

Exploring the Fantastic: New Critical Frameworks in an Evolving Genre

by

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ABSTRACT

Historically, fantasy has been pushed towards fundamentally conservative positions. This project will ask: can *progressive* fantasy be written? The question forces a reassessment of two positions. Firstly, it explores what ‘fantasy’ can be, escaping categorisations of genre for a modal understanding. Fantasy is not dragons and wizards (even when it superficially appears to be), but a meditation on the possible and impossible. Secondly, it re-opens the debate surrounding progressive aesthetics, affirming a need to imagine a socialist-humanist alterity.

Consequently, methodology addresses both of these conceptual spaces: Jameson’s ‘utopian aesthetic’ in *Archaeologies of the Future* proves an appropriate frame. His formulations about science fiction, fantasy, and dystopia seem a distillation of a neo-Marxist triumvirate: Lukács, Marcuse, and Althusser (via Rosemary Jackson). Considering their aesthetic approaches, this project argues for an applicable set of ‘measures’ to formulate and judge a progressive fantasy.

How is progressive fantasy to be judged? One answer is through two distinct ‘voices’: creative practice and critical exegesis. Firstly, *The Legend of the Wanderer*, a novel, mirrors the exegesis’ conceptual trajectory. Secondly, Jameson’s utopian aesthetic, broken into its component parts, is read through a common text—Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—whose ideological and artistic concerns parallel fantastic sensibilities. Thirdly, applying Jameson to Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*, the supposed science fiction-fantasy division can be closed. Then Jameson’s assumptions are interrogated, thereby enabling an alternate model of fantastic aesthetics. Next, this model is tested against three texts: Wolfe’s *The Shadow of the Torturer*, Sanderson’s *The Final Empire*, and Delany’s *Tales of Nevèrjôn*. Finally, having navigated several progressive avenues, practice and theory are linked. Key choices of my

novel are mapped, arguing that inscribing fantasy with a conceptual intent can transform how fantasy is understood and written.

In sum, the dual nature of this project re-imagines fantasy as a potential site for progressive aesthetics. Furthermore, applying existing knowledge to texts produces new understandings in an evolving discipline, *while* re-enforcing the importance of creative practice when answering theoretical problems.

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Abbreviations:

TSOTT: The Shadow of the Torturer

TLOTW: The Legend of the Wanderer

INTRODUCTION

While fantasy enjoys increasing academic attention (if not acceptance), its relationship with Marxist aesthetics has tended towards negative, pejorative readings. Thinkers such as Darko Suvin and Fredric Jameson have been critical of the mode's more conservative aspects, preferring to set fantasy against science fiction (hereafter sf), preferring the latter, criticising the former. This is a narrowing view, a view that while insightful, seemingly produces conceptual dead ends (namely the wish-fulfilment, escapism, and conservatism of epic, sword and sorcery). However, this thesis asks: can a progressive fantasy be written?

Immediately, this question opens up two avenues of inquiry that define the scope of the research project as a whole. At an investigative level, the creative practice and exegesis model is a platform with two hemispheres, separate yet connected, speaking to the same problem in tandem. This confluence frames a secondary debate, namely: what is fantasy? While arguments surrounding taxonomy are common, this project investigates a more interesting split between fantasy as genre and fantasy as mode. Similar to Farah Mendelsohn's modal approach in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, this argues for an understanding of fantasy that links content (structure, characterisation, setting, metaphysic, etc.) to purpose, intent, and function. Consequently, this connection speaks to the project's methodology. If the creative practice and exegesis is the attempt to conceptualise an aesthetic of a progressive fantasy, how will the effectiveness of this aesthetic be judged?

Once again, the nature of the project proscribes a certain frame. Fredric Jameson's work in *Archaeologies of the Future* functions as both introduction to fantasy as a potentially progressive literature *and* a divisible fermentation of Frankfurt School aesthetics: Lukács, Marcuse, and Althusser (via Rosemary Jackson). Concurrently, thinkers and writers of fantasy (Miéville, Mendlesohn, Le Guin, Atwood, Attebery, and Tolkien) act as sounding boards for further argument and counter-argument. These two approaches speak directly to

the problem of encapsulating a progressive, Marxist aesthetic and fantasy's relationship to it. In this way, methodology dictates method: a dialogue where what is being written must address what has been written and vice-versa.

The Legend of the Wanderer (hereafter *TLOTW*) is the creative exploration of a set of theoretical paradigms. Its creative questions regarding content, philosophy, structure, politics, plot, characters, and setting are defined not (only) by conventions of genre, but attitudes guided by intent. Inevitably, these narratological imperatives became choices, choices made in the attempt to render a progressive aesthetic through a distinctly fantastic mode. Here, the methodological outline of the project takes on the aspect of a model, of signposts influencing the direction of the writing process. Consequently, *TLOTW* develops two, distinct voices roughly analogous to dystopia (an exaggerated reflection of extratextual reality) and utopia (an imagining of an unreal alterity driven by gratification). This dyad, more than simple juxtaposition, functions dialogically—one side conversing with the other; it constructs a narrative drive that can only gaze forward while peering back. Interestingly, this dialogue is suggestive of another. *TLOTW*, far from being an artefact apart, is part of a rich legacy and, therefore, interacts with the idea of fantasy as genre. Boundaries of genre, codifications of content, structure, characterisations, purpose, always exist to be obeyed and/or transgressed. By interacting with genre at various representational, ideological, and rhetorical levels, *TLOTW* (representative of the project as a whole) hints at the possibility of using theoretical goals to inscribe fantasy and the fantastic mode with new, progressive functions.

However, what are the theoretical paradigms informing the creative practice? What is a progressive aesthetic? How is a progressive aesthetic to be judged? Chapter 1 begins the exegesis with a brief outline of Jameson's 'utopian aesthetic', tracing the theoretical discourse he advances in *Archaeologies of the Future* through the Marxist aesthetics of three thinkers: Lukács, Marcuse, and Althusser (via Jackson). Using Joseph Conrad's *Heart of*

Darkness as a textual touchstone, this chapter traces these influential schools of thought that underwrite the entire project. Importantly, *Heart of Darkness*, perceived through three, distinct aesthetic lenses, resonates with the fantastic, with preoccupations of reflections, doubles, ruptures, dreams (or nightmares), and alterity; it lays a recognisable foundation on top of which an argument encompassing fantasy can be built. Conclusively, this chapter enunciates several, definable criteria by which any argument regarding progressive content can be readily measured.

