more stops!"

When I wake up again, the dawn light is streaming onto my face through the van windows. Daniel's head is resting on my shoulder. I decide not to move for a bit, letting him sleep.

From this position, I can get a good look at him. He's in his thirties, a few years older than me. He's wearing a jacket and shirt, the collar unbuttoned, as if he was wearing a tie before. I can see under the shirt, and the line of puckered scars down his chest. They look the same as the ones on my arms and the ones I saw on the boy. Those wounds never heal properly, they never disappear, as if we need a reminder of what happened to each of us.

A business man, sleeping on a teenage girl wearing a hoodie and ripped jeans. At any other time, it wouldn't happen. The apocalypse makes for strange bedfellows.

I look around the van. It's quiet. I can't see anyone else awake. The driver has stayed up all night. I can just see him, still hunched over the wheel, like before, focused on his mission to deliver us to a promised Eden, amidst the ruin of the world.

Daniel stirs and shifts away from me. He blinks and smiles at me. "Good morning," he says.

"Same to you," I reply.

The van shudders and jerks to a stop. "We'll stop here for an hour," Joel announces. "Everyone out!"

There's groans from all around me as people struggle to wake up and stumble towards the doors.

The side rolls back and I'm drawn outside with the rest. The morning air is fresh and clean. I can't believe how many people were packed into the van. There must be thirty or more. I'm—

"You okay?"

Daniel's looking at me. I realise I'm staring and I'm in the way. I step away from the door and glance around. We're at the side of the highway. There's burned out cars and rubbish all over the place. The tarmac is breaking up as nature runs rampant underneath. Something changed when the virus came, stirring the subjugated greenery to war against us as well. I can't believe Joel managed to drive through all this muck at night.

Fog clings to the barren land either side of the road, the same dark fog we've all become used to, after it came out of the ocean and fouled the sea breeze. The sun'll burn it away later, but for now, it's an unpleasant reminder of the dangers lurking all around us out here.

"What do you know about Joel?" Daniel asks.

"Not much. He barely spoke to me when I got on," I reply.

"He's with the monks," Daniel explains. "That's where he's taking us. Some place called Anannage, where they're based. You've got the mark, that's why he let you join us."

"I guessed as much."

"We're all the same. People who got infected and survived."

"looks like Joel got the worst of it, I'd say."

"Maybe." Daniel sits down on the roadside crash barrier. Beyond him, our fellow passengers are wandering around in the mud. "Anannage is a gated community – a whole town, walled off from the world. Before the government fell apart, the Disciples of Anu bought it and set up shop. They're stocked to last for years, if you fancy prison for the rest of your life."

"How do you know?"

"They tried to take me before, one of them told me all about it. I didn't want to go then. Now, I've no other option."

Someone's watching us. I turn around and see Joel leaning against the side of the van. He looks exhausted, barely on his feet. His hands are fumbling with an old metal lighter and a rolled-up cigarette. "Monks ain't all that bad," he grunts. "A long life in this world is a rare thing. Prayers at dawn and sunset every day i'nt much of a sacrifice for three good meals and a warm bed."

"You believe in their god, Anu?" I ask.

Joel shrugs. "I say the words and kneel when I'm told. I do the jobs I'm given, like rounding up all of you. T'i'nt so bad."

"And you're happy with that?"

"Like I said, I say the words. I'm no Disciple."

Daniel laughs, but there's no humour in the sound. "Sounds idyllic. Give up your freedom, accept our chains, stop caring and we'll take all your troubles away."

Joel grunts. He lifts a cigarette to his lips with trembling fingers and after a try or two, manages to light it. "This world ain't for saving if you ask me. All we got left is to find a good place to live out our days."

"There were churches, mosques and synagogues all over the world, with people worshipping in them," Daniel says. "Did any of their prayers stop the virus? Or kill the crab men that came out of the sea?"

"The Disciples are different," Joel replies.

"How?"

"That's not for me to tell."

I frown. "You're taking us to them. What should we expect?"

Joel puffs on his cigarette and seems to relax. "Mostly what I said. Three good meals, a bed, morning and evening service, study time. You'll be working as well, like we all do, when we're not getting treatment."

"Treatment?"

"Yeah, treatment. You were picked because you survived. They need to figure out how."

"Surely, we were chosen by Anu, or whatever?" Daniel suggests.

Joel laughs this time. He drops the remains of the cigarette and grinds it under his heel. As he does, I notice a bulge on his belt. He's carrying a pistol. Looks like an old drum revolver, like my dad used to keep in his display cabinet at home. "If there's one thing you should learn from the Disciples, it's that religion doesn't have to make you blind or ignorant. They might wear masks and talk like they belong in a book, but they're not fools. Anu's the oldest god in the world. I did some readin' before the web went down an' you'll get a chance to do the same. There's a terminal archive in the compound you can access to learn all about the 'Sky-Father'. The High Shepherd wants folk to ask 'im questions too.

"A religion, that thinks?" I say. "Sounds dangerous."

"It is," Joel says. "Might be it'll save the world."

An hour later and we're back in our seats and back on the road.

I went to Sunday school for a while, when I was really young. Back then, we used to live just outside Baltimore, before the sea claimed it. My parents took me to a Baptist Church, sat me on a wooden chair and fucked off for most of the day. A grey-haired woman in a weird dress would get us to colour in pictures and repeat some phrases she read out from a big book.

I don't recall any of the words, but those pictures stayed with me. There were lots of Romans and Jesus carrying his cross. I used to dig out the lumi markers from the pen box and really go to town. The people weren't like me, so they needed bright yellow and green faces. No-one seemed to mind. There was one day when a kid coloured Jesus in brown. He got called out and told off. I don't remember why.

Later, I realised my parents didn't believe in any god. Sending me to the Baptists had been a clear case of 'do as I say, don't do as I do.' Sure, they started praying when they got sick, like most people did. That kind of lodged promise religion people discover when they start thinking about oblivion. Can't hurt when there's no other choice, right?

My stomach rumbles. There isn't much to eat. Some of the others found a truck carrying canned peaches and passed a few around. It's not enough, but it reminds me how long it's been since I ate a proper meal.

Daniel touches my shoulder and leans in close. "You hear what he said about 'treatment'?" he whispers.

I nod.

“That make you nervous?”

I turn towards him. “A bit,” I admit.

“You remember all the stuff on the news before it went dark? About CDC experiments and government authorised surgeries on people?” Daniel looks really worried now. I can see he’s weighing up his options. “You think that’s what they want to do with us?”

I stare at him. “You must have known some of this before you got on.”

“I thought I was going to a commune. Not some science experiment.”

“They picked us because we’ve been infected and survived.”

“I thought that was a religious thing, deliverance from the apocalypse, chosen of the new world and all that. Not some sort of lab rat research.”

“Maybe it’s both.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“What other options have we got?”

Daniel turns away, to look out of the window. “There’s lines that I’m not prepared to cross,” he says.

“Sure, we’ve got to give up some of what we had, the world can’t go back to the way it was, but I can’t...” he swallows. “I won’t let them cut me open like something out of the dark ages.”

“Perhaps it won’t come to that?”

He glares at me. “You willing to take that chance?”

I frown and think about it, looking down at my feet while he waits for an answer. I get what he means. The shoes I’m wearing are damp and full of holes. I remember when I got them. Eighty dollars for a pair of sneakers, back when eighty dollars meant something. I could have grabbed something better off a body on the street or raided a store, but I didn’t. I need these shoes to remind me of what we’re trying to get back to.

They're a crutch. Is that the problem?

"The world's changed," I say at last. "The cities, nations, all of it is gone. We'll never be who we were, what we were. We can't know what the new rules are – what's required of us just to live."

"We're better than this," Daniel says. "We're individuals, not sacks of meat."

I raise my head again, meeting his gaze. "What did you used to do for work?" I ask.

"What's that got to do with—"

"Indulge me."

Daniel sighs. "I was a stock trader. Some people have issues with that."

"Doesn't matter to me," I say. "I was a bike messenger. Point is, you're out of date – we both are."

We have to find out what makes us useful in this new world, not try to reclaim a past that'll never come back."

"You mean, by selling bits of ourselves?"

"We always sold bits of ourselves. These are just different bits."

Daniel shakes his head. "Thanks, but you're not convincing me. Next time we stop, I'm getting off."

"You'll be in the middle of nowhere with no food and water. How long do you think you'll last?"

"I'll take my chances."

After that, we sit in silence. I fall asleep for a while, dreaming of coloured pens and children singing songs. When I wake up, Daniel is staring out of the window at the road and the world passing by.

He's counting the moments until we stop again. He's going to disappear, leave the rest of us to our dark salvation. "If Joel notices you're gone, he'll be pissed," I say.

"I have to get out of here," Daniel says.

Someone touches my shoulder. I turn and see the boy from the previous night standing next to me. He touches a finger to his lips and points back down the aisle to the back doors of the van. I can see the scarred man who helped him sit there on the floor with the boy's mother asleep on his shoulder.

The man beckons to me. There's something about him. A strange certainty in the way he carries himself. He's confident and projects reassurance. I glance at Daniel. He's paying me no attention. I get up and pick my way over people to the back of the van.

"Hello Jess," the man says. "My name is Peter."

"Hello, Peter," I say. "What do you want?"

Peter nods, gesturing past me. "Your friend, Daniel, I'm worried about him."

"How do you know our names?" I ask.

"Joel told me who you are," Peter explains. "We spoke about you both at the last stop."

I nod. "Okay. But, if you've got a problem with Daniel, you should be talking to him, not me."

Peter carefully extricates himself from the sleeping woman and stands up. "That was my plan," he says. "But I wanted to switch seats with you."

I let him past and squat down in the aisle with the sleeping woman and her boy. Peter moves up to my empty place. He sits down, but makes no move to pull Daniel into a conversation.

After a moment or two, the van begins to slow. We bump across the uneven verge and stop.

"Breaktime!" Joel yells.

Daniel stands up and yanks open the door. Peter moves outside. I lose sight of them both as people shuffle forwards, eager for another moment in the air. I struggle to my feet and join the back of the group.

I'm outside standing there alone as everyone else scatters into the grassland. I can't see Daniel or Peter. It's late afternoon. The unnatural fog hugs the treeline in the distance. As the sun sets, it'll reclaim these fields and the road. The sun's on its way down. We're cutting it pretty tight. After this, Joel will be planning to drive on overnight.

If Daniel's going to escape, he'll have to go now and he'll have to find shelter before it gets dark.

Maybe he's already gone?

Someone screams and I look around. I can't see who it is. Something's happened on the far side of the van, out across the road. I hurry around the driver's side. People are running back towards me, Joel holding his revolver, pointing it at something further away. He fires at shadowy hulking shapes in the darkness. "Get back inside!" he screams. "Hurry!"

A huge spider-like leg appears out of the gloom, followed by another and another. There's more shouts and more gunfire; an automatic rifle of some kind, pattering into the seething fog. In response, the spider legs retreat. There's inhuman cries, creatures I've heard before when the army at Pine Bluff tried to fight whatever came out of the water.

I'm not going back to all that!

I turn around immediately and throw myself into the driver's seat. It's been years since I've done this, but Joel's left the keys in the ignition. I stamp on the accelerator and turn the key. The engine roars to life as people jam themselves into the seats behind me. "Move!" somebody shouts.

"I don't know where we're going!" I yell back.

"I do!" Suddenly, Peter is next to me. He's covered in blood. "Drive!" he orders.

I don't need telling again. I hammer the gearstick into place and the van leaps forward, bouncing over the rough ground and back on the road.

"Head straight on," Peter says. "I'll tell you when to make a turn." He's holding an assault rifle. He winds down the passenger window, leans out and fires. The noise this close is deafening. More cries echo out from behind us.

There's a loud bang and the scraping sound of metal. We're slowing, the van lurches to the is being dragged back by something... something massive!

I glance at the wing mirror on the passenger side. A dark shape blocks any view of the road behind us. A clawed hand reaches out and window glass shatters as it grabs the door frame. A man behind me screams.

Peter leaps forward, a long knife in his hand. He seizes the unnatural arm, stabbing at it with the knife. There's a guttural cry from outside and a fresh stink as dark red blood sprays across the windscreen. Peter twists the limb, somehow, breaking its grip. The van lurches again and suddenly, we're free.

"Faster!" Peter urges.

"How did you—"

"Save your questions for later! Get us clear!"

I drive as fast as I can, weaving around wrecked cars and potholes. The fear keeps me sharp and focused. I guess this is how Joel managed for so long. "What happened to the others?" I ask.

"If they're not in here, they're dead," Peter replies. "We'll be dead too, if you don't get us out!"

Appendix D: Phoenix Point Stories

How long do I drive like that? My foot jammed on the floor, eyes peering into the fading light. How long does it last? Could have been minutes or hours, I don't know, I can't tell. All I can see are shapes and shadows to swerve and avoid.

At some point, I turn on the headlights. Are we being pursued? I don't know. But we have to assume they're right behind us, waiting for a moment of weakness. Until I'm told otherwise, I have to push on as fast as I can, risking everything with each swerve of the wheel, fighting to keep us alive, fighting to—

"Okay, ease off now, I think we're clear."

It's a man's voice, a familiar voice. It takes a moment for me to remember who. His name is Peter. He's sat next to me. I lean back, relax my foot. The van slows, but we keep on going.

"Make a right turn at the crossroads, then take the next left. The road'll wind up hill for about half a mile before we reach the fence."

"Fence?"

"Yeah, it's the outside of the compound – where we're going."

It comes back to me. Me, Peter, the passengers, we're all survivors, fleeing the remains of our life to start something different. "The Disciples of Anu," I remember aloud.

"Yes, that's who we are," Peter says. "When we get through the fence, you'll be with us, under our protection."

I look at him. Peter's leaning back in his seat, breathing hard. There's claw marks across his scarred neck. His face is slick with sweat. "You're a Disciple," I realise. "You've been with us the whole time."

"This is our way," Peter says. "Without me, you'd be dead."

"You don't wear the mask and the cloak."

"If I did, I wouldn't be able to do my job."

I swallow past the lump in my throat and take a deep breath. "What happened to Joel and Daniel? Did they make it?"

"I don't think so," Peter replies.

"Did the giant spider get them?"

"I didn't see a giant spider."

The road ahead is clear. I risk a look over my shoulder. The survivors are huddled together in silence. There are less than before and it's worse, a lot worse. They're all too terrified to cry. Instead, they exist; measuring one breath after another. They've shut down to endure the present. We're all clinging on to one last feeble hope.

"What will you do with us?" I ask Peter.

"What we would have done with you before; brought you in, given you food and shelter. We are shepherds and you are here to join our flock."

"Will you experiment on us?"

"Yes. We experiment on everyone, including ourselves."

"Why?"

"Because humanity has to survive. There is no other way."

We drive on in silence and come to the fence. Peter tells me to stop and gets out. I can see lights and figures the other side of the wire mesh. Peter is talking to them. They shake hands and he returns to the van, climbing back into his seat.

"Welcome to your new life, people," he announces to our passengers. "Congratulations, you made it."

Silence greets him in reply.

I sigh, gun the engine and drive through the gate.

Appendix E: Published Papers

The following articles are papers I have written and submitted to academic journals, magazines and websites as part of this research. Each is included for your interest and illustrates some of the analysis of my process I made during my study and some of the different ways in which I applied this analysis for other work.

Again, each document is included 'as is', so as to best showcase what was submitted to each publisher.

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The Myth Misunderstanding (2014)

How to make stories linger...

In June 2014, Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier, two twelve-year-old girls from the Milwaukee suburb of Waukesha, Wisconsin, lured a classmate into woods and stabbed her eighteen times. When questioned, Geyser and Weier told police they read about the fictional character 'Slender Man' on a website wiki known as Creepypasta (<http://www.creepypasta.com>), where scary stories are submitted by users.

The origin of the Slender Man dates back to 2009, when it first appeared in a photoshop contest on the Something Awful Forums (<http://forums.somethingawful.com>). Eric Knudsen altered an image of a group of children at camp to include a mysterious humanlike creature looking over them. The creature was quickly named and other images followed, playing on the idea of observation. Each time the addition changed the tone of the picture, giving it a sinister quality.

In July 2012, a free to download first person mini-game called 'Slender: The Eight Pages' appeared on the internet. Written in Unity, it pitched the player into darkened woodland, with a torch, looking for pieces of paper. Each use of the torch attracted the Slender Man and when the player looked at him, they started to die. The personification element along with the sound ambiance and established legend made for a visceral and chilling, but wholly bloodless experience.

The website crashed multiple times owing to the number of downloads. Since then, multiple sequels have been created by other programmers and a plethora of fiction has appeared across many websites. The Slender Man is the ultimate in mythic monsters; a character engineered by creative democracy appearing everywhere someone has the inclination to place him. A myth built on the classic phenomenon of spirit photography popularised by William Mumler back in the 1860s.

Whilst the circumstances of Geyser and Weier's criminal behaviour are deplorable, their connection to the Slender Man myth can be likened to a whole lineage of incidents. Irving Lee 'Bink' Pulling's

suicide after allegedly playing Dungeons and Dragons in 1982, Martin Denham's suicide after watching Ghostwatch in 1992 and the James Bulger murder in 1993 after his killers John Venables and Robert Thompson were allegedly influenced by watching the 18-rated film, Child's Play 3.

The examples demonstrate the enduring qualities of mythmaking. The popular perception of myth revolves around the ideas of the ancient and forgotten. A mythology is a collection of myths and indeed these ancient tales are collections along a theme. Readers think of the ancient Greeks, Romans or Norse, for example, which are all strong groups of writing dealing with all manner of human and godlike behaviour.

When examining the meaning of myth, mythology and the mythologising process, we find a great deal more of interest to a writer who is attempting to make their story memorable.

Myth permeates all writing, whether through conscious intent of the writer or not. Joseph Campbell's work *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) outlines the principles of the monomyth; the idea that mythology is all pervasive, that humanity looks for meaning and symbolism in all things.

It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation.

Campbell J. *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (California: 3rd Edition New World Library, 2012), page 1.

Although less prosaic in his assertion, influential French writer, Roland Barthes agrees:

Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.

Barthes R. *Mythologies* (London: Paladin Books, 1972), page 109.

Barthes and Campbell share the view that popular myths have evolved through time, reflecting the changing nature of perceived reality and truth to which society has had to adjust. We empathise and sympathise through familiar forms, though each perception and identification of the familiar is coloured by our individual experience and cultural context. This cloak is a common garb that may be

worn by the story to draw the reader in. When used in this way it can deliver a cathartic escape. The cares and passions of the story protagonist are felt keenly by the reader when they at first seem similar, but then take on a rationalised path of their own.

There is an opportunity for the writer in this to tap into the mind of the reader audience and make use of their imagination to support their own work. The conceptual images that set out a story's initial premise are often related to the reader's own context, particularly when defining character attributes or circumstances.

It is the mark of the timelessness of a story when the relatable context can change depending upon the readers own experience. Many tales retain their original quality when this resonance remains poignant, but others are reinvented to emphasise the new cultural context in which they are being received.

For the modern writer, a relationship with older stories and speculations can prove fruitful when attempting to step beyond the cathartic experience of a contained work. Connecting to established myth suggests a deeper, partially obscured layer to the story at hand. Playing with the familiar and offering new explanations for it is a practice that allows both a relatable context and new creativity. When written carefully so as not to detract from other stories that may use similar themes, the work can also enhance them.

This process of writing supportive fiction is a longstanding tradition at odds with our modern concepts of intellectual property. The characters of popular stories drew an audience, so the creation of new narratives for them by a storyteller in any context seems a natural choice. In a less global society, such appropriation remained locally limited. There were few Hesiods or Brothers Grimm walking the world to collect up variations. Stories remained fluid, their changes designed to appeal to each differing audience. Yet, as the world grows smaller to us, so the myths collate and become rigid.

For example, the legend around vampires has existed in literature since the late 19th century (and arguably earlier). The vampire in modern stories comes with a lexicon of baggage (crosses, stakes, garlic, coffins, fangs, can't go out in daylight, etc.). When using the archetype, a writer can assume they their reader is approaching the text with knowledge of vampires derived from other stories. They will imagine scenes and characters based on what they already experienced in other works. The writer can use these assumptions or challenge them. In some cases, the use provides a framework to the story, in other cases, a limitation. A challenge can provoke interest and confront the reader assumptions.

Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I can't get used to it, though I've been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glistening like crystal.

S. Meyer. *Twilight* (New York City: Little, Brown and Co. 2005), page 228.

Stephanie Meyer's decision to make her vampires sparkle in sunlight goes against the established lore of previous vampire novels by other authors. It provoked conflict amongst readers of this fiction, some defended her work and her decisions, others rallied against her, even fellow vampire aficionado Anne Rice commented that her characters, 'Lestat and Louie feel sorry for vampires that sparkle in the sun' (A. Rice

<https://www.facebook.com/anнерicefanpage/posts/10150436358660452>)

But why? The vampire is a fictitious creature, why does a redefinition matter? Perhaps because it interferes with the established image in the mind of the reader. The idea of a different image, where the story is decoupled from other similar fiction and the vampire is different to such an extent that it denies the place of other stories in its world, forces the reader to reassess the story on its own terms. In some cases when this happens, the illusion of depth constructed by making the story supportive is cast aside, leaving a weaker tale standing awkwardly on frail legs. Perhaps this might

be ignored when dealing with location or circumstance, but the specific differences in character weakness and physiology in the example above is for some, a contrivance too far.

Nevertheless, the argument alone makes the story memorable. Granted, others may cite the testimonial prose, or the clarity of identifiable character constructed in the text, relating back to the point on identification and empathy, but these are a matter of craft. The divergence from established lore is an obvious conscious choice, forcing the reader to make a similar decision in their acceptance.

Another means by which a writer can make use of myth is by invention. This can be initially through establishing ideas that the reader can relate to that are shaped in the text to leave an impression long after the story has concluded, or by pure invention of the loose end that will remain.

If you look in the mirror and you say his name five times, he'll appear behind you breathing down your neck.

B. Rose, C. Barker. *Candyman*. (California: Tri Star Pictures, 1992).

Dad, do you think there's people on other planets?

I don't know, Sparks. But I guess I'd say if it is just us... seems like an awful waste of space.

R. Zemeckis. *Contact*. (California: Warner Bros, 1997)

'I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy of the Big People, as they call us. They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off.'

Tolkien J. R. R. *The Hobbit* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975), page 14.

Constructions like this encourage speculation in the mind of the reader. They make you look around the corner for Hobbits, stare into mirrors and say names, or gaze up at the sky and wonder. They entice readers toward additional stories. Unanswered questions or missing details when carefully balanced, let the tale continue on, but if they are not balanced, they can frustrate.

The obvious examples here lie in cliff-hangers and setups for sequel writing, yet these have a clear purpose. The television series, *Lost* drew a massive audience owing to its open fictional premise and feel, coupled with a supernatural conundrum. It learned the lesson of *Twin Peaks*, maintaining an accessible narrative along with accessible characters, whose stories were told in a patchwork of perspective and flashback. The propensity of speculative episode endings and enigmas defined patterns of behaviour. The audience spent a great deal of time watching episodes and came away speculating over what they'd learned. It seemed on every level that any time you got close to getting an answer for something, that answer raised two more questions.

Lost engaged the imagination of its audience through the speculation. The Internet became an outlet, with Lostpedia (<http://lostpedia.wikia.com>) providing one dumping ground for theories. J. J. Abrams' production team encouraged this further by launching spurious websites that contained more information, but this wasn't just expanding the narrative. Clues and Easter eggs abounded, creating hierarchies of audience privilege. If you knew more, your theories and speculation might be nearer to the truth.

Of course, all this fevered possibility wasn't what everyone wanted. After a while, the habitual questioning became tiresome and frustrating. If you ask people 'Have you watched *Lost*?' your next question was usually, 'When did you stop?' Any television series advertising a new season with the slogan 'the answers are coming', must be aware of how frustrated audience had become.

This is the essence of speculative fiction. Science Fiction lends itself to speculation on the future as this is part of its functional mode. Fantasy is often a pure escape and can draw inspiration from past forms and brings us systemised magic, where unexplained feats and miracles are rationalised into a talent or skill, which becomes an aspiration for the reader to acquire. Horror can amplify fears and mysteries of the unexplained and seeking to involve us in its outcome.

All three genres use the reality of the reader as an anchor in part and it is this blurring that can sharpen the poignancy of mythologised components in the text. The idea that the new fiction offers

an explanation for old ideas, large questions or familiar themes becomes part of its attraction. Of these, Fantasy is the most diverting, Science Fiction the most rationalised and Horror the most remembered.

Returning to the example of Slender Man, we find ourselves presented with a question on this particular version of mythologising. If myth is all pervasive as Campbell and Barthes suggest, are we not all influenced by the stories we are told when we are young?

For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouses curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; helping to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him.

Bettelheim, B. *The Uses of Enchantment*. (London: Penguin Books, 1976), page 5.

Bettelheim's comments on fairy tales can be ascribed to the speculative genres as they actively seek to encourage imagination, albeit with different agendas. The 'solutions' assertion though suggests a rounded and wholesome outcome that helps the young define their world. There are many historic examples of stories where this was not the case. The boastful Miller of Rumpelstiltskin never received punishment, the Little Mermaid died of a broken heart, Heracles killed his children and Medusa was punished for being raped. Each tale finds a new audience with different cultural experience as it is passed on and where the story is altered its meaning is also changed.

In the case of Slender Man, the world definitions of Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier are connected to their reading in some way we may never learn and in turn, the mythology of the subject takes on new meaning to its audience through the associated events. The story will linger, whatever our moral judgment over its connection to the attack or otherwise. The fact that it lingers, demonstrates a lasting achievement. Although it for each of us to determine how much value we place in this legacy.

This paper was presented at the University of Winchester's Creative Writing Conference 'Make Every Word Hurt' in July 2014. It was submitted to the British Fantasy Society Journal in March 2014, accepted for Issue 14 and published in October 2014.

Developing Elite: Dangerous (2015)

Origins

At the start of November 2012, David Braben and his company Frontier Developments launched a crowd source campaign to fund the creation and release of a new videogame set in the Elite/Frontier Universe. This is *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) and after a successful campaign, it was released in late 2014.

Working with publishers was for me, not a brilliant experience and for me it would have been hard to get the game made, until recently, and so Kickstarter has changed that.

D. Braben. 'Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview', Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> [accessed 9th April 2015]

Crowd source funding for projects is not a new innovation. However, the rise of internet companies offering platforms to launch pitches for projects is a more recent development. Some examples are, *Indiegogo*, *Wefund* and *Crowdfunder*, with *Kickstarter* as the most popular. Crowd funding remains the fringe, operating as a hybrid between consumer purchase and micro investment. There are few guarantees beyond trust in the organiser and there is a difficulty for both the organiser and backer in determining how much influence they have in the development choices associated with the project.

Running a crowd funding project is an experience in elation and humility. Every pledge is an exciting and incredibly humbling moment. You think constantly about how much faith people are putting in you and the creative work you are proposing to make.

My involvement with *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) began when I saw the Kickstarter listing on the day it started. I cast my mind back to my experiences of *Elite* (1984) and *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993). I played the games for hours. They were an escape, a way to throw myself into another world that allowed me to imagine what it might be like out there. The sandbox environment left me room to create my own stories and let my imagination run wild.

In late 2012, I followed the crowdfunding campaign through its last days, pledging my support and

finding I was not alone. Thousands of fans had come aboard and were sharing their experiences of the previous games. The last days were halcyon as we could all see the project would be successful.

One of the offered 'rewards' from the project was to write a piece of official fiction set in the game universe. A diverse collection of writers, both experienced and inexperienced had backed sufficiently to achieve these rewards, myself amongst them, with a plan to write and publish *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014).

When the dust had settled, I contacted Frontier Developments and offered my services. My Masters in Research at the University of Bedfordshire in 2008 had involved the design of worlds in fantasy and science fiction. I thought I might be able to help the company sketch out information for the writers so they could create fiction that would be consistent with the game environment. The company in the shape of Michael Brookes, Andrew Gillett, John Laws and David Braben accepted my offer of assistance.

Worldbuilding

It is often asserted that 'Fantasy'. A particular brand of fantastic fiction that became a publishing industry in the wake of the success of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, and 'Science Fiction', a brand of fantastic fiction invented or re-invented, in the USA in the technophile 1920s, have little in common. The Middle-Earth-type fantasy is anti-machines, it inhabits an imaginary past of the human race rather than an imaginary future (though this 'past' may be set in some neo-medieval phase a thousand years ahead of us); it dwells on human relationships, the human condition, metaphysical or moral problems. Science fiction is pro-technology, always set in the future, rationally extrapolating from our present, and favours hard scientific exposition above human interest. In theory, this may be so. In real life, it can be difficult from outsiders, even insiders, to tell the difference between the two sub-genres, or separate their audiences. But one thing science fiction and fantasy certainly have in common is the imaginary world, a world that must be furnished with landscape, climate, cosmology, flora and fauna, human or otherwise self-aware population, culture and dialogue.

Jones, G. *Deconstructing the Starships*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), page 11.

There are many great world-makers in fiction; writers whose imagined realities are as much a character in their work as the characters themselves. In later times, this process has been about devising wholly new environments, whereas before, it was often inspired by earlier works.

For example, the Greek writer Hesiod, attempted to define the composition and origins of the Hellenistic pantheon. His work was complicated by existing stories, so his macrotext had to be constructed to include them. In *Theogony* (1966)¹ we have an early creation myth that attempts to capture and define the Gods of classical Achaea. The disparate nature of Greek society, sharing parts of their religion and culture between city state kingdoms, made for a fractured interpretation of the different aspects of their dogma. Hesiod attempts to knit these fractures together and, by using a creation myth, determines an absolute beginning, or *point of origin*, for all subsequent writing.

In addition to this, Hesiod describes each of his defined pantheon, bringing us an image of those he includes. This is relevant for the choice of who is present and who is not.

The *point of origin* is a practical concept when attempting to construct a macrotext. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance; the *point of departure*.



Formatively, many world creators begin this journey through questions, constructing a scattershot blueprint of their world, before framing it. In this process, the questions asked are just as important as the answers given, as these frame the design. The resultant document is a '42', in reference to Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1978); a collation of importance aspects.

¹ Believed to be first produced in 700BC (approx.).

However, unless this process is employed exhaustively, these remain a starting point of notes, expanding on the original inspiration behind the writing idea. In the example above, the separation of this material may exist only as Lewis' writing notes and these would inform his own work, as is the case with many writing projects still.

In the case of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) the established canon of the game lay in its prequels. *Elite* (1984), *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993) and *Frontier: First Encounters* (1995). Game manuals, Gazetteers and short story anthologies formed a body of published fiction that was difficult to obtain. In addition, *First Encounters* (1995) had an in-game news feed, full of ongoing news events and stories and a map of hundreds of star systems, all with government types and differing trade and industry bases, much of this procedurally generated, but with a check system that maintained consistency between each player's version of the game.

The first game, *Elite* (1984) was distributed by Acornsoft, for the BBC Microcomputer and later for a variety of other platforms. The original version was squeezed onto 22K and loaded via cassette or floppy disk. It was the most popular videogame of the 1980s and was one of the first true sandbox game experiences available. Co-creators, David Braben and Ian Bell had constructed a set of eight galaxies with two hundred and fifty-six star systems in each. However, these were procedurally generated, making them almost identical in look. The system names were allocated from a database, none of which resembled names given to actual star systems, making the whole experience a fantasy.

The game release came with a manual containing some fictional references and a novella, *The Dark Wheel* (1984) by the late Robert Holdstock.

In *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993), the galaxy was remodelled. A small selection of fictional systems from before were retained (these were the systems the player had started on in the previous game), but the rest were taken from astronomical star charts. The Sol system and Earth made their first appearances and the minimal backstory of the previous release was upgraded and connected to our

own time period. For the first time, we had a galactic date that referenced our own time. *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993) was set in AD 3200 and the game box came with a manual, gazetteer, and collection of short stories.

Between us, we assembled copies of these publications. I set to work on the one that had the nearest approximation to a timeline, the gazetteer from *Frontier: Elite 2*, released with the game in 1993. This established the backgrounds of several systems and gave us a thin timeline, listing notable events that had occurred between 1993 and 3200.

Mindful of my task, to produce working background material for the game and for the fiction projects to be produced alongside it, I set about writing a more detailed historical account. I took my cue from the style of the manual, and used the tone of a history text, narrating events. Where a major event was mentioned, I examined it, looked for other references assembling all information before adding character and context to give it flavour, all the while tracking every addition I had made. I recalled history books I'd read when I was younger. The ones where characters popped out of the pages were always more memorable. I remained conscious all work that I did was conceptual. Frontier Developments would take my ideas and decide what should be used and what should be rejected, but by having someone provide an initial blueprint, they could pick and choose. These draft guidebooks became the first incarnation of our *macrotext*.

The macrotext is the guide for a specific fictional world, the frame work through which a large project of multiple outputs can be devised. It is a structured document, enabling the development of expressions that fit the fictional world, but the elements of structure are drawn together for their function, not because of a pre-determined pattern in the narrative. The macrotext, is termed by some as a canon, or plot bible, but both terms don't really encapsulate its purpose. A world canon might include previously published work and is difficult to alter as it has been exposed to an audience. A 'plot bible' encompasses only plot. The macrotext is formative and evolves along with its outputs, aspiring to be everything required to be known about a world. The expressions enjoy a

formative relationship with this catalogue so as to maintain consistency with all other work produced in the same fictional space.

The macrotext is not a new phenomenon, but is a planned construct. In the past macrotexts have been developed to incorporate existing works into a larger canon. In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments. The benefit for the writer is that this larger canvas allows for a great deal of the problems of consistency and plausibility to be worked out before starting the story and/or involving others. The mutable nature of the document also encourages change and evaluation. Rather than seeing our labour as a lonely quest, we collaborate with other specialists, each accessing the macrotext to co-ordinate our efforts. It is changed as we develop new work, but in turn helps that new work find form.

What separates the macrotext from the previously defined concepts is its exclusivity within the devised world and its altered priority. The macrotext is a form of *ergodic literature*, as defined by Espen J. Aarseth, in that it is a text that that requires more than non-trivial effort to read (Aarseth: 1997). It is encoded to inspire other outputs which are released to a mass audience. The encoding of the work is not necessarily overt. The document may evolve and change based on the outputs it generates, but it tries to act as a bridge between each, maintaining their consistency. This temporal state is in itself a form of encoding as those accessing it cannot assume its permanence. Access to it, indicates intention to produce a further work. It exists between output forms and can inspire all sorts of different work, ensuring each connects and reinforces the other, creating a new form of mythopoeiac self-referentiality. It is here that transmedia storytelling finds its guide in examples like the world of *The Matrix* (1999), or *Star Wars* (1977) and more. The macrotext defines what exists and what cannot exist. It provides mutable rules in a fictitious world of make believe. It is a hyperreal construction or artefact and as such, obeys Baudrillard's assertion of taking primacy from reality (Baudrillard: 1981), which it may draw themes from. There is a dichotomy in that it tries to represent a new reality, but can never be as detailed as our own perception of reality, which in itself is a hyperreal construction.

For the modern writer, a relationship with older stories and speculations can prove fruitful when attempting to step beyond the cathartic experience of a contained work and project depth.

Connecting to established myth suggests a deeper, partially obscured layer to the story at hand.

Playing with the familiar and offering new explanations for it is a practice that allows both a relatable context and new creativity. When written carefully so as not to detract from other stories that may use similar themes, the work can also enhance them.

Within this developmental process, some participants arrived to develop their novels, others to determine source material for the game *Elite: Dangerous* (2014). In the new franchise release accompanying the computer game there are eleven current official novels, with a roleplaying game to follow. There was a legacy of older works which needed to find a home in the new revised background and by ensuring they fit, this creates another appeal to the audience who may have played or read them.

To date, the following outputs have been devised and published as part of the project:

Elite: Wanted (2014) – G. Deas

Elite: Docking is Difficult (2014) – G. Defoe

Elite: Nemorensis (2014) – S. Spurrier

Elite: Reclamation (2014) – D. Wagar

Elite: Lave Revolution (2014) – A. Stroud

Mostly Harmless (2014) – K. Russell

Tales from the Frontier (2014) – by Various

And here the Wheel (2014) – J. Harper

Out of the Darkness (2014) – T. James

Elite: Dangerous (2014) – Frontier Developments

Elite Legacy (2015) – M. Brookes

Elite Encounters: The Roleplaying Game (2015) – D. Hughes

With such a large body of work being produced in the same setting, by so many different writers and designers, the detail and consistency of background becomes a priority to preserve the connected qualities of each artefact, so that the consumer can see them as a whole fictional entity.

Writing guidance for this body of work meant producing material that could inspire. The majority of writers already had ideas as to what stories they were going to tell, but often these stories were based on their own experiences of the Elite franchise and would have to be made compatible with the new game. Throughout the process, the fiction writers had access to a private forum to ask specific questions of Frontier Developments about particular aspects of the game and how it would be implemented, so as to make their stories as close to the game experience as possible. Final judgements on difficult questions would be given by Michael Brookes the executive producer of the game, in consultation with the rest of the Frontier Developments team.

In the case of *Elite Dangerous* (2014), with the multitude of fiction projects, this consultancy of questions remained ongoing as writers queried elements of the design that had either not yet been determined, or were not thought of.

Many world creators begin this journey through questions, constructing a scattershot blueprint of their world, before framing it. In this process, the questions asked are just as important as the answers given, as these frame the design. The resultant document is a '42', in reference to the late Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1978); a collation of importance aspects. However, unless this process is employed exhaustively, these remain a starting point of notes, expanding on the original inspiration behind the writing idea.

My own work on creating transmedia narratives is through collaboration; creating outputs and guides for groups working on a particular fiction. I have worked on guides for the factions and corporations, timelines '42's and '101's, which are a concise document of what common knowledge people in a specific context might have. This has informed writers and helped produce stories that relate a familiar experience between outputs.

The World's Creator

Many fictional worlds have architects. These individuals are often the originators, who maintain a vested interest in how the world is shaped. Sometimes their view is informed by legacy, sometimes by their own vision.

The parameters afforded to a writer, working by negotiation in a world devised by someone else, are challenging. The opportunity and access, has to be weighed against the restriction of not having the final say over what is or is not permissible within that world. In the case of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014), the architect and originator of the project is David Braben.

When Elite was first conceived, it was the freedom Ian and I wanted ... it was the openness, the ability to do what you like, to be a bounty hunter, to be trader ...

D. Braben. 'Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview', Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> [accessed 9th April 2015]

This process of writing or drawing in the fictional world of another person is a tricky balance. The architect wishes to maintain their vision and it can be difficult to reconcile where something is improved. Similarly, the other creatives involved can only put down what they have managed to envision from the text already given. Traditionally, whilst the architect remains alive, their word on what is right or wrong remains sacrosanct. No one would argue with J.K. Rowling, or with George Lucas. However, in the latter example, we have interesting new ground, where the architect has sold the rights to his creation.

This method of working is not new. Throughout the ages artists have taken commissions from clients to produce creative works. The architect can be thought of as a wealthy patrician commissioning a sculpture for his Roman villa. Ultimately it is the patrician who must live with the sculpture, not the artist who made it.

However, in many mediums, this example is less relevant. When writing information for an online videogame, the interpretation of the architect, the writer, the design team, the programmers and

finally, the consumer themselves, comes into play. When this process is multiplied to involve ten, twenty, or thirty different fictional works all written by different fictional writers, it becomes a wild ride indeed. Granted, consultation is of a high priority to this process, but, ultimately, someone must make decisions. As a writer involved, whether you agree or not, the architect has the right to make those decisions and you must trust that they are making them with the best of intentions for the wider fictional context.

Developing Background and Form

As we worked, the new game premise emerged. The factions of the Elite/Frontier universe, the Duval Empire, the Federation and the Alliance of Independent systems (Frontier: First Encounters: 1995). The major corporations, Sirius, Mastopolos Mining, etc (Frontier: 1993). The majority of these entities were drawn together from the previous game publications, their back-stories updated to fit into the new game context and published in a series of guides released on the private writer's forum. By using the previous lore as a starting point, we would reach out to knowledgeable players of the franchise and by determining the function of each component in the new game we would make it feel plausible.

David Braben outlined a reversed design principle behind certain science fiction concepts in the game. For example, the use of hyperspace; with a wish to model the galaxy as accurately as possible through procedural generation, the distances involved in the game universe would be vast. To navigate them, the contrivance of hyperspace is essential, as is a fast travel in-system drive. So, Frontier looked at the design based on what they wanted the game to be able to do, compared to what was scientifically possible and then introduced technical nova to bridge the gap between the two.

In the Elite series of games if you like there's one big lie, that's hyperspace. Unfortunately, we need that, to make the world work.