Of course, by introducing Jameson, this project has to resolve a problem: the supposed division between sf and fantasy. While this division has been weakened by genre-crossing writers like Miéville and Wolfe, like a spectre, it still hangs over the fantastic discourse. However, Chapter 2 uses this divide not as a goal, but a means to an end. Using China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, this chapter reconciles Jameson's explicitly cognitive, sf-minded 'utopian aesthetic' with fantasy. Discussed in terms of setting, mood, monsters, and character action, Miéville's text serves the argument that fantasy can fit the discursive purpose of Jameson's reflective dystopias. But this raises another question distinct from 'can it?' It asks: 'should it?' Consequently, Chapter 2 argues that, while the cognitive reflection is important, there are other aesthetic strategies (outlined in Chapter 1) that potentially produce a progressive aesthetic. Necessarily, this argument opens a debate around what a utopian aesthetic might achieve, juxtaposing inherently negative and/or destructive ascriptions with positive and/or creative possibilities. Here, the general principles outlined in Chapter 1 are reoriented towards fantasy specifically as a set of aesthetic values appropriate to the mode.

Having outlined a set of progressive aesthetic principles, Chapter 3 applies them to three case studies: Gene Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer*, Brandon Sanderson's *The Final Empire*, and Samuel Delany's *Tales of Nevèrÿon*. Moving through these dramatically

dissimilar yet aesthetically related texts, the chapter uncovers certain metaphysical, empirical, and ideological complications associated with the portrayal of progressive subjectivities in existing fantastic artefacts. Admittedly, this chapter introduces exemplars that, to lesser and greater extents, use (sometimes obliquely, sometimes reflexively, sometimes transgressively) certain genre conventions. Furthermore, these texts (their differing manifestations of the impossible, their different worlds, their different possibilities) begin to define the wider literary space of which *TLOTW* is a part.

Finally, Chapter 4 brings this discussion full circle, reframing the theory in terms of the struggles, obstacles, contradictions, and preoccupations of the creative product. In this manner, *TLOTW* converses with the exegesis, navigating its artistic topography with the project's theoretical frames. Consequently, the most important creative choices (setting, structure, character, action, purpose) are articulated with the theoretical lexicon of the preceding chapters (articulated by Jameson, Lukács, Marcuse, Althusser, and Jackson).

The creative practice is mapped, and its changing aesthetic and conceptual topography explored through reflection, creation, dystopia, utopia, past, present, and future. What started as a suite of discrete 'stories' became four digressions into a civilisation's history connected by an alterity attempting to define a socially, technologically progressive possibility. This chapter argues that the progressive aesthetic constructed via the creative practice relies not on one, but three different aesthetic approaches. Firstly, it maps a totality. Secondly, it deconstructs this totality. Thirdly, it creates something new. Reimagined as another conceptual 'voice', separate and distinct, yet theoretically related and informed, the chapter implies that creative practice can be an artistic means to imagine aesthetic goals. Fundamentally, Chapter 4 acts as both a beginning and an end; it closes the project's hermeneutic circle while opening possibilities (of which *TLOTW* entertains only a conceivable few), suggesting a landscape for a potentially progressive fantasy.

The Legend of the Wanderer

for Miklos and Terese

Gant was lost in the darkness. Shuffling down musty rows, fingertips brushing cracked leather spines, he felt the topless shelves leaning over his head, ready to fall, waiting to bury. He was turned around, wandering without reference in a maze of references. The archive was stacked with creaks and whispers; its endless shelves crammed with knowledge covering every topic but Gant's insistent, lightless now.

'Idiot.' He considered turning back, but there was no back, no forward, no left or right—only ... onwards. He'd always assumed that you couldn't search for a beginning. They just ... happened, and switching off the lamp, leaving it behind, plunging into the unknown *had* seemed like a good idea at the time. 'Use an index next time.'

Spend long enough in the dark and you realise people are wrong. Darkness doesn't fill you, you fill it. Confronted by absolute impenetrable absence, Gant's mind expanded into the shelves, filming the void with memories.

Images focussed like half-drawn pictures dredged up from a life so far away. Time dilated and his past pooled around him. Gant felt removed, out of touch with what he was, what he'd done, shivering as recollections were absorbed, added to archived layers of history. They weren't his anymore. They belonged to a past he no longer recognised, to another Gant who had left his home, battled shadows, seen cities, survived riots.

Time weighed down—a concrete burden of seconds ticking steadily into eons. Year after year, he imagined books appearing on shelves, piling words atop words, page against pages padding the archive with a little bit more.

Once he'd thought that the past once written ossified, was finite. But history was ... made—pieced together, rewritten. Competing visions existed. And Gant had his. The world history had built was destroying itself: it needed something different, something better. Somewhere in these shelves, interred under the stultifying minutiae of manifests and minutes, legend slept, waiting to be woken from myth and allegory.

Gant sighed. ‘This better be worth it, Duron.’

His mentor thought Vigilstone’s archive would ‘open up’ Gant’s study of the Wanderer, offer fresh perspective on the long abandoned Bastion Empire. The wizard was probably right ...

He stubbed his toe. ‘Fuck!’

The pain subsided when the light appeared. It was gold, warm, diffuse, sparking through curtains of dust like fire-flies. Shadows shifted as the outlines of towering scaffolds resolved like boles of an ancient, petrified forest. Iron supports bowed under rows of books, rusted struts twisting like spidery roots. Cobwebs dangled from fossilised tomes. Tattered pages, translucent and brittle, crackled with the breath of departing autumn. Gant crept towards the light.

Step by step, it shone brighter, lending the archive solidity, dissolving the fluid formlessness, replacing it with concrete continuity. Leaves dropped from the vaulted ceiling, floating on the golden glow.

Impossible, Gant thought. We’re underground.

Receding into shadow, the archive was a vast collection of musty works in musty lines. Ahead was leaves, roots, bark and the smell of rain. It was as if the light were altering Gant’s perception, transforming the shelves into a palimpsest of variable reality. Then, coming around a corner, he beheld an ardent star blanking out the stacks, the leaves, the shelves, infusing everything it touched. Gant breathed radiance and opened the book paged with sunlight.