D. Braben. 'Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview', Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> [accessed 9th April 2015]

Some discussions arose around the use (or not use) of accepted Science Fiction nova. The contrivance of artificial gravity was a particularly difficult topic. *Elite* (1984) and the games after it, featured rotational space stations. These formed an integral part of the game experience, as every player had to learn how to dock, matching their ship to a rotating letterbox entrance. This rite of passage was incredibly important and needed to be mastered to you could by docking computers.

The reason for the rotation was explained in the space station's need to generate gravity. However, a great deal of the official fiction, written and published in the game boxes, ignored the concept and had pilots merrily walking around their spaceships whilst tearing through the star systems.

For me, rotational space stations are an essential game aesthetic. They set the *Elite*/Frontier universe apart from other popular Science Fiction. Docking your spaceship with this moving structure was a seminal rite of passage in the old games and a requirement in the new instalment.

However when this information was released to the wider backer community, forum comments suggested many people seem to have difficult in accepting a rationale of 'no artificial gravity' in all of the fiction. This novum (Suvin: 1979) has been used in many science fiction works, so it feels familiar. If we don't use it, but use a different one, this appears to jar.

In the new written fiction accompanying the videogame *Elite: Dangerous* (2014), a concerted effort has been made to ensure the media operate with the same science fiction mechanics. Spaceships no longer have artificial gravity, unless rotation is implemented.

The difficulty people have with accepting an alternative contrivance, demonstrates the way in which we subconsciously build images of the writing we read, basing much from the text, but also from previous imaginings of other similar texts. When a writer goes against the accepted trope, it interferes with the previous frames the reader has built their imaginings from.

Christine Brooke-Rose in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (1983) introduces the megatext. This is expanded and refined by Damien Broderick in *Reading by Starlight* (1995). When examining the collected writing of the genre, Broderick identifies the conceptualising of future worlds as a comparative burden to the new writer (Broderick: 1995). The speculations of each fiction, authored by different individuals are consumed by an appreciative audience, but the rationales of pseudoscience used, create expectations of convenience for new writers, as readers imagine their worlds through the contrivances of the other science fiction they have read.

Brooke-Rose's original premise identified megatext-like qualities in Tolkien, but the purpose and construction of Tolkien's work is different. Broderick discusses Tolkien and identifies the widely different application of his mythology through the frame of the megatext, concluding that it doesn't apply as neatly as other Science Fiction examples, which build from the familiar into the unfamiliar.

So, its function is radically unlike that of any 'realist' megatext. Since the megatext is not "already known", it cannot fulfil the readability requirement, but on the contrary, produces a pseudo-exoticism, much of which can be savoured simply as such, rather than tactically understood.

Broderick D, *Reading by Starlight*. (London: Routledge, 1995), page 59.

In essence, this is where the practical concerns of world construction and communication different between the two genres. The techniques of fantasy are more overt, often building escapist realms that focus on the developed miasma and myth already in the mind of the reader. The connection with the real is less about possible futures and more about catharsis.

In the case of *Elite Dangerous* (2014), the material developed by me came from the parameters of mythopoeia outlined by Tolkien, rather than concerns for scientific accuracy, but this agenda was much more in the minds of David Braben and Frontier Developments.

I think the world has to feel believable. There are a lot of things that are part of that. Having the science right is probably for me, the top priority.

D. Braben. *Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview*, Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> [accessed 9th April 2015]

We found these two approaches are not incompatible. The mythopoeic approach brought themes from the older works, creating layers of meaning for the consumer to investigate.

Robert Holdstock's *The Dark Wheel* (1984) introduced several concepts and colloquialisms, some of which appeared in the original game *Elite* (1984), but others were beyond the technology of the time. The remlok for example:

It was a standard survival device, an instantly recognisable distress call indicating that it was being sent out from a small, remotely located, dying body. The alarm screeched out on forty channels, shifting wavelength within each channel four times a second. One hundred and twenty chances to catch attention ... (Holdstock, R.)

The remlok is a novum used in Holdstock's story as an emergency EVA device. *Elite* (1984) didn't have game play that included this, but the development of the fictional background and new parameters of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) meant it was an ideal component to be included. The remlok became a staple of the new fiction, activated in the game when the pilot's cockpit screen was broken and even appears as a corporation name in the space station hangar. The remlok serves a function and is a familiar pseudoscientific convenience for the consumer. In the mythopoeia, the name 'remlok', its spelling and expanded backstory from Holdstock's paragraph to a corporation specialising in life saving EVA equipment, links the new texts (game and written fiction) back to the original works.

A general consciousness of Fantasy and Science Fiction has emerged amongst readers and writers of the genre. This consciousness is quite discerning, in that it won't liken space adventures to sword and sorcery quests with magical rings, but there is still an element of comparing imagined experience. A difference between the two genres lies in the interpretation of this consciousness. In Fantasy, it is more often seen as a support, in Science Fiction, it can be supportive or critical, often depending on how predictive or escapist the writer is attempting to be. Where the text veers

towards space opera and escapism, it is usually clear the writer is not claiming any prophetic ground and the level of engagement changes. When based in science, and extemporising, the invented technology is examined in greater detail.

It is up to the individual writer how they use this consciousness, but in the modern context of 21st century writing, this consciousness exists and often the reader will already have an image or interpretation of how something should work.

If the writer elects to provide a different interpretation of the same idea, then they have to confront the reader's assumptions weigh the value of going against them; we are trying to find our own voice in a crowded inter-dimensional set of realities without disenfranchising the reader during their experience of our text. When you take into account that we are likely to have many readers and their relative reading experience will be almost infinitely diverse, it's a tough journey to map without making mistakes.

That said the requirements of divergent medium forms within a specific franchise can create complications without guidance. In this case, the need for gameplay to incorporate expectations of fun as well as ideas of legacy and accuracy converge.

A spaceship would be silent, but X-Wing fighters aren't really spaceships, they're Spitfires and P 51s.

Roberts, A. *Science Fiction: A Critical Idiom* 2nd Edition. (London: Routledge, 2006), page 27.

There is a tension in this approach, notably in the way nostalgia permeates a particular brand of populist science fiction, rather than prioritising the future thinking and rationalised visions. *Star Wars* (1977) is often cited as an example of this owing to the composition of its scenes.

Elite Dangerous (2014) takes the same cue, eschewing Newtonian theories of how motion in space works and taking a lead from what makes a fun experience playing a computer game, this is dogfighting inspired by World War II, noise in space and nebulae visible amidst the vast blanket of stars. These tropes are part of a particular brand of science fiction, the space opera and are

something the novels must reflect to remain part of the same fictional world in the mind of the reader.

In the case of a videogame tie-in, much of the visual imagery can be drawn by the reader from their game experience. This establishes the videogame as the 'canon leader' - a product which defines how all the other products will be experienced.

The remediation of themes from the old in this way provides a familiarity of theme and control, particularly when applied to a videogame, which relies on the re-interpretation of familiar control methods when providing the game experience. There is also a different evolution of purpose.

Videogames are a diversion, played for entertainment and popular interest. The writers and players of games are less interested in future prediction and the exploration of the human condition, but this might be a consequence of its youth as a past-time. The genre of the game is also applied in a different way, encompassing type of play as well as the prevalence of themes.

Videogames can be understood as collections of visual and aural codes designed to illicit a response from the player. These might include the use of colour coding, arrows and targets directing the player's movement, lights illuminating areas to be moved towards, or the monstrous growls of enemies, distinguishing them from more harmless characters. These are amongst the visual and aural codes of the videogame. Successful playing involves reading these cues correctly and responding accordingly in order to meaningfully engage with the game text: to achieve a high score, to vanquish the enemy, to progress to the next level.

Players are free to ignore, misinterpret or defy these videogame cues. But the existence of such formal systems of signification points to the way games structure the seemingly unstructured interactive gaming experience. In this respect, we may think of the videogame text as having a preferred playing, a version of the preferred reading which usefully incorporates a high score table. Kirkland E. *Restless Dreams in Silent Hill: Approaches to Videogame Analysis*,

Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association 2005,

<http://www.meccsa.org.uk/pdfs/meccsa-ampe-1-papers/MeCCSA-AMPE-Jan05-Kirkland.pdf>

The nature of an interactive medium is such that the consumer must participate in the experience in an active way to shape the narrative, transforming from reader to player and occasionally back

again. The illusions of control in this regard are well documented; there are few games that offer a truly open environment to the player, those that do, often favour an impersonality, letting the player shape the character of their in-game participant or 'Avatar'. This 'sandbox' idea offers the greatest illusion of choice owing to its lack of enforced linear path and multiple methods of keeping score. The only weakness is when a player hits the edge and the immersive qualities break down.

In the case of *Elite: Dangerous* (2014), the sandbox offered is a procedurally generated Milky Way galaxy; a vast number of space stations, planets and other features to explore and visit, potentially more than any one person could visit in their life time. This the incredible scale of this game environment pushes the walls of the sandbox back as far as they could be pushed. It does however create another weakness, namely the need to populate this vast arena with content. Much can be done with procedural coding, but to prevent repetition and add to the flavour of what is constructed, the work of writers in the fiction can be incorporated, tying the worlds, characters and contexts into the player's experience of the game.

The construction of different outputs in different mediums finds benefit in a concise brief on what other outputs are covering. This consistency can be essential when the release of these outputs is to be co-ordinated and there is no breathing room.

The absence of a macrotext for a world being used in a collaborative work makes the task of a writer choosing to create a new story more difficult. Reading all previous work set in the fiction world is a given requirement, but concise summaries pick out bits you may miss and help with a longer involved project, such as a novel.

The Role of Fans

In *Convergence Culture* (2005) Henry Jenkins discusses the power of fans to shape a media franchise. From *Spoiling Survivor* to Heather Lawver and the *Daily Prophet*, we have many examples of how enthusiastic fans have applied their creativity to their chosen passion, writing fiction (fic), making films and continuing stories.

The Elite/Frontier community is an invoked fanbase called to support a franchise via crowdsourcing funding and then involved in the construction of the videogame and its fiction. From the start, the pledge reward tiers offered gave clues as to how the supporters would be able to assist and influence the game's design and through the development process we have seen this realised. The Design Decision Forum has allowed Frontier Developments' staff to propose their thoughts on aspects of the game and the fans to comment and suggest changes. The most significant of these being proposal for in-system travel, changing from a series of waypoints to a 'frameshift' drive that allows players to explore the systems they are visiting.

With the writer's pack pledge offered as a backer reward for the game in the crowdfunding drive, many would-be authors ran crowdfunding campaigns themselves to raise the funds to afford it. These in turn, found ways to involve the fans, offering additional material, early access and character names as rewards to contributors.

From the point of view of Frontier Developments, this level of fan engagement serves a dual purpose. In one sense, the level of critical engagement provides a ready-made means test. In a second, it provides a marketing amplifier as the engaged backers, are predetermined to want the game to succeed. This coupled with an open attitude to posting test game footage online and embracing fan created content, establishes a positive community acting predominantly to assist in the game's success.

The involvement of fans in the process of game and fiction development has not always been smooth. The posting of initial design proposals led to hundreds of comments in reply, all expressing different preferences for the game's themes. Gradually, as time has gone on, this has settled down and the various forums assigned to pledge tiers now act as evaluation areas, with some occasional feature suggestion requests.

However, the role of the writer specifically in the project has been to enrich and provide a story (or stories) that give a route for people electing to play the game, to come up with their own narratives and imaginings attached to their gameplay.

You immerse yourself in the world more so than you actually care what the characters are doing.

Braben, D. *Outside Broadcast Pt2 – David Braben Interview, Lave Radio Special Episode, March 2014*, <http://laveradio.com/podcasts/LR-Bafta-DB-Interview.mp3> (accessed 9th April 2015)

At face value, this appears to prioritise the function of stories as vehicles to draw the reader into the wider game experience and in part, undermine the nuance of the texts themselves. However, as Gwyneth Jones points out:

A typical science fiction novel has little space for deep and studied characterisation, not because writers lack the skill (though they may) but because in the final analysis the characters are not people, they are pieces of equipment. They have no free will or independent existence; to attempt to perpetuate such illusions is hopeless. The same reductive effect is at work on the plot, where naked, artless ur-scenarios of quest, death, desire are openly displayed; and on the position of the author. And when I mention the demotion of the author I am not, or not only referring to the curious relationship between sf fandom and the sf writer. The self that speaks through the—literally—experimental narrative of sf is only contingently individual. What it speaks through its stock figures is not a privileged, arbitrary artistic experience, but something that can be tested and rejected: true in this set of circumstances, false otherwise.

Jones, G. *Deconstructing the Starships*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), page 11.

When considering the view that the mode or form of the text type prioritises characters as a function towards viewing the imagined world of the writer, or in this case, the writer, the other writers, the designers and ultimately, the world architect, then the genre lends itself to this collaborative and supportive approach. In the example of a videogame where the player's position is that of a spaceship pilot, operating the controls through a first-person view, the emphasis is placed

on the reader/user experience and the way in which their own story in the game echoes that of other characters in the fiction.

In 2007, I wrote a master's thesis outlining the concepts of macroplot and microplot. A macroplot in fiction is a plot that has world changing consequences (i.e. epic quality). A microplot, one that involves personal change to the characters involved. It is often by blending these two elements by the writer that we identify what we would determine as the fantasy genre. The difficulty with the use of macroplot is that on occasion it can become unworkable, particularly if the writer loses the character's sense of grounding in the world that they inhabit. Whilst for the most part a reader will accept that a writer chooses to write about particular characters because of their interesting lives, without a sense of empathic reality to the immediate concerns of their situation, the interest of the reader can be lost. For example, Frodo would not have been as identified with by the reader if Tolkien had not spent a great deal of time establishing the context of the life that he lived before being drawn into the quest of the ring and explaining the consequences for him by continuing. This empathy is continually reinforced in the plot of the story as Sam's dialogue is often used to remind Frodo of home, and relates their experiences directly to the cultural environment that they came from (Tolkien: 1954).

In *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) the supportive fiction projects become microplots to the macroplot of the game world itself. They mirror the role of the player, who also is a microplot contributor to this vast macro game environment of a procedurally generated Milky Way galaxy. The writers can use this perspective, allying their characters with the experience the player will get in the game, thereby invoking specific imaginings.

In the accompanying fiction, writers interpreted this in different ways. Some inspired by the vast expanse of the promised playing field, others looking to the histories of factions or corporations and personifying them in the scheming machinations of their characters.

In the past, The Elite/Frontier fictional universe was one without many human characters. The role of the player and viewpoint in the game came from 'Commander Jameson', the name that appeared when you first loaded the game, and that you could delete to input your own name.

Through Holdstock, we were introduced to Alex Ryder, Rafe Zetter and Elyssia Fields (Holdstock 1984). We learned of Raxxla, a mysterious term believed to be associated with the Dark Wheel order. In the Elite game manuals, we were given maps and detailed charts informing us of just how good our Cobra Mark III was by comparison to other ships we would meet in the game. There were data charts for each star system, giving us information on the planetary inhabitants living out their lives below us as we docked and traded at the space station.

In the subsequent games, mankind found this shifted fictional universe much lonelier and darker, despite its blue skies. Nevertheless, more names appeared: Hengist Duval, Meredith Argent and Cmdr J. Saunders to name but a few.

The Tie-in Novel

My own project, *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014) began later than some others, owing to my work on the guidebooks. It is set on Lave, the planet players began their experience with Elite on back in 1984, and tells the story of how the system went from being a Dictatorship in the previous games to being a democracy in the new game.

Owing to my work on the guide material and relationship with the fans of the previous games, I elected to tell a story that would showcase some of the lore developed for the game. By choosing a start point of AD 3265, my story could narrate events leading up to the game, starting in AD 3300 and complement it. It would also act as a bridge to the previous game, *Frontier First Encounters* (1995) set in AD 3250. Lave's position in the first game (*Elite* in 1984) had been one of power and focus. By the second and third games it was a backwater. The novel gave me an opportunity to tell the story of why this happened in the past and how it would change in the future.

From the moment that the trading ship, Avalonia, slipped its orbital berth above the planet Lave, and began to manoeuvre for the hyperspace jump point, its measureable life-span, and that of one of its two-man crew, was exactly eighteen minutes.

Holdstock, R. *The Dark Wheel* (Cambridge: Acornsoft, Cambridge. 1984), page 1.

This is the opening to Holdstock's story, the very first paragraph of the first chapter. It mentions the planet Lave, the same planet players began the original game from. Elements like this still mean a great deal to those who remember the games from their childhood and by preserving them and referring to them wherever possible, the entire project maintains its legacy. There are many examples where this occurs and often, writers drawn to the project are basing their ideas on the memorable elements they recalled from their own experience.

Mindful of the primary focus being the forthcoming game, I had no wish to tell too large a narrative, thereby drawing away attention, so the story of one planet's decline under a dictator, named in the Gazetteer accompanying *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993) seemed like a good choice.

As a writer, my work involved invoking the imagination of my reader. This is a writer's greatest ally and the exploration of any book is a silent partnership between both parties. Granted, as Philip Pullman states, the writer dictates the story (Pullman: 2008), but the reader creates the scenes in their mind. Finding ways to encourage this is essential, particularly balancing the image the reader gains with the one you have in your own mind. It was a source of great relief to me when, many years ago, I realised I don't have to make the two images the same, just similar enough for the story to work.

In writing a novel with a tie in to a videogame, the reader is likely to be a fan of the other elements of the franchise, or be introduced to the franchise through your work (which is quite a responsibility). If they are previous fans and arrive at your text from the game or other material, then the imaginations of some scenes covered by the same content, in this case the flying of spaceships, will be drawn from their experience of the game material. The writer, Michael A. Stackpole wrote the X-Wing series of novels, beginning with *X-Wing: Rogue Squadron* (1996). These

were a tie in to *Star Wars* (1977) and the *X-Wing* (1993) videogame, produced by Lucas Arts.

Stackpole's spaceship combat scenes invoked the atmosphere of the films and described elements that clearly drew on his experience of the videogame franchise. In a sense, this close allegiance is an intentional mesh of the megatext and to a point, insulates the fiction project from the criticisms applied to other work in the genre or rather, makes the criticisms only valid to the franchise itself. Unless given an unusual remit, the story must make use of the same contrivances and pseudoscience utilised by the other texts that are part of the project.

The guidebook resources and source material provided a means for me to tie in all sorts of things from the older games; small references to locations, companies, indigenous life forms, etc. Within the context of my portion of the game environment, establishing elements for the other writers and developing content for my own story, provides a sprinkling of detail on a large canvas, but also informs the procedural generated content.

I like writing background, history, and concordance information that can be attached to a fictional story. It is this additional information that can give a story a sense of size. A multitude of viewpoints in a novel can prevent the writer and the reader from connecting with a character or characters. If the story perspective is diversified too much, we lose the microplot of the individual. We can also lose the emotional connection with an individual character's plight.

However, when additional material is organised into an appendix or other equivalent section, we learn as readers to set this aside if we are more interested in the fictional story itself. Sometimes as readers, we come back to these appendices, looking for more information when the story is done. This is a well-trodden path famously employed by Tolkien in *The Return of the King* (1955), although, the forms used there are different to those that may come naturally to science fiction. Journalist articles, historical accounts, police reports, email messages; each are remediated forms from a modern context, but contemporary enough to be used and adapted into a future context when de-familiarised with some stylistic tweaks. Also, changes in perspective, maintaining a connection to

characters within the story gives opportunity for further layering, as do coded messages and a missing chapter.

The finished result is a microcosm of the design principles outlined for the new game and fiction.

Elite: Lave Revolution (2014) is a layered text, telling the story of individuals leading to an event (the planetary revolution). The additional material closing chapters and in the appendices then provide new perspectives and embellishments on that material.

Having completed the book, it is my intention to continue the story with Frontier Developments. An ongoing news feed in *Elite: Dangerous* (2014) provides an opportunity to link in new stories and seed new story information. Additionally, I left some loose ends in my work for the game to make use of as plot lines in the videogame. The conclusion leaves room for another tale of Lave, set before the game begins in AD 3300.

This paper was submitted to *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* in April 2014 for the computer games special edition to be published in December 2014. Owing to editor illness this issue was cancelled. The paper has been revised into this current form and was published in May 2015.

From the Megatext to the Macrotext (2015)

As a theorist and writer, Professor Christine Brooke-Rose was experimental and a proponent of the essentiality of the text, looking at omission to demonstrate meaning in language. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic* (1983), she introduces us to the *megatext* (page 42); a blueprint-like concept where the world values of a book are explained .

Brooke-Rose begins her study of this with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1951). She acknowledges the popularity and effect of the work as a preeminent fantasy quest and examines it from a structuralist viewpoint, breaking down the components into likened elements; the quest narrative itself being a common trope as are the defined roles of characters as plot functions or representation functions demonstrating the unity of peoples in opposition to Middle-Earth's villain.