ELET AND SEMMIS

1 In the Beginning the Universe was Elet, the Light of Thought, and Semmis, the Mouth to Nothingness. ²Whole and divided before time was wrought and tree was grown they were siblings in eternal contest.

³ Elet was the creation of all things new, delighting in forging forms and revealing secrets. ⁴But Semmis strove always to return to the infinite, uncut forever, unmaking all that its brother made.

⁵ In Elet was wonder found and inventions beyond the dreams of man were devices for his play. ⁶And Elet did inter his purpose into towers raised of singing crystal crowned with unnumbered rainbows. ⁷These were the works of awe raised in the long moments of eternity.

⁸ Yet Semmis rose in envy and despair, its desire mocked by the design of Elet's joy. ⁹And anger burst from Semmis as it smote Elet's Light in twain, dividing Thought from Power, and spurning Elet's

wonder into the Void. ¹⁰Thus it was that darkness and light did come together for the first time.

2 From this sundering were two great orbs cast into the Universe: these we name Sun and Earth. ²The flame of Imagination was in the Sun and the rock of Consciousness did ground the Earth. ³And it was, that so divided, Elet was given both flesh and spirit; his bones buried deep in stone, his power blazing bright about the Sun.

⁴ Bereft of his Light, Elet drew into the fastness of the world, crawling deep into its unfeeling rock and the fate of Elet was made one with the Earth.

⁵ But the memory of Light was in Elet, and the Sun's face a burning reminder. ⁶Wounds he had taken, but in their vicious scoring was witnessed the making of new forms. ⁷One had become two, and in those two thrones was the majesty of Elet given court: the Earth was

as Elet's stately robes and the burnished sun his shining crown.

8 Now was the dread desire of Semmis overawed, for its purpose was destruction, yet by its action was creation found. ¹⁰So Semmis did flee into the Void.

3 Grievous were the pains rendered unto Elet by Semmis and hidden was his glory in the Earth's blackest caves. ²Eons passed and Elet fixed his gaze upon the Sun whose glorious heat was a burden too heavy to bear.

3 Reaching from the stone, Elet made to grasp his sundered Light. ⁴Two would be joined as one, by a lofty thought that was the Tree. ⁵So Elet laboured in the building of a bridge that might span that loneliness between Earth and Sun. ⁶But, it was a distance unbridgeable and his Light was beyond all earthly reach.

7 Then Elet heaved his Will upon the Earth and that mighty orb, being one with his mind, did yield. ⁸For the desire of Elet was overwhelming—an ever-striving to be whole once more. ⁹Thus, the

moorings of its creation were cut and the Earth set loose upon the path to desolation.

10 Heat upon heat, light onto light—Elet's body soared closer to the Sun. ¹¹Fire swept across its face, wreathing Elet in a scorching halo. ¹²But want raged unquenchable in the thoughts of Elet and the Earth sailed on. ¹³Light upon light, heat onto heat, until his craggy flesh was cracked and Elet burned.

14 Now Elet learnt fear, for in his marriage to the stone was he bound to all its pain. ¹⁵Unknowing and unmindful, he had reached for his lost power, but the Sun was estranged from his will and raged unmindful and unknowing. ¹⁶Elet tried to withdraw his Will and stall the Earth, but found his urgings too strident to recall.

17 In his haste, Elet had made of the Earth an unbreakable reflection of his want. ¹⁸Doubtful, Elet leant against the Earth, hoping to turn it from its deathly path. ¹⁹And compelled at last, the Earth broke from its demise and was moved to spins circles around the Sun.

20 Then Elet blew out the fires on his flesh and when the Sun's heat was but a gentle touch and the Earth becalmed.

4 In this time Semmis had not been idle. ²Having witnessed its brother's burning, Semmis knew the Sun was unassailable to its wrath. ³But seeing stone subject to scarring, it fell upon the Earth with malice.

4 Gathering darkness to its body, Semmis stole into the Void and, as black in black, turned the Earth to a shattered ruin. ⁵Deep rents it cut and long furrows appeared beneath its wicked claws.

⁶Gouges, sharp and bitter, were churned into chaotic whorls, whose blasted parts were taken into Semmis and devoured.

7 Without the recourse of his Power, Elet worked upon the roots of the Earth, forging spears of rock to contend with his wrathful brother. ⁸Long was their struggle and the outcome unclear. ⁹So great was Semmis' rage that great pieces of the Earth were hurled into space, yet the bastions of Elet's resolve were without

measure. ¹⁰And lo, the very universe did shake at the as the siblings came together as one in war.

5 With each blow Semmis felt its intent wane, and in each defence, Elet fed more of himself into the bedrock. ²And it came to pass that, as Semmis consumed its rage in devastation, Elet poured his life into the unthinking stone of Earth.

3 Yet, where Elet breathed life was that life choked by Semmis. ⁴And grave were the hurts etched over the Earth—long trenches had been carved and land tattooed with mountains.

5 Having wasted its ire against the stone, Semmis fell somnolent and was subdued. ⁶Now Elet was wholly invested in the Earth, and in the Earth was heard his wondrous song—'My mind is now the rock of Earth and in that rock is my life bound.'

6 Elet wept.

7 Spilling from the depths, Elet's tears flowed as the crashing waves. ²And over all his hurtful cuts did that water

wash, cleansing the rock of Semmis' touch. ³Rivers poured into the winding gouges and became a flood that was the blood of the Earth—his tears were water and through water does all life flow.

4 But so great was Elet's pain that his tears overflowed into the folds of the Universe. ⁵And it was that those great pieces torn from the Earth by Semmis were three, and they possessed the memory of Elet's Will. ⁶And these three pieces were islands in the holdfast of space.

7 As Elet's sorrow rained into the Universe, some touched upon those wandering pieces. ⁸Thus, through mourning was Elet reunited with the fragments of his spirit. ⁹Moved to be whole once more, the pieces joined together in the earthly image of Elet—a celestial monument to Earth unriven. ¹⁰Thus, the Moon was made and the tears on its surface became a silver sheen on all Earth's flowing waters.

11 Far from Sun's warmth and Elet's Will, some tears froze and were as jewels on a field of black. ¹²And these became the stars of the firmament. ¹³Without the Will of Elet, unlit torches were these stars, drifting the undiscovered paths of heaven. ¹⁴Then, kissed by the Sun's long beams they became echoes of the Elet's past wonder before its first breaking: the undimmed memory of Light Unbroken.

15 And by those that would one day look up at the night and sing, these bright candles were the most beloved of all Elet's creations.

8 So barren was its form, Elet's mind did alight upon the Earth and shape it towards the glory of the Universe. ²The oceans were polished to hold the Moon's refulgence, doubling the splendour of that satellite. ³And the mountains that stretched towards Sun and star did echo the grandeur of those lofty bodies. ⁴And the rivers, flowing into placid lakes, did ripple with the whisper-music of rushing waves.

9 Then Elet came upon the Thought that was Life. ²Within immobile stone did Elet suspect his lofty works were fruitless and incomplete. ³He had rediscovered majesty in, Moon, stars and water, but they did think not unless he thought for them. ⁴So, leaping from his mind there came a host of thinking things: forms of and for themselves. ⁵And they did bask under Sun, dance beneath the Moon, and bask in starry waters.

⁶ Having conceived of thinking things, Elet sensed that their forms were a counterfeit to life. ⁷For life and death are twinned as one and life without death is no life at all.

⁸ In memory of those wonders he once imagined, Elet had forged the forgotten designs of his ancient mind. ⁹These were things of crystal and flowing metals; devices filled with timorous song and ingenious movement. ¹⁰For his was the delighting work of the gentle toymaker. ¹¹And beautiful things sprouted from Elet's dreams they were ornaments

unmindful and unloving with no purpose of their own.

10 While the Sun remained constant Elet's brilliance waned. ²Earth, Moon and star were of Elet's invention and in their shaping had he given much. ³Only once could Elet act so again; only once could he touch the Universe and weave its fabric anew. ⁴Doubts whispered in Elet's heart concerning a Choice unmade and pressing.

⁵ Elet could breathe the Thought that was Life into his mind's inventions and in his death life would be born. ⁶But this he could not do, for in Elet was the need to create, never to destroy.

⁷ And having spent the full force of its wrath Semmis slept. ⁸Bellicose were its dreams and in dreaming was new spite fostered in its heart. ⁹Its breath was volcanic ash and its fitful murmurs were all of decay.

¹⁰ And Elet knew that if Semmis woke and found him gone the Universe would end. ¹¹But Elet was bound against the murder of his sibling, for through

destruction was Semmis' the path to emptiness.

12 So Elet made his Choice and their two fates were sealed as one. ¹³Elet opened his arms to Semmis and clasped annihilation to his breast. ¹⁴Thus, creation and destruction joined and Time was forged by their mingling—two opposing forces face to face for all eternity.

15 Thus Elet poured his the last of his Will into the Earth and all its thinking things. ¹⁶In stone would Elet remain forever, and in all minds was contained his desire for joyous ever-making.

17 So it was that Elet held Semmis in sleep and made Time his sibling's keeper. ¹⁸For in slumber was Semmis' ire banked and its raging spirit calmed. ¹⁹And taking Semmis into himself Elet knew how life could die and death give meaning to his Will.

20 Through Semmis did Elet die a death of sorts and give his Will unto the waking life of uncounted minds. ²¹And lo, it is right that all things that live must die and Time links the two in one.

THE JOINING

It was to Oran, daughter of Z'rael, daughter of Oreel—who in her grace kept the desert within the Tribes—that this truth was given. Coming upon the shores of the Mirrormount and drinking of its waters, Oran heard the Oreel speaking of the Wanderer and our Beginning.

THE THREE PEOPLE

1 In the days of the Earth under the moon, when the sun shone bright, and the stars gathered as a net of blazing jewels, three peoples met under darkness in the south ²From the north, south and west they

came, through mountain pass and endless desert, over windy plains and churning waves.

3 From highest peaks were the Ironborn—*Ferrun* in their tongue—heard to crash as a human avalanche. ⁴Their

limbs were cased in metal and their aspect was all of war. ⁵Gaunt and tall, light of skin, and sharp of eye, they marched as if the world was theirs to rule. ⁶Through their hair shone silver thread and on their armour blazed golden cords with precious stones. ⁷Above all things they delighted in working stone and forging metal, and by the craft of their hands was the world adorned with everlasting beauty.

8 And yet hardship etched their faces, and of their long wandering they spoke to none. ⁹For in the *Ferrun* was anger quick to kindle and caution a shield held in welcome and in friendship.

10 From distant plains there came the stretching host of the *Dal'Rherik*—Those Who are Lost. ¹¹Their journey had been long and their skin was stained by heat. ¹²Lost for years in shifting lands, with no recourse but exodus, their eyes had ever been drawn north to snowy peaks.

13 Their stories told of subjectivity to a mighty nation that ruled beyond the southern seas. ¹⁴No name had they for the

home of their past, and no map could lead them back to those forgotten lands.

15 The *Dal'Rherik* were a swarthy people and in their clear eyes was a laughing light. ¹⁶Long-sighted and keen-eared, they were lovers of the hunt, bedecked in the hides of garish beasts. ¹⁷They carried dread totems and wore no jewellery other than the glint of a simple smile. ¹⁸Light-hearted and knowing, they loved touch of grass and rain against their weathered skin. ¹⁹And it was in nature that their thoughts always returned—to the running stream, the curling root, and the movement of the clouds.

20 Last of all, the Shipmasters washed ashore on the western tides. ²¹They had no other name or spoke it not but to the scions of their salty blood. ²²On vessels of brine-black timber they had entrusted their fate, finding friendship in the map, beacon star, and guiding gull. ²³But it was to the glowing moon they gave their deepest love. ²⁴And to that great lantern

did the Shipmasters pray and offer names of reverence.

25 In the calls of birds and sighing winds they took their speech and the ocean was a roaring music in their veins. ²⁶Lean and fey they strode their decks with the grace of dancing lords whose kingdoms border unreachable horizons. ²⁷With eyes washed grey they pierced the secrets of the depths, taking knowledge from spray, keel's wake, and creaking mast.

28 The Shipmasters came into the south, three hundred masts on one hundred ships, but their crews were short and full of sorrow. ²⁹For they had braved the Revenant Isles that tales tell no ship can pass without a heavy cost.

30 But in the Shipmasters was heard unending music, clear and strong. ³¹It was the wind and the swimming stars, the call of the moon, and the whispering waves.