Brooke-Rose builds her argument from the work of Roland Barthes and his referential code (Barthes: 1971). This is a study in familiarity as the narrative uses our own knowledge and experience of parallel works as a backdrop to its story. The sedentary life experience generated is recognised by us and used as an anchor for the narrative. It is the shared conceptual memory of related forms to the story being told.

It is in *the appeal to memory* (Barthes: 1971) that we find a starting point to the concept of the megatext, although not perhaps as Brooke-Rose intended at the time she wrote her book. Initially she uses the term to describe the expositional back story that is woven into Tolkien's work.

The Lord of the Rings] like SF but more so, is particularly interesting in that there is such a megatext, not pre-existent but entirely invented, yet treated with the utmost seriousness and in great detail, thus destroying the element of recognition and hence readability which this feature provides in the realistic novel and causing on the contrary a plethora of information and the collapse of the referential code...

C. Brooke-Rose. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), page 243.

The conclusion of this analysis is difficult to digest when other critics have drawn comparisons of the Shire, to the pre-industrialised agricultural idylls of England and likened the Dead Marshes to the battlefields of the First World War.

Apart from the 'hypertrophic' redundancy in the in the text itself, the recapitulations and repetitions, there are long appendices, not only on the history and genealogy but on the language of elves, dwarves, wizards and other powers, together with their philological development, appendices which though ostensibly given to create belief in the 'reality' of these societies, in fact and even frankly playfully reflect the author's private professional interest in this particular slice of knowledge, rather than narrative necessity, since all of the examples of runic and other messages inside the narrative are both given in the original and translated. Nor are the histories and genealogies in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies, whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish.

C. Brooke-Rose. [Rhetoric, page 247].

The 'hypotrophic redundancy' of Lord of the Rings is a common criticism. The prose is thick and littered with self-referentiality for a reason which Brooke-Rose describes as 'infantile happiness'. Her argument is that this is because of the author's 'professional interest' and she infers that it has no purpose. However, this jams together many things under one criticism and does not really examine their function or effect (Brooke-Rose: 1983).

Writing in *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, author Michael Moorcock, calls Tolkien's descriptive style 'Epic Pooh' showing a comparison to A. A. Milne.

The sort of prose most often identified with "high" fantasy is the prose of the nursery room. It is a lullaby, it is meant to soothe and console. It is mouth-music. It is frequently enjoyed not for its tensions but for its lack of tensions. It coddles, it makes friends with you; it tells you comforting lies. It is soft.

Moorcock, M. *Wizardry and Wild Romance*. (London: Monkey Brain Books, 2004), page 123.

Moorcock's criticism focuses on the familiarity of Tolkien's descriptive writing, suggesting it is an evocation of children's stories and the simplified world of the fairy tale. This is a wholly familiar

world to us and is a clear *appeal to memory* (Barthes: 1971) which in part, contradicts Brooke-Rose's assertion of a collapsed referential code (Brooke-Rose: 1983). However, there is an expositional weight as she suggests, to seemingly define many of the story concepts.

Brooke-Rose indicates Tolkien's megatext is wholly unique to the author's invention, but this does not appear to be the case. To suggest Tolkien's work doesn't use the familiar and generate recognition is denying many of its themes; the homely pre-industrialised echo of the Shire, the Anglo-Celtic resonance of the Rohrimm² and the good/evil binary of characters. Granted, Tolkien does reinvent contexts, but Middle Earth is made familiar by so many of its aspects, not least its name. Much as some are not in the immediate mind of the reader/viewer they are as much a part of the background story memory as any other work of fiction, but are applied to the adopted form.

In Tolkien's hands, the Elf takes on a new image from its Norse origins with invented language and image transposed into a new mythology. Our own language is also accidentally re-written with the word "Dwarves" becoming an accepted plural form. In Middle-Earth, we have many familiar tropes retranslated into a new fantasy world, although not completely.

'I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy of the Big People, as they call us. They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off.'

Tolkien J. R. R. *The Hobbit* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975.), page 14.

This quote is one of very few that through authorial voice anchors Tolkien's texts to our world and is often overlooked as it cuts against the accepted thinking of the work as being purely escapist. In fact,

² *Lord of the Rings*. J. R. R. Tolkien (1954)

the escape is a journey rather than immediate choice and if there is a unique parallel story, we are gradually led towards it, or away from what we accept and know.

For Brooke-Rose to suggest redundancy in the writing is to imply there is no purpose to the additions of appendices and expository reference. It is true the additional material is not essential, but it still has a function. The weave within the story narrative is primarily designed to project depth. Tolkien builds layers, using invented terminology so that you might want to learn more and through the appendices, inviting you to do so. There is no essentiality here and that indeed is part of the attraction, instead there is intrigue, curiosity and empowerment. Readers may choose to engage on a number of levels, with the most enthused, delving into the depths of the final book's additions and moving on to *The Silmarillion* (1979) for more invented mythological context. By layering the narrative of the work, Tolkien creates layers of engagement and as an unintended by-product, creates layers of community (through knowledge) amongst fans.

Writing at the time, Tolkien and the other Barrovian Society members were looking to produce new kinds of mythic narrative. Lord of the Rings is a wholly English perspective legend, drawing on his Anglo-Saxon academic work. In producing a story collected with so many additional documents, this entity emerges as a feast for the reader who can follow its quest and then delve into the history, imagining further tales and adventures that might emerge from this world.

In his essay, *On Fairy-Stories* (1939), Tolkien outlines the concept of *mythopoeia*, the invention of fictional mythology attached to fictional writing. In a way this is a similar concept to Brooke-Rose' megatext and some of the same writing can be seen as examples of it. For Tolkien the intention is to provide depth and create self-referentiality within the text. Characters discuss the fictitious history and counsel against repeating the same mistakes; a fragment of old lore is found, learned or rejected etc. This suggests a very clear intention behind the inclusion of this extra material and the burdens of the narrative. It appeals to the reader by being illusive and suggestive rather than

completely exhaustive, encouraging speculation and lingering thought on the story. The found fragment of old lore implies more may have been written, etc.

The decades since *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) saw an explosion of stories drawing on the archetypes established in Tolkien's work. Initially these were derivatives and of variable quality, as publishers sought a second Middle-Earth for purely commercial reasons, but this didn't stop them being bought and being read. Fans absorbed these lesser worlds through a frame of the first. The descriptions of Elves in Middle-Earth fill in the gaps of Shannara (T. Brooks: 1979), Midkemia (R. E. Feist: 1982) and Krynn (M. Weis, T. Hickman: 1984) to name only a few. In a sense, this grounded the new forms and made what Brooke-Rose considered "hypotrophically redundant" in intention the new archetype for a growing community of readers. It becomes a part of the megatext of Fantasy; an elusive evolving language of familiarity that connects the genre writer to the genre fans. A dragon in any fantasy story will be pictured by the reader through the frame of their experience of other stories containing dragons and from Tolkien, this will be Smaug or Glaurung (Tolkien: 1937, 1977). Likewise, in Science Fiction, the laser gun will be imagined as a variation on laser guns in *Star Wars* (1977) or *Star Trek* (1966). These specific examples are described as "icons" (G. K. Wolfe: 1979) and they (and their like) form only part of the entity. The megatext is also the familiar characters, the writing styles and tropes, the novums, the defamiliarisation and more.

Both Tolkien's mythopoeia and Brooke-Rose's megatext approach a section of narrative with a second purpose or function to the telling of the story. The mythopoeic function is to project depth, the megatextual one, to reflect archetype or trope. At times, both can be used to interpret similar passages of work. Here is a passage chosen at random.

'Hm! Here we are!' said Treebeard, breaking his long silence. 'I have brought you about seventy thousand ent-strides, but what that comes to in the measurement of your land I do not know. Anyhow we are near the roots of the Last Mountain. Part of the name of this place might be Wellinghall, if it were turned into your language. I like it. We will stay here tonight.' He set them down on the grass between the aisles of the trees, and they followed him towards the great arch. The hobbits now noticed that as he walked

his knees hardly bent, but his legs opened in a great stride. He planted his big toes (and they were indeed big, and very broad) on the ground first, before any other part of his feet.

Tolkien J .R.R. *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy Unabridged Paperback Edition* (London: Harpercollins Publishers London, 1993), page 491.

‘Treebeard’ is a descriptive name and provides an image of this character in isolation, a bit like Mervyn Peake’s character names all evoke images of them (Peake: 1946), although Tolkien never relied on a device like this alone and we could find a detailed description of Treebeard in the previous pages.

‘Wellinghall’ has a familiar ring to it, so from a traditional megatextual analysis using it as a place name suggests familiarity, but the juxtaposition of words is not common, so there is also difference and mythopoeiac speculation. The “Last Mountain” indicates the end of something, whether by time or geography and is a simplified naming form in that we understand the words, but may struggle to find a similar parallel application in the real world, although ‘Land’s End’ might do.

The distance travelled is also familiar (strides, seventy-thousand) but the word ‘Ent’ is unfamiliar and self-referential. It is taken from Anglo-Saxon and means ‘Giant’. It is in the unfamiliar that mythopoeia finds its place, but it uses the familiar as a bridge. From the rest of the paragraph we get an impression of the size of Treebeard and so use this to apply meaning to the words we aren’t familiar with. We decide ‘Ent strides’ are longer than ours by looking at the related action and the additional comment of Treebeard.

However, the megatext also continually evolves, so ‘Ent’ becomes familiar, as does ‘Hobbit’ and Orc and more. As new writers introduce innovation and further narrative function to their work so other writers follow and the genre absorbs them.

Both terms also reveal a third concept, the *macrotext*. If the sum of human experience is myth and from which we draw creative inspiration (mythopoeia being the invention of myth) and the

megatext is a shared subconscious catalogue of familiar themes in a genre, the macrotext is the guide for a specific fictional world, the frame work through which a large project of multiple outputs can be devised. It is a structured document, enabling the development of expressions that fit the fictional world, but the elements of structure are drawn together for their function, not because of a pre-determined pattern in the narrative. The macrotext, is termed by some as a canon, or plot bible, but both terms don't really encapsulate its purpose. A world canon might include previously published work and is difficult to alter as it has been exposed to an audience. A 'plot bible' encompasses only plot. The macrotext is formative and evolves along with its outputs, aspiring to be everything required to be known about a world. The expressions enjoy a formative relationship with this catalogue so as to maintain consistency with all other work produced in the same fictional space.

The macrotext is not a new phenomenon, but is a planned construct. In the past macrotexts have been developed to incorporate existing works into a larger canon. In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments. The benefit for the writer is that this larger canvas allows for a great deal of the problems of consistency and plausibility to be worked out before starting the story and/or involving others.

It is often asserted that 'Fantasy'. A particular brand of fantastic fiction that became a publishing industry in the wake of the success of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, and 'Science Fiction', a brand of fantastic fiction invented or re-invented, in the USA in the technophile 1920s, have little in common. The Middle-Earth-type fantasy is anti-machines, it inhabits an imaginary past of the human race rather than an imaginary future (though this 'past' may be set in some neo-medieval phase a thousand years ahead of us); it dwells on human relationships, the human condition, metaphysical or moral problems. Science fiction is pro-technology, always set in the future, rationally extrapolating from our present, and favours hard scientific exposition above human interest. In theory this may be so. In real life it can be difficult from outsiders, even insiders, to tell the difference between the two sub-genres, or separate their audiences. But one thing science fiction and fantasy certainly have in common is the imaginary world, a world that must be furnished with landscape, climate, cosmology, flora and fauna, human or otherwise self-aware population, culture and dialogue.

Jones, G. *Deconstructing the Starships*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), page 11.

The macrotext draws from both mythopoeia and the megatext. Like mythopoeia its purpose is to encourage depth, but it does so by encouraging further writing, drawing or other art that fits within the constraints of the devised fictional world. Like the megatext it uses forms associated with its genre. In fantasy this can be historical context, language or song. In science fiction it might be a timeline from the present into the future; stopping at the period the events of the story are due to start. The macrotext can also take outputs types and re-purpose them. The map becomes a set of locations for different writers to work in, the timeline a list of events known to characters in different stories at different periods.

There are many great world-makers in fiction; writers whose imagined realities are as much a character in their work as the characters themselves. In later times this process has been about devising wholly new environments, whereas before, it was often inspired by earlier works.

For example, the Greek writer Hesiod, attempted to define the composition and origins of the Hellenistic pantheon. His work was complicated by existing stories, so his macrotext had to be constructed to include them. In *Theogony*(circa 700 BC) we have an early creation myth that attempts to capture and define the Gods of classical Achaea. The disparate nature of Greek society, sharing parts of their religion and culture between city state kingdoms, made for a fractured interpretation of the different aspects of their dogma. Hesiod attempts to knit these fractures together and, by using a creation myth, determines an absolute beginning, or *point of origin*, for all subsequent writing.

In addition to this, Hesiod describes each of his defined pantheon, bringing us an image of those he includes. This is relevant for the choice of who is present and who is not.

The *point of origin* is a practical concept when attempting to construct a macrotext. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance; the *point of departure*.



Illustration 2: The Macrotext Framework.

In Fantasy, this method often requires the author to return to the absolute point of origin; the creation of the world. From here the writer can establish the consequential relationship that brings the events of their world to the point of their story's circumstance. J. R. R. Tolkien's decision was to begin at this point with Middle Earth – or at least to explain it within his work³. C.S. Lewis made a similar decision with Narnia and the *Magician's Nephew* (1955); describing the events of the beginning of the world.

The Lion opened his mouth, but no sound came from it; he was breathing out, a long warm breath; it seemed to sway all the beasts as the wind sways a line of trees. Far overhead from beyond the veil of blue sky which hid them the stars sang again; a pure, cold, difficult music. Then there came a swift flash like fire (but it burnt nobody) either from the sky or from the Lion itself, and every drop of blood tingled in the children's bodies, and the deepest wildest voice they had ever heard was saying:

"Narnia. Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters."

Lewis C. S. *The Magician's Nephew*. (London: Grafton 2002), page 108.

In this example, the macrotext has been brought into the story to form a part of it, showing us the creation of the world and establishing a point of origin, although, this is only the origin point for Narnia and not the origin of the characters that have arrived here. This echoes the work's

³ Opening of the *Silmarillion* (1979).

consummation. There is no tiered division of audience, or (as mentioned) an intention for the macrotext to be used by others.

Many world creators begin this journey through questions, constructing a scattershot blueprint of their world, before framing it. In this process, the questions asked are just as important as the answers given, as these frame the design. The resultant document is a '42', in reference to Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1978); a collation of importance aspects. However, unless this process is employed exhaustively, these remain a starting point of notes, expanding on the original inspiration behind the writing idea. In the example above, the separation of this material may exist only as Lewis' writing notes and these would inform his own work, as is the case with many writing projects still.

It is interesting to note that the style of appropriate writing often changes through the context or layer the author is attempting to explore. There are hints in Lewis, but this is much more obvious in *The Valaquenta*; the opening of *The Silmarillion* (1979) imitates the Book of Genesis.

"There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Illuvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought and they were with him before aught else was made."

Tolkien J.R.R. *The Silmarillion* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1979), page 3.

Compared to;

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness."

Collins. *The Holy Bible* (King James Version). (London: Collins, 2011), page 1.

In *The Silmarillion* (1979) example, the writing speaks to the story memory of the reader, borrowing from a megatext of religious works in tone, as well as being functional mythopoeia. The adoption of

style is an intentional cue and indicates a connected gravitas and in being presented as part of the story, becomes a functional tool to generate depth. It would be part of a macrotext if it were solely being used to for imaginative stimulation and writing reference, but the content has been adapted to suit the concordance narrative of *The Silmarillion* (1979) itself. Nevertheless, the trappings of the macrotext remain here and in many other places. When I first read the book, it inspired me to recreate the scenes depicted with model soldiers

What separates the macrotext from the previously defined concepts is its exclusivity within the devised world and its altered priority. The macrotext is a form of *ergodic literature*, as defined by Espen J. Aarseth, in that it is a text that that requires more than non-trivial effort to read (Aarseth: 1997). It is encoded to inspire other outputs which are released to a mass audience. The encoding of the work is not necessarily overt. The document may evolve and change based on the outputs it generates, but it tries to act as a bridge between each, maintaining their consistency. This temporal state is in itself a form of encoding as those accessing it cannot assume its permanence. Access to it, indicates intention to produce a further work. It exists between output forms and can inspire all sorts of different work, ensuring each connects and reinforces the other, creating a new form of mythopoeiac self-referentiality. It is here that transmedia storytelling finds its guide in examples like the world of *The Matrix* (1999), or *Star Wars* (1977) and more. The macrotext defines what exists and what cannot exist. It provides mutable rules in a fictitious world of make believe. It is a hyperreal construction or artefact and as such, obeys Baudrillard's assertion of taking primacy from reality (Baudrillard: 1981), which it may draw themes from. There is a dichotomy in that it tries to represent a new reality, but can never be as detailed as our own perception of reality, which in itself is a hyperreal construction.

As Baudrillard indicates, what is not included or not meant is indeed as significant as what is, particularly in relation to the macrotext's use of the megatext. When a macrotext does not make use of the traditional devices the reader has come to expect from a particular type of story, this affects the imagination of scenes as much as the inclusion might.

It is the devising of a macrotext that has formed the basis of my work in Science Fiction and Fantasy. The origination of a bridging document, maintaining the interconnectness of outputs from old (*Elite* (1984), *Frontier: Elite 2* (1993), *Frontier First Encounters* (1995)) to new (*Elite: Dangerous* (2014), *Elite: Lave Revolution* (2014), *Elite: Reclamation* (2014) etc.) is a complicated process and its stewardship becomes even more difficult as the outputs become increasingly diverse and for consistency to be maintained, requires the document to remain as mutable as possible.

It is for this reason the macrotext itself is not released to a wide audience, unless it is transformed to make it accessible and through this transformation and release, it is solidified. As an example, *The Silmarillion* (1979) was not intended to be a macrotext. Although it shares many of the attributes of a macrotext, it was never published or written to inspire further creative work in Middle-Earth. Much of its contents in a previous form may have done when they existed as reference for the writer. Later, *The Silmarillion* (1979) may have been re-appropriated as such by those writing boardgames, films, computer games and other outputs set in Middle Earth.

Baudrillard asserts that hyperreal constructions are fundamentally unimaginative (Baudrillard: 1981). In assessing the macrotext, we might consider this true, if the priority was to create an exhaustive encyclopaedia of our fictional world, but this isn't the intention. Instead, we are attempting to provide a stimulus as well as a framework; we are balancing the mythic functions along with the explanatory. The speculative imaginings and creativity of the writer electing to work within our frame are just as important as accepting the frame's constraints.

Using Musil's writing as an example⁴, Calvino discusses a binary, the incompatibility of codified structure and soul or irrationality. The macrotext is an artefact that exists between these poles. It encourages constrained creativity, within the form it defines.

Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialised, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the

⁴ *The Man Without Qualities*, R. Musil (1940)

various branches of knowledge, the various “codes,” into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.

Calvino, I. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), page 112.

Calvino’s writing looks towards attempts by different writers to define the world or universe through the form of the novel, or of poetry. Each person he cites undertakes an enormous labour in their attempt to encapsulate everything into their work. Some of these attempts to be definitive create a wall between the writer and their greatest ally, the imagination of the reader. By invoking myth and encouraging speculation, we engage the reader as part of the process and stay true to the purpose of the macrotext text as a mutable stimulus and reference artefact. Thirty years on from Calvino we talk the same way about constructing transmedia narratives and building layers of meaning through different forms of expression which the macrotext sits behind. Rather than seeing our labour as a lonely quest, we collaborate with other specialists, each accessing the macrotext to co-ordinate our efforts. It is changed as we develop new work, but in turn helps that new work find form.

The published collections of Tolkien’s notes⁵ prove a macrotext existed for Middle-Earth and its stories so he could maintain their consistency and Brooke-Rose alludes to the items that might have first existed as guide material for the writer (maps, timelines, etc). However, neither assumed the significance of such material in a modern context. In a pre-computer age, such a manual is difficult to share, revise and maintain for a multitude of creative individuals working on a collection of different outputs.