2 Beneath the mountains these three peoples joined in fear and doubt. ²Long had they been alone and the calmer aspects

of their blood was a ferment of hate and choler.

3 In shadow the *Ferrun* wore the guise of wakened stone, whose marble skin shone deathly-white in the darkness. ⁴Wrapped in steel they strode with voices of thunder, and their marching feet were the breaking storm.

5 The *Dal'Rherik* became snarling beasts, clothed in the mind's most primal nightmares. ⁶Enveloped by night, their pelts seemed awash with blood and their eyes glowed like crimson glass. ⁷With the heads of wolves and ravenous hounds, their voices broke into so many howls and all who heard them felt their hearts beat with ice.

8 But above that clamour, above all else, were the songs of the Shipmasters heard to wail—a mournful dirge in a sea of vengeful spirits. ⁹And in this music were they the most terrible to behold. ¹⁰For in that song was the crash of heaving seas, and in their hands were burning lanterns

held aloft as if they had taken down the brightest stars for battle.

3 On this night, the three peoples warred. ²Bitter was the contest and into dawn's breaking hours did it rage untamed. ³Tempered by blade and blood, the moon burned red and the sun was to become a weeping wound. ⁴The wind screamed with spirits and sooty tears were seen to pour from solid rock. ⁵And as the dawn did break, eating away the horror of the night, the three peoples were witness to life taken in fear and ignorance.

⁶ Overcome by grief, the Shipmasters raised a funeral song, which, recalling languid waves and clouded stars, did move through the three people as a warming breeze. ⁷To this music, the *Ferrun* mixed their battle chants in celebration of the fallen. ⁸And, tearing their hairs, the *Dal'Rherik* lost themselves in sorrow and howled like a pack mourning wolves.

⁹ Without language, the three peoples gathered to bury their dead and

tears they shared from every eye. ¹⁰Then, as the sun followed its golden arc, the shadows lengthened to lend the battleground a midnight cloak. ¹¹And in this darkened veil did the three peoples become one in sorrow and found a harmony in mingled tears. ¹²And lo, the first truth was delivered unto the three peoples: the Union of Sorrow.

THE SEEDS

4 Thousands were interred under the mountains by those who remained to carry forth their memory. ²Through pain were the three people linked as strangers, but it was by the smallest of objects that three were mingled and made one. ³For each tribe had taken seed from their native lands: a tiny part of home—precious and powerful. ⁴And while their wandering pasts and fateful journeys were much different, the three people were alike in their love of trees.

⁵ The *Ferrun* saw the soaring grandeur of their craft mirrored in the tallest oaks. ⁶For in its growth, that tree

would forge the very earth with its mighty roots.

7 For the *Dal'Rherik* were the wonders of nature witnessed in the dappled gum. ⁸For in its fiery demise would that tree find rebirth.

9 And for the Shipmasters, all trees were a gift of love and use. ¹⁰On long timbers cut and joined were they allowed to walk the endless sea.

11 Long had those seeds been carried; witness to wave, mountain and desert deep. ¹²And though these seeds had yet to sprout they had shared in their keepers' burdens and taken sustenance from their unbroken spirit.

13 Crossing the mountains, the *Ferrun* were made strong of body and clear of mind. ¹⁴From them, their seed learnt that cold contest called survival.

15 With the *Dal'Rherik* was thirst fostered in their seed. ¹⁶Gnawed by the desert, the *Dal'Rherik* were drained dry and their bodies gnarled.

17 Last of all, the Shipmasters' seed had been lulled by the unending music of the sea. ¹⁸And sleeping on the rocking waves the Shipmasters had become wise in the language of dreams.

5 Walking from the mountains onto greener plains, the three peoples brought forth their seeds. ²And when the sun was low, and the greatest peaks lined with golden light, did they plant their seeds.

3 The world turned and the seasons followed their looping paths. ⁴The moon chased the sun, night trailed day, and years passed and passed again. ⁵Winds blew across the land, carrying the rush of icy streams, the rasp of sands, and the distant song of lonely gulls.

6 And from three seeds did one Tree rise. ⁷With invention and design, the *Ferrun* caused its trunk to grow straight and fast, reaching into the sky like a battlement of stone. ⁸Tended by the *Dal'Rherik*, its roots wound far and long, never breaking the ground or strangling the breath from other living things. ⁹And

caressed by the Shipmasters' songs, the three seeds were braided as one in twisted symmetry. ¹⁰So it was that the three peoples placed in the Tree a purpose unified: grow strong, grow well, grow together.

THE TREE

6 Like strands of coiled hair, the Tree roped the ground in curling fingers, recalling the rigging of the Shipmasters' boats. ²And so it was that the Shipmasters forsook the waters of their past, anchoring their future to a sea of leaves.

³ As a minaret in the clouds, the Tree was formed of three lesser trunks, each one greater than the greatest oak. ⁴This was the artifice of the *Ferrun* who delighted in the shaping of all earthly matter. ⁶Beauty on beauty was their unbending will.

⁷ From the Tree's lofty branches spread like sweeping arms that reached protectively over the land. ⁸And flocks of birds did nest in the canopy, and scurrying creatures were known to forage in its roots.

⁹This was the labour of the *Dal'Rherik*, who, contemplating the living world, needed the company of living marvels.

7 In the Tree's three trunks were the hearts of the three peoples mirrored, which, beating in the seeds, had blossomed into fullness.

² One trunk was clad in golden sheaths with veins of beaten bronze. ³And from its branches burst emerald leaves that never fell. ⁴In this was the artifice of the *Ferrun* seen.

⁵ Like a dying hand was another trunk, its bone-white bark stained with inky tears. ⁶Gnarled claws were its branches groaning in the wind. ⁷Yet under moonlit skies it gleamed with an inner light and seemed to hold the firmament in a sweeping net. ⁸Having known the prying thirst of death, the *Dal'Rherik* understood that treasure called life.

⁹ In the third trunk was found the gift of imagination. ¹⁰In its leaves was autumn ever felt, flowed red in yellow like water from the swaying branches. ¹¹And

touching the earth they would dissolve and reappear upon an empty branch to fall again. ¹²Its bark was mottled blue, green and grey, and from its top faint music could be heard. ¹³By these wonders were the oceans of the Shipmasters remembered.