Conversely without Tolkien’s work, the macrotexts of different fantasy worlds might not exist in the forms that they do. Writers retain their experiential inspirations and the familiar holds power. The appeal to memory and referential code still influence the construction of these guides. We view our own history through a linear list of events, and use maps to determine our location, but Tolkien applied them to fantasy, producing them for Middle-Earth and influencing those who followed him. We could not write in his world but we still imagined more stories and in turn apply the same

⁵ By his youngest son C.R. Tolkien in a series of volumes.

functional tools to the new worlds we create. We rationalise, codify and create systemic patterns for our new realities and often retain the simplified binary ethics of the fairy tale as part of this construction. At the heart of our world building and macrotext lies a wish as creators to define, constrain, relate and understand. This is the opposite purpose to well-constructed myth which is used by a writer to engage the reader in speculation and highlights the change of roles from audience to creator.

When constructing a macrotext to exist between other works so that a fictional world retains its consistency, we must shape our work so that it best inspires and informs the construction of other narratives. The reader/audience is privileged; only granted access owing to their intention to create these works.

This paper was presented at the University of Winchester RKE Symposium in December 2014 and submitted to Mythlore (ISSN 0146-9339) in March 2015. It is currently at the peer review stage.

Dead and Loving It (2016)

We have a healthy obsession with monsters, one that usually keeps us from frequenting dark alleys on our own, saying names three times in mirrors, sleeping in coffins and electrocuting the dead, but the zombie has a particularly special place in the fluttering hearts of horror fans.

Since George Romero introduced us to this particular form of shambling corpse back in 1968 with his film *Night of the Living Dead*, we've seen the zombie appear in movies, TV series, books, board games, wargames, comics and conventions. Encounters range from comic to terrifying; there's something enduring about watching a mindless corpse shuffling towards you, intent on devouring human flesh.

Good monsters are a twisted reflection of our own human condition. There is a memory of life in the zombie, its motive made even more terrible owing to its inability to see the ultimate end of its undying hunger. When all the world becomes zombies, what is left to sate the hunger of the dead? At least vampires are selective predators and the bite of a werewolf may transform you into a raging monster, but you get to be strong and powerful. There's not much upgrading when you get turned zombie.

We teach horror writing at Buckinghamshire New University on both BA (Hons) Creative Writing for Publication and BA (Hons) Film and Television Production courses. The rules of writing a good horror story involve the narrowing of the narrative. Our viewpoint character makes decisions that turn out bad and is gradually 'boxed in' until they have few choices and become a plaything fate and/or the monster. When zombies are involved, this process is particularly harrowing as our monster of choice is weak and pathetic; a broken ruin of its living self, left to stumble towards a potential victim motivated only by its hunger. If you're caught by a zombie, the struggle is made all the worse by your enemy's weakness. Most gather in packs, are infectious and once you turn, you can't come back.

When the human struggle for survival is at its most pitiful is when it scares us most. Zombie's provide that moment when desperate characters are brought down by sheer numbers, submerged and bitten by a mindless supernatural horde only to rise again as one of the monsters they fought so hard to get away from.

The development of the zombie as a modern monster is something of a twisted path. The word 'zombie' is similar to words from the Kongo language 'nzambi' 'god' and 'zumbi' fetish. Some ideas are drawn from the animated dead of Haitian rural folklore, where sorcerers animated servants with 'no will of their own'. Older references come from the epic tales of Gilgamesh – "and I will let the dead go up and eat the living" and the Bible Zechariah 14:12 *"And the lord will send a plague on all the nations that fought against Jerusalem. Their people will be like walking corpses, their flesh rotting away."*

However, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* introduces us to the most famous of the animated dead. The monster made by Doctor Frankenstein is more sentient than our crowds of infectious shamblers, but comes from the similar stock in being a reanimated man. When Frankenstein's monster demonstrates intelligence, this provides a rationale for his actions. With zombies, we see a memory of what they were, a poor corrupted reflection of what we are and if we're not careful, what we might become. Well written zombie stories play with the mysterious memory of humanity. It's important that we and the surviving characters are conflicted over what to do. Maybe their zombified loved ones can be saved? *The Walking Dead* (2010) gets this right from the start with survivor Morgan Jones' wife, Jenny.

Undead monsters in stories build on the legacy that went before them. The most obvious example of this is the vampire and archetype baggage a writer has to contend with when writing a new vampire story. Write up a list of vampire weaknesses, idiosyncrasies and other traits vampires have and you'll find you've got quite a lot to contend with. If you introduce zombies, they don't come with quite as many suitcases, but you still have a fair bit to deal with. However, there's an advantage to this.

Readers have an image of your monster already and will assume you're working within these parameters, unless you challenge them – sparkly vampires anyone?

French theorist Roland Barthes identified this process as *the referential code* – the way in which we let the images of one story fill in the gaps of another. Imagine a space battle and you see *Star Wars* (1977), etc. The code works for most genres of writing. You can apply it equally to Jane Austen romance and zombie stories. Or even, as in the case of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), both at the same time.

That said, identikit horror on its own doesn't get as far as good writing allied with these memorable tropes. A good writer makes use of the reader's expectations, fulfilling and confounding them at the same time.

Zombies become interesting when writers play around with their context. The strangely balletic fight between a shark and a zombie in Lucio Fulci's 1979 film (*Zombie*) might not fit in with Romero's vision of the stumbling dead, but there is something weird about watching these two creatures try to eat each other.

Modern horror and fantasy writer John Hornor Jacobs has an excellent wild west fantasy called *Heaven of Animals* in the Newcon Press anthology *Legends II* (2015), where zombies are treated like cattle herds and guided by brave horsemen towards their destruction in huge threshing machines.

Other variations on the zombie include the *28 Days Later* (2002) depiction where director Danny Boyle decided to make his monsters feral, rabid and fast moving. Eschewing Romero's instruction to his cast to 'do your best dead', The animalistic predator qualities of Boyle's zombies are emphasized by their energetic pursuit of the film's central characters and their flagrant disregard for self-preservation. The sequel, *28 Weeks Later* (2007) directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo begins with an amazing eight-minute sequence that is one of the scariest thrill-ride introductions of the entire horror genre.

Our appetite for monsters is insatiable. Countless bestiaries have been written about creatures lurking in the shadows from fairy tales and ancient legend. *Dungeons & Dragons* (1977) gathered together hundreds of monster archetypes, setting out generic attributes for each drawn from their mythological origins. The various iterations of their monster manuals, catalogue forms a blueprint for writers in the seventies, eighties and nineties and gradually became part of the reader's expectation.

In the pantheon of horror monsters, the zombie sits at the bottom of the hierarchy of the animated dead – corpses given life. These poor wretches are characterized by their mindlessness. Usually they are the tools of an evil master who created them, or the byproduct of contagious disease and/or mutation.

Popular Types of Undead	
Zombie	Mindless animated dead corpses, the product of disease, mutation or necromancy.
Skeleton	Animated dead soldiers, created by necromancy.
Revenant	Sentient summoned dead brought back until they can complete a task.
Ghoul	Feral fast-moving cannibals who feed on the living.
Wight	Sentient graveyard lurkers who drain life from the living and eat the flesh of the dead.
Wraith	Incorporeal spirits, known for their glowing eyes and hunger for the souls of the living.
Spectre	Powerful incorporeal spirits who haunt desolate places.
Vampire	Intelligent undead who drink the blood of the living, hate sunlight, etc.
Lich	Sorcerers who have bound their souls into a jar (phylactery) and live on after death in the decay remains of their body.
Ghost	An intelligent incorporeal spirit usually bound to haunt a location, like a house or other building.
Banshee	An intelligent/semi intelligent spirit capable of a tremendous scream that heralds someone's imminent death.
Mummy	Sentient and powerful entombed dead Egyptian royalty.

Climbing the corporate ladder of the undead isn't an easy task and usually requires our shambler to regain or retain some part of their humanity, achieving sentience and independence. This might offer a zombie a chance of redemption, but more often than not it doesn't. In many stories, the writer decides any kind of recovery for the mindless undead isn't possible. The basic principle of what makes a zombie horrific is our inability to know how much of their former life they retain.

The popular boardgame, *Zombicide* (2008) describes its own hierarchy of mindless corpses. In the first edition you have Walkers, Runners, Fatties and Abominations. In the season three expansion you get Crawlers and Seekers. Each type has its own strengths and weaknesses, but all act as an implacable horde for the players to shoot and run from as they work together to achieve a mission objective.

Similarly, there are many popular zombie computer games which cast the living dead in their familiar roles as infectious stumbling predators throughout the landscape. *The Walking Dead* is recreated as a game (*The Walking Dead: The Game*), *Left 4 Dead* (2008) is pure adrenaline rush survival play and the most interesting of them all, *Day Z* (2012) lets you roam around a vast sandbox and see achievement in the mundanities of staying alive in a hostile dystopia world

The rotting and mouldy nature of the zombie means we're unlikely to see many stories where they become heroes or protagonists, but the exception remains to prove the rule. The romantic comedy, *Warm Bodies* (2013) plays with the archetype. Nicholas Hoult's character R develops more sentience than your average animated undead and falls in love with Julie Grigio after eating the brains of her boyfriend. This draws on Egyptian mythology of memories being absorbed by eating the minds of the dead and the fixed settings (in an airport and a baseball stadium) harks back to George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) which was shot in a shopping mall where zombies browse the aisles in half-remembered instincts that satirise our own consumer habits.

It's clear there's something both attractive and repellent to us about the living dead. Whether its games, films, novels, comics or convention zombie walks, our fascination with this particularly brand of undead shows no sign of abating.

This article was written for Total Film and SFX Magazine's *Zombies: The Ultimate Celebration*, first published in April 2016 and republished in August 2017.

Inspecting the Canons (2016)

Divergent stories in popular fiction.

A contemporary sequel release in the cinema, an ongoing series of books, a TV series, comic books, webseries, computer games or all of these combined. Each output and release of work featuring a familiar cast of characters appeals to its consumers through that familiarity and a desire to learn about the next adventure of a particular hero or heroine.

This is particularly true in genre fiction, where we have seen an unprecedented rise in investment and release of ongoing storylines across the different consumer mediums.

The consistency of these outputs in their frequency of publication depends on their commercial viability, but the consistency of character, location and story across a multiplicity of content requires careful cataloguing and reference, particularly if more than one content creator is involved in the construction of the work(s).

My research on this co-ordination identifies the need to construct an unpublished *macrotext* that sits behind published material to adapt and change as each is developed, ensuring consistency between the published works. This allows for a synergy of intention and detail during an intense publication period, or ongoing consistency as a collection of texts looks to encourage its audience to follow an ongoing story across multiple outputs.

Jean Baudrillard's ascribes Science Fiction into his second order of simulacra:

...simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production—a Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy (desire belongs to the utopias related to this order of simulacra);

(Baudrillard, 2016: 121)

Baudrillard's notion of hyperreal constructs certainly applies to the concept of canon and the macrotext. The idea of 'continuous globalisation and expansion' resonates with the simulationist qualities of fiction reference material. The strategic aims of roleplaying games, such as White Wolf's *World of Darkness* (1991) or *Rolemaster 2nd Edition* (1984) by Iron Crown Enterprises certainly step beyond the idea of providing enough information to allow a gamemaster to tell a story, and into the realms of redundancy in their detail. Of course, we cannot know what will ever be truly redundant, but this exhaustive depiction can exceed our own definitions of reality, particularly if we think of the world in simplistic terms, thereby rivalling our own self-defined hyperreal construction of what does and doesn't exist. The similarity of intention between these constructions lies in their attempt to provide homo-stasis. Consistency within the frameworks encourages reliance on information and new information is analysed from a framework perspective, thereby allowing it to reinforce what has already been established.

Baudrillard's third order of simulacra is also relevant:

...simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game—total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.

(Baudrillard, 2016: 121)

The concept of totality as mentioned here, confirms the concept of redundancy, which are also mentioned by Christine Brooke-Rose when analysing Tolkien.

Apart from the 'hypertrophic' redundancy in the in the text itself, the recapitulations and repetitions, there are long appendices, not only on the history and genealogy but on the language of elves, dwarves, wizards and other powers, together with their philological development, appendices which though ostensibly given to create belief in the 'reality' of these societies, in fact and even frankly playfully reflect the author's private professional interest in this particular slice of knowledge, rather than narrative necessity, since all of the examples of runic and other messages inside the narrative are both given in the original and translated. Nor are the histories and genealogies in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies, whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish.

(Brooke-Rose, 1983: 247)

This writing, identified as redundant in this analysis, finds purpose through the variety of explorations made by subsequent creative contributors. Those who devised films, games and other associated fiction from Tolkien's writing, did so by making use of the redundant work. This is certainly true of the two film trilogies, the roleplaying games, the board games, the computer games and the tabletop wargames that have been subsequently devised.

That said, there are many fictions where such consistency is only partially observed and/or ignored at times. These projects are messy stories where contradiction lives and rides rampant over the plot lines, picking and choosing the connected elements previous stories as they wish. Often, the visual image is prioritised in this, as it is clearly identifiable. This becomes the predominant identifier of interest for the consumer and the characters they identify with.

Gary K. Wolfe identifies concept this as an icon.

Like a stereotype or convention, an icon is something we are willing to accept because of our familiarity with the genre, but unlike ordinary conventions, an icon often retains its power even when isolated from the context of conventional narrative structures.

(Wolfe, 1979: 16).

In a modern context, comic books offer the most obvious example of an ongoing story of continuing contradiction. The consummation of content in a medium that publishes once a week is a difficult beast to manage. Unlike a television series, many do not have break periods in which the majority of production is completed and the medium exists near the margin of commercial viability. An 'iconic' character is a commodity, their continual adventures a reliable revenue stream that must meet the ongoing deadlines of publication, so as not to disturb the habitual buying practises of an audience. Additionally, stories that span multiple issues are not necessarily connected to the next set of stories, beyond the presence of the 'icon' character(s). This sometimes reflects a global marketplace, where the exported stories may not appear on store shelves in the same order, or the consumer may be more casual in their interest. In many ways, the comic book shares its priority of consistency

with soap opera. Scratch a little way beneath the surface and questions arise that the narrative cannot cope with, but the urgency of the plot is designed to stop us looking left or right and considering issues in relation to the actual age of a character such as Spider-Man, who was a fifteen-year-old teenager in 1962 (Comic Back Issues, 2011).

It is interesting to note the acceptance of 'retconning' (retroactive continuity) in comic books, where consistency remains fluid and secondary to character. However, this does not preclude plots being built over a longer term and coming to fruition years after they were first conceived, such as Jessica Drew as a Skrull agent, conceived in 2006 and revealed in 2010 (Bendis, 2010). However, these consistencies of vision usually revolve around the continued presence of one writer.

Additionally, the relationship a popular franchise has with a second expression of its story communicated in another medium is often complex. Storylines in Marvel comics have been used to construct the storylines of the Marvel film franchise. *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) written by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely is clearly inspired by *Avengers: Civil War* (2007) written by Mark Millar, but there is no clear relationship between the two, other than the cast of characters (Wolfe: 1979). The plot of *Spider-Man* (2002) draws from several classic episodes of the comic book, taking for example, Steve Ditko's depiction of Peter Parker at school (Ditko, 1962) and the later introduction of Mary Jane Watson (Ditko, 1966) and bringing them together as classmates.

Readers of the comic books accept that the films operate on a separate continuity, drawing their inspiration from the original depictions, but even then, the cinematic continuity is altered or reset as new actors take the place of old ones in the titular (iconic) roles.

By comparison, the Harry Potter Films (2001-2011) have a stronger relationship with the books they were adapted from (Rowling: 1997-2007) with minor changes made, other than to compress the stories into the requisite movie running time, although readers have been very analytical in listing all the detailed alterations and omissions (Fulcher, 2015). In general, the books are seen as a deeper

exploration of Rowling's vision, allowing a reader to learn more about the reasons and ideas behind each aspect of the story they may have first experienced in the films.

Similarly, the Lord of the Rings franchise offers two pathways into the world of Middle-Earth and Frodo's quest to destroy the one ring (Tolkien, 1993). Whilst the books and films were produced fifty years apart, a large portion of their contemporary audience will have come to Tolkien's writing through Jackson's cinematic vision. This in itself creates a visual relationship between the two as the Orcs, Elves and Trolls described in the writing are realised on screen and remain in the mind of the viewer as they read. This is the megatext (Brooke-Rose, 1983) and appeal to memory from the referential code (Barthes, 1991).

This inverted experience also demonstrates the imperfect realisation of an author's intention. The reader's interpretation of a text cannot be precisely the same as the writer's and nor does it need to be. The encoding and decoding establishes a connection and the room a writer afford to the reader's imagination as partner to their own vision. This invokes Barthes, *Death of the Author* (Barthes, 1967), where a text or texts can be interpreted on its own merits. In this case, the interpretation of a text has informed its adaptation beyond the intention of the writer. In the case of Rowling's work, there is still a guiding presence, but in the case of Tolkien's there is not.

Both of these examples highlight the revision of a canon that falls short of the retconning mentioned above, but they redefine the image a reader may have of the work, invoking the aforementioned megatext (Brooke-Rose, 1982). There is something lost here, as the visual representation is easier and can supersede the previous imaginings of the reader. So, Harry Potter is now a teenage Daniel Radcliffe (Yates, 2009) and Elves look like Orlando Bloom in a blond wig (Jackson, 2001).

Revisionist interpretations of texts and revisions of those texts in new forms are not only an issue of modern times and genre. *Lost Scriptures* (2003) by Bart D. Ehrman collects together some of the rejected writing of the New Testament.

The debates over which texts were apostolic, and therefore authoritative lasted many years, decades, even centuries. Eventually—by about the end of the third Christian century—the views of one group emerged as victorious. This group was itself internally diverse, but it agreed on major issues of the faith, including the existence of one God, the creator of all, who was the Father and the Holy Spirit together made up the divine godhead.

(Ehrman, 2003: 4)

Again, the image of characters has been revised, this time through omission. Wolfe's concept of the icon applies in the same way, only not in isolation, but in the revision and re-encoding of the text. Each reader of the Bible takes a different interpretation from each different version and each experience of fresh connected content builds on that interpretation in a similar layering of connected texts.

The concretised image of characters across texts applies to many other historical fiction continuities. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain) published sometime between 1136 and 1138 established the character of Arthur from a series of proto legends, which was then reinterpreted by Thomas Malory in *Le Morte d'Arthur* first published in 1485. Subsequent stories, *Once and Future King* (1958), and modern interpretations by Stephen Lawhead, David Gemmell and many others demonstrate the timeless nature of the story, characters and themes. Some writers rely and build on the previous imaginings, some choose to contradict them.

Another parallel can be drawn to modern fan fiction. The continual exploration of alternative narratives might be considered unofficial by those who own the intellectual property of the characters, mythos and milieu, but they are still explorations of each in the eyes of the reader. Any individual who connects them with their other experiences of the same characters is building their own narrative consistency beyond any individually encoded intention of one author. In many ways, the aberration of this process lies in the attempted protection of intellectual property.

The Ring of Soshern (c.1973) is one of the earliest Star Trek fan fiction stories and explores a homosexual relationship between Kirk and Spock, a direction Rodenberry, Paramount Pictures and CBS would have been unlikely to accept in any medium at the time. By comparison, the current controversy between Paramount Pictures and fan film creators of *Prelude to Adana* (2014) and the forthcoming Axanar film is much more public affair, but still confronts the same tension over the audience's desire for content and the originator's desire to retain value and ownership of their creative ideas.

All of these examples lead back to Barthes' code and Baudrillard's map. Both concepts rely on one immediate quality, the imaginative and experiential engagement of the reader. With the plethora of published material across the genres of fantasy, horror and science fiction, determining what is or isn't 'canon' or 'official' in terms of the story or development of the characters ultimately becomes the decision of the reader and so, despite the best intentions of co-ordinated publications establishing consistency across the breadth of a transmedia project, if a reader elects to include a fan fiction story as the continuance of a character's journey, then both the code and the map are different to the code or map intended by those who may have originated them. This truly is the *Death of the Author* (Barthes, 1967) in as much as the connected texts to those produced by the original writer, or those considered official and privy to the macrotext are saturated by enthusiastic creative contributions from fans. The reader is able to define their own map and develop their own megatext of referential experiences.

This new plethora of fan texts are in the same tradition as the aforementioned reinvention of Arthurian legends. With continual improvements to our internet access, these texts are available to us with less and less effort required. And, with the tools available to us to create new work becoming more and more usable and affordable, the barrier between consumer and contributor becomes increasingly artificial, relying on two subjective strands, that of commercial value and that of quality that are supposed to be inherent in official, canonical texts.

The intrinsic value of content is difficult to determine in this sea of creativity. What sets apart one story from another? In populist multi-authored projects with a large number of works written, value is often determined only by the concept of intellectual property. In this, when a fan has no ability to generate monetary value in their work, their motivation for making new stories lies in the same place as their desire to read new stories about their favourite icons (Wolfe, 1979).