14 Gathering beneath the Tree, the three peoples spoke with a single tongue. ¹⁵And with this music they named it *Haro'Zman*: the Tree of All. ³Thus, three peoples were one and called themselves the *Tal'Vari*: Singers at Dawn. ¹⁶And lo, the second truth was delivered unto the three peoples: the Union of Peace.

THE SUNDERING

8 About the Tree of All a forest sprang. ²From eastern peak to western shore did this forest unroll like a wooded carpet. ³And the *Tal'Vari* made a home of this forest, which they named Abode, and came into great strength and wisdom.

4 Yet, from the south, came rumours of war. ⁵Fearful of ruin, the *Tal'Vari* set guards in their forest and

soldiers went armed like ghosts awakened from darker days.

6 Suspicion bred and whispers gathered. ⁷Sentries reported movement against the southern horizon and council was taken in misgiving and doubt. ⁸Many decided it was better to strike before being struck. ⁹Violence was stirred in foreboding hearts.

10 In this time of trouble, the blood of the *Ferrun* sang the loudest—for in their past was war a bitter memory. ¹¹Great forges they built which lit in Abode with bloody flames. ¹²Swords were cast and shields hewn, spears did rise and axes fall, as the treetops were roofed by smoke. ¹³Armed and grim, the sons of the old *Ferrun* unfurled their forefathers' ancient banners and made ready for battle.

14 But those who had been *Dal'Rherik* admonished their wayward siblings. ¹⁵Doom they foretold and great evil found on bloody paths. ¹⁶Yet, in the darkness of the waning moon, *Ferrun* banners marched and what was once was

known again. ¹⁷Ablaze with strife's easy call, they were sundered from the forest and left Abode.

18 Years bloomed, years withered, and the forest grew until the *Tal'Vari* saw the passing seasons as so many leaves drifting in the wind. ¹⁹Succoured by the Tree of All, they had become long-living and their minds turned upon the nurture of Abode. ²⁰And as the forest grew so did the *Tal'Vari*, until the span of their lives was measured with the trees that housed their sanctuary.

THE RETURN

9 And lo, those who had marched away returned to Abode in the raiment of death. ²The *Tal'Vari* perceived the weight of time staining their lost siblings: their cheeks were hollowed and their eyes haunted. ³They had become strangers like ghostly faces in a fevered dream.

4 Having buried many fathers and mourned many brothers, change had been written into them. ⁵To distant shores had they warred and lost the better parts of

better natures. ⁶Into the furthest south they had gone and left the *Tal'Vari* in their footsteps. ⁷Death had overcome their lives. ⁸And with each step they had forgotten, losing their songs like smoke taken by the wind.

9 Yet, the *Tal'Vari* received their mislaid kindred beneath the falling leaves of *Haro'Zman*, and in song they welcomed: a chorus of regret, succour, and love.

10 But strife had carved itself too deeply—sword and shield was their new language and they spoke it well. ¹¹Not as kin, but enemy they saw the *Tal'Vari*—figures of failure and blame from days long gone. ¹²In rage and bitterness they attacked and blood flowed.

13 Not all the *Tal'Vari* had gone in welcome; knowing evil, a few had found the banked forges of the old *Ferrun* and collected steel. ¹⁴Disconsolate at the slaying of their kin, these war-gird *Tal'Vari* leapt into vengeance and forgot themselves. ¹⁵Then, the music of the Tree

of All was shattered and Abode ruled by disharmony. ¹⁶Thus, for the second time, violence became kin-slaying and the world went dark.

THE LAW

10 When the battle peaked, the ground heaved and the leaves of the Tree of All turned red and burst. ²So terrible was their crime that *Haro'Zman* had wept blood. ³And the two forces faltered in this stain of violence.

4 Taking up the wreck of battered sword, axe and shield, the survivors walked as if asleep and came into a clearing. ⁵There they made a pyre from their violent tools and smote them with their voices.

6 Calling up the music of the *Tal'Vari*, all minds made to sing the world anew. ⁷Zeal composed this music and, distilling sorrow, the *Tal'Vari* rendered deathly metal to blinding liquid. ⁸And from this was a tower built into the earth. ⁹And into this tower the *Tal'Vari* poured all fear

and rage, purging their bodies of violence and death.

10 In the music of the *Tal'Vari* was the complete expression of their thoughts, merged with the cunning of their hands and the wonder in their hearts. ¹¹So it was that *Banat'Torv*, the Tower of Grief, was struck, uniting the *Tal'Vari* as one mind in many.

12 In the Tower of Grief were the great dictates of the *Tal'Vari* recorded and recalled. ¹³Never more did they quarry stone or put axe to timber; the fires of industry were snuffed and the tempering of steel forbidden.

14 But, being connected in thought, nature was made clear to the will of the *Tal'Vari*: man and earth were bound together. ¹⁵And lo, the third truth was delivered unto the three peoples: the Union of Law.

OF LELLORIAN

I am Oreel. The Wanderer entrusted his life to me. This is the Wanderer.

Succoured by the Tree of All and the Tower of Grief, the forest of the *Tal'Vari* flourished. To the southern desert it brought the promise of respite, while east and west its trees were swaying wardens watching cerulean seas. But in the north the forest changed. As if aware, like a shepherd sensing the stalking wolf, it set itself in thickets, close and grim, under the shadow of the mountains.

Music filled the canopies as the *Tal'Vari* raised their voices and composed their purpose. Turning rivers, the songs of the *Tal'Vari* flooded lakes into vast clearings and made reflecting pools to catch the beauty of the stars. Shaping the earth into winding valleys and sweeping plateaus, they spun the landscape as if it were a shifting tapestry. The *Tal'Vari* sang and the notes were echoed in the world. Peace reigned.

In the grandest of their grand endeavours, the *Tal'Vari* composed a song a thousand on a thousand parts. Majestic and sonorous, lyrical and deep, this music bored into the soil and touched the deepest roots. Exposed to those voices, the roots spread and sought connections, seeking until the unnumbered trees of Abode were linked as one. Then, taking up the connections like the strands of a fibrous bridge, the *Tal'Vari* worked a net between the Tree of All and the Tower of Grief. And through their song was tree and mind coupled throughout the far reaches of Abode.

Within the *Tal'Vari* three families came to prominence: the noblest and wisest in which the ancient blood the three peoples still beat strong. To these families was given the honour of

tending the infinite connections coursing beneath Abode. Centuries moved and the families mingled, bringing the marvels of the *Tal'Vari* under the guidance of the Stewards.

Keepers of past and future, the Stewards were knowledge and wonder, temperance and foresight, patience and brilliance. To them and no other was the burden of their dark history trusted: a burden they carried with clear thought and happy heart.

Within Abode's connections, the Stewards created a haven for the mind. Understanding the darkness in their history, they were concerned that ancient passions should not be forced to slumber beneath the surface of waking thought. And so, the Stewards built a sleeping world, opening the walls of consciousness, where dreams were shared with kindred dreamers—in sleep, the imagination given space to soar. This they called the Gift: where dreams came to life and life was like a waking dream.

Into the Stewards was Lellorian born. Taking after his father, Darralon, he delighted in trekking over hills, into dells, and along the banks of winding rivers. Days he spent in idle journey, watching sun become moon amidst the paths of spiralling constellations. But it was to Fillayn, his mother, that Lellorian wore resemblance and had nature echoed: unruly hair and eyes inked blue, with an unbound spirit filled with curiosity. And in the shifting dusk, he would watch the flapping of a moth as its wings rained silver dust.

Whispers and rumours preceded Lellorian in all his comings and goings. Too much of the old ways were folded through his mind. To dry southern plains and the roar of western shores were his paths taken. He went too far. To the eastern escarpments he climbed, sitting high amongst Abode's final canopies to watch the night dyed by the waking sun. He was without

purpose and unmindful to his duties. But most troubling were those occasions that Lellorian's feet walked no conscious path and carried him north toward the mountains.

Long had those brooding peaks and broken steppes been taboo. Danger lurked beyond that wall, danger best left undisturbed and unrecalled. Like a row of blackened teeth, they were vast tombstones towering over forgotten graves and beneath their shadows were the last green traces of Abode seen to wither.

Lellorian came into the full power and knowledge of the *Tal'Vari*—in song and dream no voice or mind could match his skill. He would sing rock to glass, glass to smoke, and smoke to sprites that danced on lilting melodies. He was the song and the song was his.

Sitting listless against the Tree of All, Lellorian spoke with his father.

‘Something is buried in Abode,’ he said. ‘So far beneath our feet and thoughts that it can barely be touched.’

‘Such thoughts you have, Lellorian!’ Darralon smiled. ‘To see shadows where only light exists. But will you not heed our counsels?’

Lellorian waved this away. ‘Your words seem wise and yet ... I doubt. Are those dark mountains evil? Tradition says yes. But, I worry for us. I perceive ... a wrong.’

‘This land we have made is nurtured by dreams.’ Lellorian heard the others making the claims through his father—their thoughts in his mouth. ‘It is peaceful and plentiful.’

‘How many trees are there in the forest?’

Darralon laughed. ‘There are enough.’

‘That is the prevailing thought.’ Lellorian watched leaves fall—fall, disappear, reappear, fall. ‘But no new trees grow in Abode.’

Darralon frowned. 'The forest furthers every day.'

'Verisimilitude.' Lellorian shook his head. 'Abode does not grow. It ... replicates. There is no death here, just an endless mechanism we call life. Tower, Tree, and Gift have put a stop to that most mysterious end.'

His father hissed. 'Fallacy.'

'We sought immortality and found emptiness. Time should pass us by but we have trapped it here. By making this forest immutable, we have made ourselves immutable. Our dreams are empty and stagnation is the ceremony of our existence.'

'And what would you seek beyond the mountains?' asked Darralon.

Lellorian smiled. 'The unknown.'

'Pain waits on that path.'

'Spare me your reiteration.' Lellorian spat. The words were not his father's—the others used him like a mouthpiece. He felt them slithering over this mind. 'We are dead without dying and too blind to see it.'

'We are ... barred from you.' Darralon shook his head. 'Why do you hide your thoughts?'

'To save myself. I need, I need, I need ...'

'What is it you need, my son?'

'Change.'

Lellorian felt the *Tal'Vari* shudder and shackles were fastened to his mind that held his limbs like iron chains. Tears broke from his father's eyes, dissolving as they touched the earth, and Lellorian knew his existence was debated. With a thought, he shattered the chains, dispersing the many minds that tried to bind him. Then, he struck his father and fled the Tree of All.

Numbed by anger, lost to the minds of his people, Lellorian went north. And it seemed to him that the trees were props, paper cut-outs repeating a single, tired image. Abode was barren, filled not with life, but life's imitation—a prison cell surrounded with huge bars that blocked out the sun. Lellorian tried to recall the stars, the moon, the sun, but the memories were hazy. He wondered if he had ever seen them. If their beauty ever existed. Or were the lights of his people gaudy baubles painted gold and silver, hanging on a bare, unfeeling scaffold?

He longed for things he did not know, to bask in moments between ignorance and revelation. He wanted a life beyond Abode—unfiltered and exposed. Ahead were mountains, behind the Tree of All. Lellorian stepped out of the darkness, into the light.

He looked back and saw his mother beneath the trees and, in an instant, the youth of her face was bleached by time and turned to chalk. She was nothing but a memory and, for the first time in his life, her mind was closed to him.

‘Be it closed or open, your mind was ever known to me, Lellorian,’ she said. ‘By crossing this threshold, the long road of exile shall take your days and grind them to dust.’

Lellorian sighed. ‘A matter of perspective.’

‘My heart breaks, as does your father’s.’

‘Some things cannot be undone ... should not be undone ... and I will bear that burden.’

The forest bled slowly into formations of granite and shale where giant boulders sat covered in moss. And ascending icy passes and narrow canyons, Lellorian followed the faded traces of a path etched long ago. Steps, hewn into the rock and smoothed by time, embraced steep sheers to climb in treacherous zigzags that disappeared into boiling cloud. Wandering north and west, Lellorian breathed burning air unhindered, and laughed—for the first time in his life he knew pain.

Lellorian was lost. The steppes receded into a maze fractured edges and frozen dirt, where pitted shards and square-faced monoliths jutted from the mountain like shattered bones. Rain slammed ice while lightning flashed in dissolving sheets of white.