The concept of quality is also an evolving threshold that becomes increasingly blurred (Pirsig, 1991) and the subject of a multitude of studies in itself. The refined methodologies of different publishing and production processes look to ensure certain standards, but ultimately these are not requisites for the encoding of a message within a text and the decoding of a message from the text. The stylistic trappings of quality are more often a set of signifiers that determine the concept of officialness and canonical approval mentioned above.

Ultimately, the determination of what or what is not a relevant experience to a reader's understanding of a character's continual journey is determined by that reader, despite all the best intentions of any author, publisher or copyright holder. It has always been so and will always continue to be so, no matter what gateways we might contrive to place in the way of this relationship.

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This paper was submitted to *BFS Journal 15* in January 2016 and was published in April 2016.

Where to start with Pittacus Lore? (2017)

Post *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* amidst the plethora of young adult dystopias and chosen ones, there is Pittacus Lore and the *I am Number Four* series. A set of books that survived an underperforming box office movie adaptation and the accusations of being derivative that plagued other franchises caught up in the emergence of a genre.

The aforementioned Number Four is an alien, from the planet Lorien, living on Earth under the pseudonym John Smith. He is hunted by the Mogadorians, he is royalty and in possession of super powers. He was raised by a protector, Henri, who pretends to be his father and together they are forced to move all the time as one by one, the nine royal survivors of Lorien are hunted down.

Where Should I Start?

Pittacus Lore is unusual, being the pseudonym for three different writers, James Frey, Greg Boose and Jobie Hughes. The name is also enshrined in the fiction, being a character that is telling the 'true story' of the Lorien survivors. He is revealed as a mysterious character tied up in the events themselves.

The series doesn't settle comfortably into either of the Science Fiction or Fantasy genres. There's a variety of tech and magic used continually from both, with a real-world backdrop that makes use of a variety of countries across different continents.

Picking up any of the books launches you into the journaled thoughts of the Lorien survivors. You'll be hitting the ground running for your life wherever you begin and this being a modern, forwards, backwards, sideways narrative, you'll find yourself pulled in all directions, depending upon which parts of the story and mythology you want to explore.

The main series order is as follows:

- 1 *I Am Number Four*
- 2 *The Power of Six*

- 3 *The Rise of Nine*
- 4 *The Fall of Five*
- 5 *The Revenge of Seven*
- 6 *The Fate of Ten*
- 7 *United as One*

The first book is the titular, *I am Number Four*, which remains the most established entry point despite the subsequent publication of prequels and side stories. The writing is first person, present tense, delivering an immediate connection to the situation and circumstances of Four, also known as 'John Smith'. We read John's own words as he tries to settle in Paradise, Ohio, the latest town he and his mentor/bodyguard/father Henri have been forced to flee to as they try to evade the Mogadorians after they learn of the death of Number Three.

We follow this main story theme through into the sequel, *The Power of Six*. This picks up right where the last one left off, but starts to split the narration, gradually expanding our cast of protagonists amongst the discovered Garde and their allies. We're introduced to Seven, also known as Marina, who has grown up in a convent in Spain and we learn all about her life from her account. The shift is delineated with font changes for different characters and feels little more natural than H.G. Wells' account of what his brother saw in London.

It is in this episode we are first introduced to the Mogadorian leader, Setrákus Ra.

In the third book, the *Rise of Nine*, published in 2012, the mysteries of the Garde are gradually uncovered, with plenty of hidden lore for the young survivors and us to learn. Our heroes are scattered across the world, giving the author chance to build on the international scope of the ongoing story. This is a brave choice and unusual for a fantasy or science fiction series, whose second world setting, or dystopia or future premise insulates stories from real world events. The *Rise of the Nine* features scenes where the Garde fight The Lord's Resistance Front in the Himalayas. The very real Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Uganda and South Sudan was featured in the *Kony 2012* advocacy video, raising questions of a real-world parallel between the two organisations.

Book four, *The Fall of Five* is the first in which Sam Goode, friend of John Smith (Four) and not one of the Garde exiles takes a spot as narrator. The series has pushed on at breakneck speed, dealing out victory and defeat in equal measure. Here, Sam's father, UFO conspirator, Malcolm, who went missing many years ago, returns to rescue his son. For the first time, we have proper dissent and betrayal as the Garde's purpose is questioned and divided. Granted, throughout the series, following a group of teenagers we've had our share of strops and squabbles, but this is where the stakes ramp up. Five is revealed as a complex character with shifting loyalties, who we can never wholly trust from this point on.

If you want to keep reading, there are three more action packed volumes, but by now we're incredibly involved in the detailed plot of the war and the Lorien survivors. The seven-volume series reaches its conclusion with *United as One*, published in June 2016. Whilst this concludes the struggle between Four and Setrákus Ra, there's plenty of aftermath to straighten out, which makes me think we've not heard the last of Lorien, the Garde and the Mogadorians.

Concordance Stories – The Lost Files

As I mentioned, avid readers and fans of these adventures who are looking for more won't be disappointed. Since 2011, *The Lost Files* series has been adding to the mix with backstories, prequels and spinoffs. These are shorter "e-novellas", collated into omnibus editions that contain three stories in each.

- *The Legacies*
- *Secret Histories*
- *Hidden Enemy*
- *Rebel Allies*
- *Zero Hour*

These collected works fill in gaps and perspectives between the main novels as well as going back and giving us an insight into what happened before. A particular highlight is the secret histories. New fans will want to read *The Last Days of Lorien* which tells the story of the world before it was attacked by the Mogadorians. We also learn more about the pasts of some of the main characters and have alternate perspectives written about the main events.

Alongside this, we have *Pittacus Lore's transmissions*. These are available from the dedicated fan site, *I Am Number Four Fans*, along with transcripts.

<http://iamnumberfourfans.com/extras/hear-from-pittacus-lore/>

The podcast files are links to a Soundcloud account. The quality isn't great, as these are intentionally voice masked recordings, but you can also download a transcript of what's been said too. Each work offers a bit more of an explanation about the character or events being discussed and give sneak peaks into the forthcoming releases which were happening when they were released.

Conclusions

The Lorien Legacies and the associated movie, additional writings and podcast recordings create a real feeling of depth to the world of *I am Number Four*. It is this meticulous mysteriousness and diligent fan service that maintains our curiosity more journals from Pittacus Lore. The wizard behind the curtain is alive and well, and pumping out content in a medium and by a method that suits. All three authors taking up the persona of Pittacus, write consistently and fluidly, delivering fast, action packed adventures that enshrine their characters as special, different and gifted. This innate appeal is timeless and we see it again and again in popular fantasy aimed at the teenage audience. We all identify with feeling we're the odd one out, secretly hoping we're special in some magical way. Being an alien of an exiled nobility fulfils this desire. Superior strength or telekinesis or anything else like it, makes that fulfilment extra special.

A comparison to other series' gives a clue as to why this works well. Classics like *Lord of the Rings* and stories in Middle-Earth are finite. Comic book franchises tend to be fragile and continually revised, retconned and restarted. *The Lorien Legacies* and their extras, all fit. There's a robustness to this, letting you know upfront, getting involved will be a detailed and diverse experience. The fan communities are diligent and enthusiastic, with collated wikis and vibrant discussion between readers. The Pittacus Lore collective know the people they're aiming their stories at and are succeeding, in a crowded market, in reaching them.

Further Reading

We all start our journey into genre fiction somewhere. *I am Number Four* is a strong set of books, with big characters and big action, all delivered at a fast pace.

If you like this series and its given you the taste for more Fantasy and Science Fiction, there's plenty to choose from. If your taste is for more first-person narrative with teenage protagonists, then *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* are the big names in the genre, but there's plenty of other gems to find if you dig around.

Well known authors from Penguin who've written long running Fantasy and Science Fiction series are Anne McCaffrey, Robert Rankin, David Eddings and more. You can also find audio version of *The Lord of the Rings*, by J. R. R. Tolkien.

Segei Lukyaneko's *Nightwatch* books are set in our modern world. It's based in Moscow and features a last line of defence against supernatural creatures. *The Vampire Academy* series by Richelle Mead is also a long running saga and features teenage protagonists.

One of 2016's best new young adult science fiction stories is *Chasing The Stars* by Majorie Blackman. It's a little more space opera than Pittacus Lore's work, but there's plenty in it to like and try.

This article was a commissioned reader's guide for the Penguin/Random House Website and was submitted in February 2017.

You can find it online here: - <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/find-your-next-read/reading-guides/2017/mar/where-to-start-pittacus-lore/>

Inara the Shapeshifter: Fulfilment or Evolution of Vogler's Character Function and Archetype? (2017)

As a writer and director, Joss Whedon's portrayal of female characters in his works has evolved with each different story he elects to tell, but has always attempted to find strength and contradiction in accepted gender tropes, subverting expectations directly and indirectly with his plots, characters and locations.

Whedon's objectives as a writer earn him praise and criticism when his works are analyzed. The portrayal of characters in popular fiction is evolving constantly and generally moving towards a more equitable depiction of genders, ethnicities and more. Whedon's work has been heralded as being at the forefront of this at times. Whilst many have praised the way in which he has created and promoted female protagonists, there are also troubling conclusions that can be drawn from a close analysis of some of his scenes and characters.

Whedon's early career saw him working as a contract writer and script consultant, writing dialogue and fixing scenes for American films and television series. He was an uncredited writer on *The Getaway* (1994), *Speed* (1994), *Waterworld* (1995), *Twister* (1996) and *X-Men* (2000), many of which did not make the final cut of the films. Gradually, his work earned him more responsibilities. He wrote the film script for *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) and one of the early drafts of *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001). He was co-writer for *Toy Story* (1995) for which he earned an Academy Award nomination and *Titan A.E* (2000).

Buffy: The Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), the television series was Whedon's first where he took the lead as creator and producer. It ran for seven seasons and won numerous awards. The story ran continuously from the end of the unsuccessful film narrative with its principle character, the slayer, Buffy Summers, moving to another town and school, but finding it also plagued by vampires. The series also spawned a spin off, *Angel* (1999-2004), which lasted five seasons until 2004.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003) is a clear-cut example of his search to find new meaning in audience expectation. In both the film (which Whedon wrote) and the earliest episodes of the series, Whedon subverts the archetype of the rescued character or gift, defined by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of a Folktale* (2003). This identified archetype is described as a 'Princess' whose usual function in a narrative is to be saved by a hero. Whedon instead, allowing this character to rescue herself. This is summed up by Buffy's speech in the episode 'Amends'.

Strong is fighting. It's hard and it's painful and its every day. It's what we have to do and we can do it together, but if you're too much of a coward for that, then burn.

(Whedon: 1998).

Firefly

Whedon's television series, *Firefly* (2003) ran for one season. It was commissioned whilst Whedon was still running both series of *Buffy* and *Angel*. It suffered a variety of production problems as the commissioning channel, Fox insisted on several technical changes and did not give it a consistent airtime slot. After cancellation, the story continued in *Serenity* (2005) a cinematic release, and later in comic books and graphic novels.

The premise of *Firefly* is asserted to make it a genre hybrid, (Kafalier, 2017). The character archetypes relate to those that might feature in a hard-bitten Western, but these are mixed into a science fiction premise, allowing the story to transition between both concepts, blend both concepts and subvert both concepts continually. These aspects are exhibited in dialogue, characterization, and context. Whedon's use of tropes in new contexts is what makes the series and subsequent film a relatable, but innovative and different experience for its audience. There is a continual play with familiarity and the remediation of themes, something that reflects Whedon's philosophy in his writing. Scenes in *Firefly* and the sequel film *Serenity* (2005) continually invoke the expectations of the reader by playing with familiarity (Barthes, 1991), but then subverting it to a different outcome in a way that is knowing, epitomizing the writer's intention to make look at their assumptions again.

The character of Inara Serra, played by Morena Baccarin, the Registered Companion in the *Firefly* (2003) television series and the sequel movie *Serenity* (2005), is a re-interpretation the sex worker in a fused American/Chinese space-faring future. Inara's profession renders her a strange mixture of high and low social class, depending on the moral and ethical considerations of those with whom she interacts. This is somewhat strange compared to our modern American/European regard for the profession, but still connects this profession to the audience's referential understanding (Barthes, 1991). This re-interpretation is part of a wider re-contextualization of professions and deviancy in the "'verse" (Whedon, 2003) that demonstrates the different logistical needs of an interstellar society.

The re-imagination of the sex worker in *Firefly* (2003) and in Whedon's subsequent work, *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) is somewhat sanitized compared to portrayals in other fictions. In both of Whedon's science fiction contexts, the profession is legitimized by those involved and depicted (mostly) from the higher end of the economic scale. The only prominent exception to this is in the thirteenth episode, "Heart of Gold," which we will discuss later.

There is substantial writing that criticizes the way Whedon depicts sex workers. Amy Chinn's excellent "Tis Pity She's a Whore" (Chinn, 2006) argues that Whedon's depictions do not advance the reader image and reflect only modern interpretation. The theme is continued in a variety of further articles, from other authors which highlight the limitations of Whedon's imagining of characters who engage with this profession.

There are nine crewmembers of the spaceship, *Serenity*: Mal Reynolds, Inara, Zoe, Wash, Kaylee, Jayne, Book, River and Simon – five males and four females. None of the female characters are directly deferential to the men, or involved only owing to their relationship. They are each invested in being part of the crew as part of their own storylines, needs and agendas. In Whedon's 'verse, the status of a Registered Companion brings legitimacy to the *Serenity*

Whedon has gone on record about the ways in which he sees his writing of female as being pigeonholed with the tag “strong female” at times (Whedon, 2006). In a sense, whilst some may see this expression as empowering, it is a second stage stereotype that attempts to find ways for a female to demonstrate her *animus* – the male element of the female unconscious, according to Carl Jung - in physical and assertive ways that aren’t particularly well thought out.

In **animus-inflated** women with strong interest in intellectual matters we find the need to impose and maintain a rigorous and schematic list of values judged the most important. There's no reflection as regard the little substance and significance of these values, nor any aim at discussing about them. Only the urge to impose them to others.

(Jung, 2017).

This imposition and assertion is the crux of problematic “strong female” depiction. Boorish and impositional characters like this, who seek to impose their agenda on others through ‘physical and assertive’ ways remain boorish, irrespective of gender they are given.

Whedon’s characterizations are much more complex and nuanced. Kaylee, Zoe, Inara and River express themselves differently, demonstrating that the writer is capable of understanding and realising each of them as individuals.

Zoe Alleyne Washburne is perhaps the closest to being a “strong female” Zoe’s relationship with Wash (Hoban Washburne) as a married couple is one of inequality, with Zoe being the dominant character. She defers to Mal, because he outranks her when they were in the military, but she is clearly the more martial of the two of them, demonstrating greater aptitude and accuracy with weapons and in other physical confrontations.

Kaylee is a mechanic and expert in the running of a spaceship. She demonstrates her skill in several scenes, showing an understanding of the ship’s workings that no-one else on the crew can match; almost the equivalent of being a magician of her craft. When the audience learns her backstory, they

discover she was the lover of the previous mechanic, but quickly demonstrated to Mal she knew more about the workings of the ship than her partner, causing him to hire her.

River is the unpredictable fugitive, rescued by her brother from a special training facility that trained her as a telepathic assassin. She has moments of lucidity and moments of crisis where she is unable to cope with the world around her. She and Simon are on the run from the Alliance, the predominant ruling authority of human space. River's story and what was done to her is at the centre of the plot of the series and the sequel film.

We first meet Inara in the first episode of the TV series. She is with a client, an Alliance officer who is clearly enchanted with her.

Do you really have to leave? I mean... I, my father is very influential, we could... I could arrange for you to be...

(Whedon, 2003)

Whedon's use of non-diegetic visuals (the conversation continues, but Inara's facial expression reveals her inner self, showing boredom) and a jarring jump cut to the two characters parting ways in a stilting and distant manner reveal a continued societal tension over a Companion's role. Time with her is a purchased commodity, but one of the highest form. The unnamed young officer is clearly enchanted by her act and believes it is her true identity. When he propositions her, she gently refuses. A jarring cut is used to illustrate this sharp change in mood and he leaves having delivered a time-honoured insult.

Young Officer: —Experience has been more than... it was very good, thank you.

Inara: The time went too quickly.

Young Officer: Well, your clock's probably rigged to speed up in sheer sight of our fun.

(Whedon, 2003).

Whilst there are several aspects to Inara's work that allow her to belong in rarefied circles, the paid sex worker epithet remains. This is an interesting fusion of class, invoking the courtesan of the

Middle Ages and the wild west whore. Inara's status outside of the ship is considered much higher, raising a continual question as to why she remains with the crew. This is clearly exhibited in several scenes, particularly in her opening appearance in the first episode 'Serenity'. episode one, where an Alliance officer remarks - "It's a curiosity a woman of stature such as yourself, falling in with these types?"

The high status/low status dichotomy is pervasive throughout Whedon's vision of a future interstellar society five hundred years ahead of our own. The commodification of resources, people, everything that can be traded on indicates the fragility of the existence of people at the low end. This also emphasizes the sharp difference between social classes.

Inara's interaction with the new guests brought on board brings this into focus, Mal is quick to introduce her to Shepherd Book, seeking to invoke his disapproval at her profession.

Mal: "What? You not sticking around to meet the whole bunch?"

Inara: "Maybe you should make sure they want to meet me first."

(Whedon: 2003).

In these scenes, Whedon rarely resorts to giving Inara the quipping dialogue he is well known for in this series and in others. Some characters exhibit this in times of stress, others to show their level of intelligence, high or low. Inara's poise requires something more sophisticated, even in times of crisis. We rarely see her give an unconsidered response to anyone.

The way in which conversations between Inara and Mal go reveals a great deal about them. Both operate their respective businesses independently of each other. However, Mal's continual antagonism of her could jeopardise this relationship if there weren't more to how they feel about each other.

We have some explanation of Inara's continual presence on the ship is given in episode 2, "The Train Job," where Inara and Book discuss their reasons for remaining on Serenity with the others.

Inara: Shepherd.

Book: Good day. So, how do you think it's going?

Inara: The caper? Mal knows what he's doing.

Book: How long have you known him?

Inara: I've been on the ship eight months now, I'm not I'm not certain I'll ever actually know the captain.

Book: I'm surprised a respectable companion would sail with this crew.

Inara: It's not always this sort of work. They take the jobs they can get, even legitimate ones. The further you get away from the central planets the harder things are, this is part of it.

Book: I wish I could help. I mean, I don't wanna help, not help, help, not with the thieving, but I do feel awfully useless.

Inara: You could always pray they make it back safely.

Book: I don't think the captain would much like me praying for him.

Inara: Don't tell him. I never do.

(Whedon: 2003).

Shepherd Book initially finds it difficult to accept Inara's work and values. However, without Mal's presence between them, he is able to find common ground with her as they find themselves as outsiders to the criminal activities of the crew. They both value spirituality and express those values in the different rituals they practice.

Often in the first few episodes, Book seems to act as a penitent, with Inara performing the role of confessor. This subverts his character role as well.

It is clear Inara has some feelings for Mal and these are confirmed by a further part of their conversation.

Inara: Why are you so fascinated by him?

Book: Because he's something of a mystery. Why are you?

Inara: Because so few men are.

(Whedon, 2003).

In truth, all of the characters are something of a constructed mystery, at times, performing functions against type in the scenes in which they appear. This is a clever technique used to imply depth, as each is assumed by the audience to perform their assigned role at times, so seeing them acting in other ways, suggests. Whedon does not use it constantly, else this would completely destabilize the characterizations, but there are enough subversions going on to suggest each has a variety of experience to bring to the situations the crew encounter. There is a correlation between mystery and resourcefulness for some, although again, it isn't a consistent barometer, else, again, the characters would seem artificial.

Whedon's depiction of a possible relationship between Inara and Mal is intricate. Much like Buffy before her, Inara has no need to be rescued, or to be looked after. With Buffy, we come to understand this as we are shown her ability to rescue herself. With Inara, we rarely see her in a circumstance that might need Mal's intervention, and when this intervention is forthcoming, in the fourth episode, "Shindig", the situation becomes much more complex. She may choose who she wishes, but also knows that any relationship might jeopardise her ongoing profession.

Mal's disapproval of Inara's work is best explained in episode four, Shindig. Here, she takes on a client, Atherton Wing, who requests her professional company as a registered companion at a high society ball on the world of Persephone. The other characters discuss Inara in glowing terms whilst Kaylee admires a beautiful dress in a shop window. Mal takes exception to this.

Mal: What are you going to do in that rig? Waltz around the engine room? You'll be like a sheep walking on its hind legs.

(laughter from Jayne)

Zoe: See you on the ship captain.

(Whedon: 2003).

In this conversation, Whedon plays on gender stereotypes, dividing the men and women by reaction. Whilst not apologizing for the comment, Mal does recognize his error and buys Kaylee the dress.

Mal also attends with Kaylee, as he needs to make contact with someone who wants a ship to transport goods. Mal ends up in an altercation with Atherton over Inara, which becomes a formal duel. He explains his reasons for causing the incident:

Inara: You have a strange sense of nobility, captain. You'll lay a man out for implying I'm a whore, but you keep call me one to my face.

Mal: I might not show respect to your job, but he didn't respect you. That's the difference.

Inara he doesn't even see you.

(Whedon: 2003).

Whilst this suggests a noble motive, this rationalization is also flawed outside of this context as Mal doesn't see how disrespecting Inara's profession to others is disrespecting her and his instincts to ride to her rescue remains patriarchal.

Inara fulfils many different plot functions in the ongoing story. Her status as a private individual, renting one of the ship's shuttles and frequently being away on business, makes her an associate part of Mal's crew, but also gives her a degree of autonomy. Her attitude to the ongoing adventures of the crew is always negotiated, from a position of vested interest, in that she is inclined to support them, but on her terms and through her own set of values. This allows her role to be changeable and allows her to problematize the situations that are presented to her.

At first glance, this appears to fulfil Christopher Vogler's definition of the shapeshifter:

Heroes frequently encounter figures, often of the opposite sex, whose primary characteristic is that they appear to change constantly from the hero's point of view. Often a hero's love interest or romantic partner will manifest the qualities of a shapeshifter.

(Vogler, 2007: 59).

Narrative structural theories outline commonalities of story components, whether that be by the functions of characters in a narrative (Propp, 2003:25-65, Vogler, 2007: 23-27) or the differing stages that a narrative may go through (Propp, 2003: 19-24, Aristotle, 1996: 13, Campbell, 2008: 210), the

differing frames outlined by each rely on seeing the ways in which texts are similar and make use of tropes and archetypes.

There is a danger in accepting a structure, or concept in that it can lead the critic to ignore elements of a character or story that do not fulfil the structural constraint and instead limit an analysis by attempting to fulfil the concept.

Vogler's shapeshifters can manifest in the form of the femme fatale, the capricious, changeable woman who seduces a man to fulfil her narrative needs and desires, manipulating him as these needs change. This is something of a stereotype now and whilst the manifestation of change does imply depth, this depth is subservient to the superficial considerations of the here and now, the ways in which she is twisted things to serve her needs in the present.

With Inara, we have a multi-faceted character. The audience's perception of her changes as she is given more time with them and new contexts are introduced, but this does not mean she is changeable in nature, moreover, she is changed by the way in which these introductions and her reasoned reactions surprise us. In fact, Vogler's anchor point concept of the hero is assuming a similar viewpoint for the audience. Whedon's work subverts this, by on occasion, subtly, moving the audience's viewpoint to another associated character; something that can be done without being obvious in a film or a television series, particularly if there are a group of characters who the audience identifies with.

The changeable quality of the Shapeshifter has to be carefully balanced. If a character reacts in a way the audience considers atypical, the rationalisation must follow, otherwise identification and empathy is jeopardised. This can be addressed by explaining the context. A desperate character, surviving on the frontier of the space western is used to making use of any resources they acquire. This survival mode might become instinctive, even when a character's circumstance and situation has improved.

In times of crisis, leaders and ideas emerge from unexpected places. The capture of Zoe and Mal in the second episode, “Trainjob”, means the rest of the crew have to engineer their release. Suddenly, the capacities of Book, Simon and Inara are brought into play. Each remains reserved in normal circumstances, so the engagement and application of power and resources by these characters is surprising and a further shapeshift of their role and function within the text.

There is also a rotation to the episodes, allowing the past and present of each character to be explored in turn. Some backstories have more detail and interest than others, but it is clear that *Firefly* was a rich television series in terms of its characters, denied the exploration that each deserved in this medium.

Inara’s continual switching of status from being on the ship and off the ship reinforces our interest, in that we see her separate agenda is active and ongoing. The aspects of Companion training are many and Inara demonstrates them at different times. She is trained in self-defence, but Like River, her martial prowess isn’t immediately apparent and doesn’t define her. In each circumstance where such qualities become necessary, she makes use of them, as needed.

There is much that Inara does as part of her profession which does not involve sex. It is these ritualizations which are used to indicate the difference between a Companion and a whore – as described by Inara herself. This aspect of Inara is one amongst many ritualizations of the sex-worker as depicted by Whedon’s Companions and does not conform to our experiential understanding of the role in any genre. The whore characters in the ‘Heart of Gold’ bordello offer us a contrast between Inara and archetypes that are drawn more obviously from the Western genre.

When Nandi dies, Inara is grief stricken and announces she needs to leave Serenity and the crew. Again, this reinforces a sense of depth in the character. The group are a priority to her, but not the sole priority, she has other matters in her life.

Inara’s role as a love interest remains speculative. Much as she does demonstrate feelings for Mal, particularly when pushed into circumstances of crisis, she does not act upon them to initiate a

relationship and remains equivocal enough to suggest these feelings are not definitive. After all, she has not given up her life for him and he is unlikely to give up his life for her. However, the choices are not equivalent. Inara accepts Mal as a criminal and we get the sense she would continue to accept him as this if they were together. What he has to give up is his skewed principles over her profession.

The sixth episode – “Our Mrs Reynolds” is particularly revealing of Inara’s feelings. The sudden appearance of Saffron, a woman who has stowed away onboard Serenity and claims to be Mal’s wife, causes conflict between Inara and Mal. Saffron was married to Mal as part of the celebrations on a mining outpost where they have been helping the miners of Triumph deal with a group of outlaws. At first, Mal’s discomfort is a source of comedy for many of the crew, but it is clear the more he tries to make his feelings on the matter clear, the more he offends people and hurts Saffron, who eventually storms off.

Inara’s reaction to Saffron is complex. She exhibits jealousy at first, but also seeks to defend her when Mal cannot express his own discomfort without hurting Saffron’s feelings.

Mal: Would you stop crying?

Inara: For god’s sake Mal, could you be a human being for thirty seconds?

(Whedon, 2003)

Inara struggles to come to terms with this change to Mal’s status. She is inclined to defend Saffron from the hurt of Mal’s confused response, but this instinct conflicts with her emotional attraction to Mal, making her confront those emotions.

Whedon’s exploration of a marital relationship where a woman expects to be subservient is at first, strange given his reputation for developing innovative characters. Saffron exhibits all the qualities of an aspirational domestic wife servant, she is desperate to please Mal, to earn her right to be his wife, cooking and cleaning for him as required. A comparison might be drawn to the circumstances in comedy western, *Paint Your Wagon* (1969), where Ben Rumson, played by Lee Marvin, marries Elizabeth, played by Jean Seberg. Elizabeth is the second wife of a Mormon trader who happens to travel through No Name City – a town made up entirely of

male gold prospectors. The prospectors cannot let this pass and refuse to let him leave until he agrees to sell one of his wives/Jacob: Quiet! Brigham Young has twenty-seven wives, and he hasn't had half the trouble with them.

Elizabeth: Then simplify your life, Jacob. Sell me.

Jacob: But, Elizabeth, you don't know what you'll get.

Elizabeth: I know what I've had.

(Logan, 1969).

Saffron and Elizabeth are both married under 'mining law'. This could be a reference from Whedon to Logan's text. Both are revealed to have taken matters into their own hands to improve their lot. In many ways, Elizabeth's attempt to assert herself and engineer a break from Jacob is a blueprint for Saffron's situation.

Writing in *Morphology of a Folk Tale* (2003) Vladimir Propp identifies a set of archetypal characters who are assigned functions within the narrative. He describes two archetypes that are intertwined – the father and the princess. As Propp states, 'The princess and her father cannot be exactly delineated from each other according to functions.' The function of the father in this instance is to bestow the latter through marriage upon the Hero (Mal). This function is clearly identified by Propp as a common narrative action of the father. At this time, Saffron's situation is conveyed to the reader as exactly this.

Initially, this is a source of amusement, but quickly breaks down into a reflective comment on relationships and people as other characters are drawn into the discussion.

Wash: Who is she?

Mal: She's no-one!

Kaylee: Captain!

Mal: Would you stop that?

Wash: You brute.

(Whedon, 2003).

This puts Saffron in continual cultural conflict with the crew, who defer to Mal in some respects, but not without questioning his actions to understand them. There is no blind trust, even from Zoe, who habitually falls back on their shared military background. Thankfully, her husband, Wash, is there to remind her when this happens as illustrated in the first episode of the series.

Wash: What if we just told Mal we need a couple of days 'stead of asking him?

Zoë: He's the Captain, Wash.

Wash: Right; and I'm just the Husband.

Zoë: Look, I'll ask him.

Wash: Don't forget to call him "sir". He likes that.

Mal: [walking in] Who likes what?

Zoë: It's nothing, sir.

[Wash smiles sarcastically and gives her a thumbs up]

(Whedon, 2003).

Saffron's conflicted values become particularly apparent when the relationship she envisages with Mal is demonstrated in contrast to the relationship between Wash and Zoe. She is attempting to prove her worth as a gift (Propp, 2003) and find a role on the ship. However, this role is a subservient one and places her at odds with the rest of the crew, particularly when she makes an assumption about the roles of other people based on her own experience.

Mal: thank you

Wash: Something smells good.

Zoe: Having yourself a little supper Captain?

Mal: Well... Saffron insisted on... y'know I didn't want to make her feel... its damn tasty.

Wash: Is there any more where that came from?

Saffron: I didn't think to make enough for your friends. But everything's laid out if you'd like to cook for your husband?

(Whedon, 2003).

Whilst Wash attempts to dissemble and Mal is trying to please Saffron, Zoe notes the institutional gender bias and how the men are unable to challenge it directly, seeing humour in the situation, rather than the vestiges of oppression.

However, the audience learns this is an act. When Saffron's true identity as a swindler is revealed, Whedon's writing returns to more familiar territory. The crew are fooled by her act, Mal seduced and rendered unconscious, and Wash is knocked out. Only Inara is able to challenge Saffron. The two women fight and Saffron escapes, leaving Inara to deal with the rest. Believing Mal dead, she kisses him, unwittingly and is also affected by the tranquiliser Saffron applied to her lips. Both wake up with the ship rigged to fly into a trap. The crisis is eventually resolved, but Inara conceals the fact that she kissed Mal. He later assumes that Saffron seduced her too.

The intertextual reference between 'Our Mrs Reynolds' and *Paint Your Wagon* helps to establish Saffron's character premise initially, measured against Elizabeth, but when her real agenda is revealed, this comparison drops away. Instead, we start to see Saffron as a dark mirror of Inara and in many ways, Saffron's scheming reveals many of Inara's capabilities, particularly, despite any claims otherwise, her choice not to apply self interest in her dealings with the Firefly crew.

Within this episode, both characters shapeshift as they oppose one another. Initially, Inara is trying to catch up with Saffron, who risks more each time she twists and changes, seeking any advantage she can get.

The use of Propp's identified archetypes and processes by Whedon demonstrates the evolution of the reader's referential code. Whilst Saffron's first presented circumstance causes narrative change, the use of the archetype as a masquerade demonstrates the relationship between Propp's ideas and Vogler's ideas. Propp first published his work in the 1920s, Vogler in the 1990s. The shapeshifter could not exist without shapes to shift into.

Inara's action in kissing Mal reveals, once again, that her feelings run deep and that she gives into them when she believes he might die. There is no surrender of status in doing this, only an

illustration of the constraint Inara's profession places on her. She has no wish to give up what she is and doesn't see Mal's means and moral requirements, which she would have to accept in a relationship as an alternative.

"Out of Gas", the eighth episode in the series, is a reflective one. When Serenity breaks down and begins to run out of air, Mal sends the crew away in the shuttles, hoping either they or the ship's distress signal will be answered. When it is, he fights his way out of a double-cross and fixes the ship, before falling unconscious. The shuttles then return and the crew rescues him.

The majority of the episode is a series of flashbacks. The most important one in is the moment where Mal makes the agreement with Inara to rent a shuttle to her. The conversation is less familiar than we are used to, reflecting the moment, but there is still enough of a subtext to connect this to their current complicated relationship.

Inara: Were we to enter into this arrangement Captain Reynolds, there would be a few things I would require from you. The foremost being complete autonomy. The shuttle would be my home. No crewmember, including yourself would be allowed entrance without my express invitation.

Mal: You'll get your privacy.

Inara: And just we're clear? Under no circumstances will I be servicing you or anyone who is under your employ.

Mal: I'll post a sign.

Inara: That won't be necessary.

(Whedon, 2003).

This conversation sets out the parameters that Mal has been pushing against since the start in the first episode. Inara has made the rules of their professional relationship clear and the fact that Mal is blatantly flouting them, demonstrates his desire to provoke a reaction in her. The entire set of earlier conversations are now cast in a new light and, on reflection, make Mal look bad. Perhaps he had reasons for this, but these are not immediately apparent. Instead, we have a demonstration of

his deliberate attempt to undermine Inara's principles. We never get a good rationalisation for her tolerance, and this, in turn, undermines her character.

Episode Ten, "War Stories", finds Wash and Mal captured by crime lord Adelei Niska, their client from the second episode, "Train Job". Niska wants revenge for Mal's decision not to steal the medical supplies and the crew are required rescue him.

Inara's part in this is peripheral. She is entertaining a new client aboard the ship, a female planetary councillor. Whedon plays with the sexual politics of this. Inara has always stated she accepts male and female clients. Jayne Cobb, Mal's hired gun, is used to represent a typical male reaction to a sexual relationship between two women. The actual depiction of the relationship is much more affectionate, caring and realistic than he might imagine it to be as their intimacy when alone extends to all areas of human behaviour, with Inara working to help her client relax whilst they are together and seeking to make her feel she is in a safe space to be candid and unguarded, in as much as she might be.

The scenes between the Inara and the councillor do not make up much of the episode, but they do further our understanding of Inara's character. Once again, Inara's status is reinforced, particularly in that she chooses the clients she engages and chooses fewer women than men. Whedon is showing a character with her own agenda, demonstrating another facet of her outlook on life. Perhaps this is a further shapeshift? Although that would depend on the definition, as Inara is not being inconsistent, instead she is showing us her professional competency in a situation that she is comfortable with.

Saffron returns for episode eleven, "Trash" and again, her presence casts a reflection on Inara. This is more apparent in her second appearance as we already know her game and the crew are enlisted to help her with a heist. This time, Inara is better prepared, having already experienced Saffron's games. She will not be taken in and knows what to expect. Saffron attempts to maintain different identities with different people to further her schemes. In this episode, she has three husbands, all of whom call her a different name and have a different set of beliefs about her past and present.

Saffron is truly changeable, altering her behaviour mid-scene to try to get her way, attempting to manipulate Mal, his friend Monty, and Durran, her other husband from whom she wants to steal.

Monty: That's enough! What the hell is going on here? What do you mean, she ain't my wife?

Mal: She ain't your wife because she's married to me!

Saffron/Brigitte: Don't listen to him!

Mal: Bout half a year back, at the Triumph settlement, but it wasn't Brigitte then, it was Saffron! She hitched me by surprised, got on my ship and then tried to steal it out from under me! She is cold as ice and dead crazy on top of it!

(Whedon, 2003).

Inara's take on Saffron when she returns to the ship with her proposed heist is carefully considered. Saffron states she needs the crew to break into her other husband, Durran's apartment to steal an antique weapon. Whedon plays on the love triangle, positioning Saffron with Mal and carefully orchestrating the proposal to allow the crew moments to voice their opinion. In this case, the scene has been set to allow further scheming, with everyone expecting Saffron to double cross the crew. Wash is the character who voices their concerns.

Wash: I'm confused...

Saffron: You're asking, if I've got the security codes, why don't I walk in and grab it for myself.

Wash: No... Actually... I was wondering, what's she doing on this ship! She tried to kill us!

(Whedon, 2003).

Later, we realise that much of the conversation has been staged for Saffron's benefit, although we aren't clearly sure who was in on this as the tensions between the crew are not staged. This is a mark of the writing, acting in dramatizing a secure bond between the characters and once again, subtly shifting the audience's perspective towards the outsider, Saffron. Inara's part in this arrangement is not revealed at this stage, but it becomes apparent in the conclusion. In this sense, Whedon is invoking another important genre – the heist.

The resolution of the plan Saffron attempt her betrayal, but finds herself outmanoeuvred by Inara, who has arrived at the rendezvous site first. The dialogue between the two reveals the sharp difference in their characters.

Saffron: Where is it? Urgh, Its not here!

Inara: Looking for this? Wonder if it works? [weapon fizzles] Oh well, still worth a fortune, anyway this works fine. Honey you look horrific.

Saffron: What are you doing here?

Inara: Oh, just my part of the job.

Saffron: What part of the job?

Inara: You know, I put on the big act, storm away in a huff. Then I fly off, wait for you to double cross Mal, beat you to the rendezvous spot and grab the loot before you can get to it. What? You didn't see it coming?

(Whedon, 2003).

Both characters share a trait in concealing something of themselves. Inara's poise is something of an act, as it was revealed to us in the first episode, but how much is act and how much is truth is difficult to judge. Only in adversity or rare unguarded moments do we see her nature emerge. She is generally straightforward in her views and dealings, reserving only something of her feelings. Saffron's act is constant and she draws attention to it by her constant shifting of personality type. We are unsure what is real about her and in part, the act appears to have consumed her as she too is unsure of the difference anymore.

The Shapeshifter serves the dramatic function of bringing doubt and suspense to a story.

When heroes keep asking, "Is he faithful to me? Is she going to betray me? Does he truly love me? Is he an ally or an enemy?" a Shapeshifter is generally present.

(Vogler, 2007: 61).

On face value, Saffron fulfils Vogler's dramatic function quite clearly in most of the scenes she is present in. She displays her animus through continually working to subvert others to her agenda and is uncompromising in doing this.

Inara's fulfilment of the function is more subtle and carefully orchestrated so as not to alienate her from the audience. We never doubt her loyalty to the crew, but she does bring doubt in terms of the uncertainty over her relationship with Mal. Her agenda is not always clear and her changing role in opposition or attraction to Whedon's hero (Mal) is identifiable.

Episode thirteen, "Heart of Gold" sees Inara more prominent in the story. Exiled Companion Nandi runs a bordello on barren landscape named The Heart of Gold. Rance Burgess, the local despot claims one of the girls is pregnant with his child and demands she gives it up. Nandi contacts Inara to get help and she enlists the crew of the *Serenity* to defend the bordello from Burgess and his mercenaries.

The storyline remediates a popular western trope with a plot reminiscent of *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *Seven Samurai* (1954), and a host of other films since. The crew answer the plea for help and arrive on the planet to assist Nandi and the pregnant Petunia. The request given to them is a thinly disguised call to adventure, as first identified by Joseph Campbell:

This first stage of the mythological journey – which we have designated the “call to adventure” – signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown.

(Campbell, 2008: 48).

It is interesting to note that Inara acts as bearer of this call to the rest of the crew. Her role here is as the Herald – another of Vogler's identified archetypes, whose function is to deliver the request. (Vogler, 2007). This places her in an unfamiliar position of penitent on the behalf of others.

The whores of Nandi's establishment are a working-class depiction of the profession than any other characterisations in the rest of the series. Their business is presented as sex work, with no associated ritual or other service offered. They are characters to be rescued and whilst individuals are given the opportunity to become more detailed, their function in the story remains the same.

Here, Whedon is reverting to a classic depiction of the sex worker, rather than the fusion of professions embodied by his 'registered companions'. There are comparisons to be drawn here between Whedon's work and popular westerns such as *Unforgiven* (1992), *Young Guns* (1988) and *Young Guns 2* (1990), which in turn, look back at older depictions. The wronged woman or revenge story in this case is less realised than in other texts, possibly owing to the audience the television series is looking to attract.

Inara uses the term 'whore' when talking about Nandi's employees, correcting Mal in the application of the term and Nandi herself accepts this as an accurate description. The straightforward approach disarms degradation and disapproval. Whilst there is some stereotypical indulgence in labelling and 'reward' by the character Jayne, Whedon remains non-judgemental of people's choice of profession and, whilst the prominent characters of the bordello – Nandi, Petunia and Chari are all female, there are male sex workers there as well, which Kaylee draws our attention to.