Taking shelter beneath a prow of glassy obsidian, buffeted by wind and cold, he took a twig from belt and sang. With a recitation of the sun, Lellorian worked to draw fire from the twig, but no flame would come. He sang against the outside world, striving to bend it to his will. But try as he might, the land was cold and the rain a battery of drummers pounding reality to splinters.

So Lellorian delved into the reservoirs of his power, stripping raw his throat to conjure a tiny spark. Racing through the faltering song, he tuned some resonance between wood and rock, transposing the twig's tiny fibres into strands of fuel long-burning. And in the swirling play of crimson shadows, he perceived a yawning emptiness consuming wind, rain, and cloud. Lellorian lurched forward and blackness overcame him.

Unshared dreams invaded his mind, overpowering Lellorian's mind with faces drifting out of reach; layers of whispers; and howling voices that sliced against the erratic beating of a dying heart. Everything was backwards, sideways, running in reverse, blurred and strange. He stood apart, watching a world he recognised but could not touch. He saw his father, his mother, tears streaking into their eyes from an impenetrable abyss. Cold pressed against his face as cracks spread in a geometric script writing out his years. He tried to read it but had no eyes.

Lellorian's dream had left him troubled and listless, and the night's effort alarmed him: the music of the *Tal'Vari* had worked, but only at the extremity of his energies. Outside Abode,

his singing had become a fumbling in the dark as if once familiar connections had shifted—navigating the usual compositions was now a perilous sight-reading. Scratches covered his arms and legs, and bruises spread purple with yellow over his chest—his powers were diminished and he had nearly killed himself.

The sun hurt his eyes and forced Lellorian deeper into the cave where his body faded and the shadows closed. The sun disappeared and he was swallowed by a place where there was no sound, no light, no Lellorian—nothing but a faltering mind struggling through emptiness. On and on, around and around, he wandered blind and cold as one lost in the dark. Then, he stepped into light.

Glowing copper infused the turquoise walls, shimmering bright in a high-domed chamber, emitting light like translucent skin held tight around a blazing lamp. And as his blindness burned away, Lellorian saw that the stone was alive with running, leaping animals. Across the floor and up the walls they moved, defying that pull of the earth to frolic on the rounded stone above. Life pulsed in those primitive depictions—a cycle of survival carved into the bones of world. And the cave held them, as the world held all living things.

Lellorian knew that the *Tal'Vari* had known this truth and he lamented for their loss. Aware of the universe's ebb and flow, they had once possessed the knowledge of pain that made the beautiful all the brighter. Would the craft of the *Ferrun*, the totems of the *Dal'Rherik*, or the songs of the Shipmasters have come to life if they had not known death? But death had become too steep a price to pay and so they had removed themselves from nature, becoming a people of perfect statues. Lellorian felt the light penetrate him and he was reforged in the radiant force of eternal creation.

Of his exit from the cave Lellorian remembered little, grasping it like a dream that hangs in the mind that moment after waking. And following the sun west, he came to a steep crevice whose fractured walls fumed with fog. Plunging into static grey his hands were dark blurs like fish swimming at the bottom of a deep pool and by touch alone he descended, relying on the rasp and click of stone to push back the welling terror of a fathomless fall.

The mountains disappeared, replaced by an image in his mind he struggled to recall. Here, clinging to the cliff-face was to cling to the thought of the cliff-face, and to blink was to forget and fall. His past dissolved and the only thing Lellorian could comprehend were the concussions of his heart striking through the fog. And, when the hours hung like years from his aching limb, the fog lifted to reveal a solid world of sandy stone.

No damp and bloody trace remained of the descent but, looking up, he saw a roof of swirling water. As if a barrier had risen to gate his past, the mountains had been erased, leaving Lellorian in a city made of stone.

Cut into the narrow valley like so many twisting scars, its sandstone streets wound through a sprawling city of vast facades and colossal porticos. Lellorian walked on glass mosaics glistening in fragmented constellations; past funereal temples with hollow invitations; and onto sweeping colonnades looping mysteriously in lopsided spirals around deserted marketplaces. He squeezed past a population of statues arguing on street corners, their manner imposing and proud, but somehow fragile. Silent and abandoned, the wind had stolen their faces. Grey sand muffled his steps, whispering the susurrus of a far-off breeze—a timid suggestion in the grim finality to the city's silence. The city was empty spaces staring blankly into endless skies. Then ... laughter, and Lellorian ran, searching for the sound, trying to chase the voice. So accustomed to Abode's ever present song, he had forgotten that all things

in nature have a voice of their own. What he heard and thought a child, was the giggle of a trickling stream. Charting the streets, nestled high in sloping architraves, pipes coursed with water drawn from mountain springs that, like so many veins and arteries, led to the city's gurgling heart. And Lellorian found a forest.

No branch or root grew from those trees for, like the empty city, they were carved from stone—marble towers holding high an intricate crown of stony boughs. Placing his ear against a graven trunk, Lellorian heard the rush of flowing water. And he roamed beneath a canopy of pipes pouring water into a colossal cistern, marvelling at the artifice that had found such beauty in a simple function.

He listened to the music of the city's builders and heard their mighty purpose. Water and stone were the city's soul: movement in stability. It welled and lapped, pulling back time and, for a brief moment, uncovered a city alive with people whose world was luminous. Stone was water in their hands and its forms were found, not designed, waiting to be loosed from sandstone and marble. But the moment passed and Lellorian was left with his shadow, with sediment, with sand.

Overcome by thirst, Lellorian searched for open water and found nothing but the hissing rumour of its passage. He would find no respite in the city of stone, whose many wells and fountains offered no drink but dust. Any answer bought here would cost his life and, though he longed to walk its avenues and narrow roads, Lellorian stumbled from the city and discovered the desert.

Lellorian was witness to the pathlessness of all paths. As a tranquil sea the desert opened in all directions, its undulating dunes held like rearing waves before the crash. He only had to

dive into the granulated waters and be cast adrift, swept away on unseen currents, and washed ashore in unknown lands. To survive he had to breathe the arid air and brave the wastes where life was the continued affirmation of denial.

The fey trappings of the *Tal'Vari* fell from him like tattered rags, each peeling layer baring more of Lellorian to the desert. His hands became knives to hunt the small animals that scurried between rocks, and against his feet the desert as an intricate map of shifting heat and density. Reflexes assumed control and the sand poured *through* him, removed any concept of *him*. And it was as if the ground beneath him was dragging him towards a