Kaylee: Look they got boy whores. Isn't that thoughtful? I wonder if they service girl folk at all?

Wash: Best not ask.

(Whedon, 2003).

If we are to use Propp's definitions, Inara's role is as the dispatcher, a similar archetype to Campbell's herald. In this case, Propp identifies the narrative function as follows:

1. A call for help is given, with the resultant dispatch of the hero (B1).

The call usually comes from the tsar and is accompanied by promises.

2. The hero is dispatched directly (B2). Dispatch is presented either in

the form of a command or a request. In the former instance, it is

sometimes accompanied by threats; in the latter, by promises. Sometimes

both threats and promises are made.

(Propp, 2003: 37).

This role is fulfilled quickly, but retains a place in the narrative as Inara is included in business discussions between Nandi and Mal. However, the most interesting moment comes later with Inara's reaction when she discovers that Mal has slept with Nandi. To Mal's face she is calm and accepting of this, but the next jarring jump cut reveals her crouched in a corner crying. This confirms her continual struggle of managing her profession with her personal feelings.

...we are left with the feeling that Inara can't establish a relationship with Mal because she works as a Companion, which demonstrates a rather closed-minded view of how sex workers deal with relationships in the real world.

(Smith, 2009).

If we accept that Inara is representative of her profession and not struggling with the matter solely as an individual, then Smith's conclusion is valid and troubling. If Whedon is attempting to portray a different and enlightened view of sex-workers in the twenty-fifth century, an inability to resolve this professional and personal dilemma should be possible. Much of the episode's narrative points to both characters being unable to accept the other's positions on this, but ultimately it is Inara whose legitimate profession is questioned, not Mal's illegitimate one.

When Nandi dies, Inara is grief stricken and announces she needs to leave Serenity and the crew. Her action suggests she believes she is incapable of resolving her professional and personal dilemma. It also implies a misperception of Nandi's actions that brought her between Mal and Inara. Inara cannot hate or condemn Nandi, nor can she condemn Mal, but she cannot reconcile her own feelings to either position.

Episode fourteen, "Objects in Space", is the final episode of the series and the main narrative focus is on demonstrating the character River's ability to read minds. This is used as a narrative function to reveal more of the hidden stories and agendas behind each member of the crew and Whedon uses this to snoop on the feelings of both Inara and Mal. River walks around the ship listening to conversations. In each, we hear something of what the crew are saying and then something of what

they are thinking. Mal and Inara are discussing her decision to leave and when she will tell the crew.

Of most interest is what is not said between them.

Inara: I'm a big girl, just tell me.

Mal: None of it means a damn thing.

(Whedon, 2003).

The meaning of both lines is not immediately apparent. The audience is meant to read into the lines and relate them to what they already know. The context of Inara's conversation suggests she is thinking about Mal. The implication is that she expects him to tell her how he feels and in the process of doing so, hurt her. Mal, in turn, is evaluating something. The implication is that he is considering life without Inara.

Whedon's decision to write these thoughts as fragments is intentional. He wants the audience to make the links between these small insights and the rest of the information they have about both characters. By allowing this conclusion to be drawn and not dictating it, Whedon encourages a greater investment in both characters and their circumstances. A more obvious acknowledgement of their emotions would have gone against the sophistication of story. These are complex people, meeting each other from complex positions which do not grant room for them to co-exist, as they see it.

What there is no sign of, which we might see in a lesser work is the kind of emotional strop we are used to seeing in dramas, when a relationship is ending and one person pulls away, waiting for the other to break and come running after them. A kind of brinkmanship of feelings to force acknowledgement. This doesn't happen.

Serenity

The sequel film allows Joss Whedon to bring some kind of closure to the storylines of *Firefly* (2003), exploring the revealed nature of River and the secret behind the cannibalistic Reavers, a re-occurring enemy in the series.

Right from the outset, there is a clearer aesthetic comparison with another genre hybrid, *Star Wars* (1977). The space western concept, journeying between planets and places on an adventure is much more in keeping with the requirements of a film narrative, whereas the episodes tended to be in limited locations, reflecting the production requirements of writing and producing a series.

The Alliance want River and have sent a government assassin, known only as “The Operative” to capture or kill her and her brother Simon. They believe as a telepathy she may have overheard something, a deep and dark secret about the Reavers they do not want shared.

Inara is absent from the opening scenes of the film. At the end of the television series, the audience know of her intention to leave the ship. She has returned to a Companions training house subsequently contacts Mal requesting help. The crew suspect this is a trap, but go anyway.

Mal: You all were watching I take it?

Kaylee: Yes

Mal: D’you see us fight?

Kaylee: No

Mal: Trap.

(Whedon, 2005).

Again, Whedon is playing on the tropes and archetypal experience of the audience. Acknowledging that the situation is more complex than it appears, but electing to act as requested anyway implies that the crew will make a contingency plan, but does not lessen the sense of risk.

On a superficial level in this scene, Inara is fulfilling the narrative function of the Princess (Propp, 2003: 79-80), as a character to be rescued. Mal travels to the planet to meet her and becomes embroiled in an argument with her captor, the aforementioned government assassin. Here, Whedon has invoked and presented Inara as a structural archetype but then allows Inara to subvert her own role, shapeshifting in the subsequent confrontation.

Throughout the scene, the three characters exchange lines, the framing of the situation continually altering as each tries to get the upper hand. Inara's ability to affect the outcome of the scene is concealed. Whedon allows her to hide her flash bomb incense stick, which will bring the scene to a favourable conclusion. This is Chekov's gun in practice.

Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.

(Valentine, 1987).

As the scene progresses, the Operative confesses he is unarmed and Mal initiates a fight, invoking an intertextual reference to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) when Indiana Jones shoots a sword wielding adversary before the man can close with him. In both cases, the audience is surprised owing to the elaborate set up and seemingly, quick resolution. However, in this case, the Operative is not defeated and the conflict escalates.

In the ensuing violence, Inara demonstrates skill, but cannot match their adversary. Neither can Mal. The fight choreography makes no concession to Inara's gender as this would undermine the character of the assassin. She tries to placate and dissemble, but he recognises the tactic and strikes without hesitation.

Throughout the scene there is an attempt by each character to re-contextualise what is going on.

This is concluded by the Operative and Inara as Mal lies bleeding on the floor.

The Operative: Nothing here is what it seems. He isn't the plucky hero, the Alliance isn't some evil empire, this is not the grand arena.

Inara: And that's not incense.

(Whedon, 2005).

Here is the moment where Inara triumphs in the scene, rescuing Mal and thereby casting aside the archetypal role she has been presented with. Once again, she shapeshifts becoming the rescuer of herself and her would be hero.

In many respects, this scene is the moment where *Serenity* (2005) comes closest to matching the concept of Whedon's previous work, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the Princess or victim who is empowered to save herself. Once again, the resourcefulness of Inara is demonstrated by her transition between roles and functions in the narrative from an object of rescue to becoming the rescuer. When Mal arrives she questions his decision, clearly seeing that if he hadn't responded both might have been in less danger.

This questioning continues when they are back on *Serenity*.

Inara: This isn't the war Mal.

Mal: You telling me that because you think I don't know?

Inara: You came to the training house looking for a fight.

Mal: I came looking for you.

Inara: I just want to know who I'm dealing with, I've seen too many versions of you to be sure.

Mal: I start fighting a war, I guarantee you'll see something new.

(Whedon, 2005).

This is something of a projection from Inara. At the very beginning of the television series, she confesses to Shepherd Book that she remains because Mal is a mystery and 'so few men are' (Whedon, 2003). Now, she is asking him to be transparent, to explain his actions and reasons for them. From the audience's perspective Mal is consistent, a person whose reactions are reasoned and rationalised as part of the story, but like any Whedon character, not constrained by his archetypal trappings. An interpretation of this would be that Inara is projecting something of her own changeable nature back onto Mal and making him another mirror of her own dilemma.

Inara: Mal!

Mal: I got no answers for you, Inara. I got no rudder. Wind blows northerly, I go north. That's who I am. Maybe that ain't a man to lead, but they have to follow. So, You want to tear me down, do it inside your own mind.

Inara: I'm not trying to tear you down.

Mal: But you fog things up, you always have. You spin me about. Wish like hell you was elsewhere.

Inara: I was.

(Whedon, 2005).

It is here, that Mal finally acknowledges their relationship and her hold on him. From his perspective, Inara is fulfilling the role of the shapeshifter, destabilising his judgement and Mal's lines confirm this. This is also an acknowledgement that going to rescue her (and thereby needing to be rescued himself) might have been a mistake.

However, by calling Inara on this and acknowledging the situation, Mal settles their differences for the time being. From here onwards, she keeps her own council, expressing concern, but not challenging or intervening, allowing him to lead and taking her part only as one of the crew.

In some senses, suspending this conflict is unfortunate and something of a contrivance for the narrative of the film. Inara loses her agency at this moment, her ability to drive the plot is crushed as a hierarchy of protagonists is confirmed. This frees Mal to assume the hero function fully in *Serenity* (2005), something Whedon was keen to eschew in the previous television series. It also buries or suspends Inara's character arc.

The only other meaningful scene between them comes right at the end, after *The Operative* is defeated and people have learned the truth about the Alliance and the origin of the Reavers.

Mal: ready to get off this heap and back to civilised life?

Inara: I uh... I don't know.

Mal: Good answer.

(Whedon, 2005).

This final conversation is an acknowledgement on Inara's part as well. She wants to stay and implies she may have stopped planning and second-guessing things. This isn't a happy ever after, but it is a star for them, a chance to see what happens next without baggage and without either surrendering their individuality to the other, a much more realistic depiction of a relationship.

Conclusion

The function of Vogler's narrative archetype of the Shapeshifter intrinsically destabilises scenes in which it is deployed. The Shapeshifter brings doubt and concern to any situation. Joss Whedon's characters often exhibit tendencies of this kind, but ultimately are being utilised for a more sophisticated reason, to establish continual uncertainty, and shades of morality and ethics, rather than only the reactions needed in a particular scene.

Whedon's use of shapeshifters in *Firefly* (2003) makes use of the genre functions and archetypes of related work. There are classic narrative devices from Propp, Vogler and Campbell, as well as a collection of Science Fiction and Western film tropes. For the most part, Whedon looks to apply these frames to characters as a means of subversion, asking his characters to play against their strengths, so as to reveal more of who they are.

This approach established a nuanced cast in the television series, *Firefly* (2003) where a variety of opinions on the relevant circumstances were always expressed. However, the requirements of the film, *Serenity* (2005), to conclude the major narrative arc previously established, undermines this and gives the film a less innovative feel.

Whedon's objective in establishing a cast of mysterious characters, with no clear hero leaves his narrative open to criticism. Some of the blatant misogyny spouted by Jayne and Mal is challenged, but other moments are not. This does destabilise any identification of a clear hero, but the switch of narrative priority into *Serenity* (2005), where Mal is portrayed as a hero, legitimises much of his previous perspective, which is troubling.

Inara is arguably a character who suffers most at the cancellation of the series, with a personal story that is truncated into a tragic binary of choosing her profession and independence over a relationship and feelings. Even this binary is resolved roughly in *Serenity* (2005), leaving the potential of the character to challenge stereotypes in the wider genre of Science Fiction, unfulfilled.

We may never know if Joss Whedon planned for a more complex exploration of Inara in subsequent seasons of *Firefly* (2003). He has done so in the subsequent comic books, but there isn't a major focus on her character as there is on others, like Shepherd Book and Hogan Washburne.

The application of Shapeshifter qualities to a greater or lesser degree in *Firefly* (2003) balanced with the needs for empathy does demonstrate an innovative way in which familiar tropes can be applied to make characters appear interesting and fresh.

However, as an experiment in this kind of narrative construction, *Firefly* (2003) remains some of an unfinished and unrealised project. It is perhaps this that makes its cancellation an even greater tragedy as we will never what the unrealised character of Inara could have been.

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Defamiliarising Europe (2017)

Introduce yourself and own context.

[clip] Intro Hypernormalisation (00:00 – 02:36

Adam Curtis' documentary, *Hypernormalisation* describes a world view of systemisation and systems. The simplified perception of the world as a system can be likened to Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and the hyperreal.

Whilst this reality is hyperreal, the way it conforms to the utopian and promethean ideals suggested by Baudrillard in his three orders of simulation, bears exploration.

Those three orders are as follows:

1. simulacra that are natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that are harmonious, optimistic, and that aim for the restitution or the ideal institution of nature made in God's image.
2. simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production—a Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy (desire belongs to the utopias related to this order of simulacra).
3. simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game—total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.

(Baudrillard, 1991: 121).

Baudrillard's orders are not necessarily discreet in their application. They are frames that demonstrate the concept. The system identified by Curtis, is continually evolving revising and remodelling itself, operating under Baudrillard's third order of simulacra. There is a contradiction at

the heart of this. The system appears to be aiming to be an entirely encompassing understanding that allows for total control of now and the future, but continues to deny the existence of marginalised forces, acting to marginalise them further by ignoring them.

The process of defining our world with the available information we have and through that definition, ignoring, or discounting information that might go against the framework is an issue structuralists continually find themselves challenged by.

Looking back through history its clear we can find many potential proximal causes or praxis moments. Curtis draws the origin of this from two incidents in 1975. The first one in New York, the second one in Damascus. To illustrate this presentation, we'll be looking at the first of these examples.

[Clip 02:36- 06:30]

Curtis' theorisation of a proclaimed systemisation culture, where financial authorities attempt to engineer society to best benefit their specific interests is based on a flawed assumption that all these interests are in everyone's interests. The furtherance of capitalism and/or profit, is not necessarily also the furtherance of human society. In this sense, Curtis describes the ideology of the system – a continual belief that the world operates on a simplified financial structure of continual 'trickle down' profit.

This simplification is also exemplified by Curtis' portrayal of Ronald Reagan's attempts to involve America in the conflicts of the Middle East, as the United States attempted to portray its position to the world and its own people as a good and progressive force, almost like the binary Good versus Evil simplification we see in much of the Fantasy Genre and indeed, that we saw exemplified in popular movies around this time.

Clip – (26:57-28:12)

This framing of geopolitics is something we still struggle with the legacy of in every major conflict across the world. As we become increasingly global, the simple and clear, moral high ground in any circumstance is difficult to find and accept.

Mythologies

In *The Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner identifies ways in which mythical constructs can be manufactured and arise to demonstrate the cultural familiarities of interpretation that bind together a society. These can be found when looking back through a collection of literature produced by that society. Warner identifies these in films, books, folk tales and more, noting how they can cross between mediums and evolve in the way a society perceives them.

1975 & 2016 – United Kingdom Referendum

One identifiable mythology can be found in the connection between these two events.

In 2016, after the Brexit vote, I spoke with my parents asking them why they voted for Leave, when...

There is also a connection here to Curtis' contradiction. When forces are marginalised and ignored, they can be empowered. The empowered anti-Europe perception, fuelled and reinforced by the continual mythological construction of Europe as a constraining force on the United Kingdom waited for a moment in which it would be empowered to act – the 2016 referendum. Campaigns for referendums had existed before – throughout the 1980s and 1990s – but these were continually ignored. Arguably, if these had been enacted, the anti-European sentiment in the United Kingdom might have been reduced.

There is a continual, critically negative position that is part of the UK identity. We are quick to criticise, but slow to give praise. We discourage creativity within our institutions and struggle to celebrate initiatives that improve our society.

It is only when we are outside, looking into what we have that we notice how others see us and recognise the institutional achievements we have made.

There is an endemic superiority/entitlement complex to 'being British'. This stems from reinterpreted mythologies around the concepts of 'Empire' and 'Great'.

Beyond the Brexit vote, there are additional simplifications. Leave and Remain are perceived by some as binary forces. The facts used to support arguments on either side are questioned with a vigour and animosity that undermines any genuine attempt to find consensus in discussion.

Curtis identifies the circumstances the Soviet Union found itself in during the 1980s. The parallels are interesting.

Clip [23:28-24:30]

Curtis' identification of the hopelessness and despair this fiction generates is important. It highlights the feeling of hopelessness individuals can find in their lives everything around them proves stagnant and unreliable.

Dystopias

The concept of a dystopia can be difficult to clearly define. In, *The Utopia Reader* (1999), Lyman Tower Sargent and George Claeys describe a dystopia as a flawed society by relative comparison to an individual's own identification of the society they live in.

Curtis' argument in identifying a system and a continual process of imposing systemisation as a geopolitical agenda implies that our reality is actually more like a dystopia than we think and that our realisation of this dystopic perception can be compared to what we thought we knew before, thereby fulfilling the measuring criteria.

This shift of perception is a defamiliarization of our understanding and a glimpse into the stagnant, pretend society that birthed the science fiction of the Strugatsky brothers.

[24:40-26:55]

Curtis goes on to identify the series of post-apocalyptic 'dark forebodings' that gripped America at the end of the 1990s as people focused on the worst that might happen in the future. These are exemplified by the string of apocalyptic films made at the time.

What these, and other science fiction dystopias did, was to reinforce the system by demonstrating the possible dangers that would be suffered if it was broken or abandoned. This is a projected mythology in itself, that doesn't look backwards, but looks forwards, speculating on what might happen if these established interests were undermined.

It is easy to characterise many protest movements as part of this undermining, particularly when those movements are highlighting injustices, but not offering simplified alternatives.

In Curtis' film, 2008 becomes a moment when the narrative goes full circle to 1975, when, in a moment of crisis, the banks are saved by the politicians. However, whilst there is talk of regulation, there is less demonstrable change in how society is systemified.

Fractured Europe

There are many worthy successors to the Strugatsky's fiction. David Hutchinson was first writing the award winning, *Fractured Europe* trilogy in the 1990s – at a similar time to the emerging apocalyptic reflection elsewhere. His books imagine a continent broken into tiny countries, with new independence movements asserting their autonomy every month. Hutchinson's Europe is a vast patchwork of city states and border controls. A reactionary dystopia born out of the failure of the union project, in asymmetric conflict with a mysterious second reality, accessible through strange pathways, hidden in plain sight.

Initially, in the first book, *Europe in Autumn*, Hutchinson draws from the familiar iconography and referential tradition of the spy thriller, specifically in this case, Len Deighton. This gives the work a strong sense of grounding in our reality. Hutchinson's *Fractured Europe* is detailed and familiar to us, but seemingly changed by conventional political failure. When the fantastical elements are introduced, this change hearkens back to the ideas of the Strugatsky brothers. However, instead of

highlighting the alien strangeness of his alternative Europe – known as The Community, Hutchinson at first uses his second reality as a means of transportation and then as an asymmetric enemy to his protagonists.

The Community are an interesting concept. Taken at face value, in our post Brexit world, the idea of an alternative Europe populated solely by antiquarian English people can be read as a satirical poke at our new context. However, Hutchinson also describes their society as boring, drawing a comparison to the stagnated society of the Soviet Union, identified by Curtis. If that is so, then the Fractured Europe of Hutchinson's novels provide the comparative, changeable environment as described by the Strugatsky brothers.

However, Hutchinson's Fractured Europe is also a dystopian warning to us of the failure of the European Union project. The detail with which Rudi's life, slipping between the different polities and finding the cracks in border security is described conveys this sense of choking bureaucracy and constant imperfect surveillance. There is a technocratic asymmetrical illuminati war going on in Hutchinson's fiction, but those fighting it have retreated, acting only lash out at each other when they perceive weakness, using an array of mysterious fantastical and technological tools.

Beyond Dystopia: Where are we going?

This 2014 quote from Ursula Le Guin, coupled with Adam Curtis' identification of a systemisation process pervading our society suggests we don't have an answer to this question, but that we need to encourage more attempts at trying to answer it for ourselves, beyond the simulationist modelling of what we are as a species. Some of Science Fiction's most naïve and inaccurate dreams came from people trying to envisage a better society, but writers who attempt these things are still dreaming of something positive. Can the same be said of the process modelling systemification identified by Baudrillard and Curtis, if it is happening? Or is this modelling an attempt to maintain a status quo or equilibrium, leading to stagnation?

Hypernormalisation shows us a world we know, but in a different way, defamiliarizing it. Similarly, what has happened to our societies in the last few years have caused us to question what we believed were accepted truths. We are still in the middle of this process, looking for answers and familiar, reliable things to hold on to. Does that mean we need the system to feel secure?

If the simulation and systemisation of our global society is happening. We must be aware of it and aware of our part in it.

These presentation notes were part of a work delivered at the World Convention of Science Fiction in Helsinki in August 2017.

The accompanying slides can be found here -

http://prezi.com/pqsauzr9tb0x/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy

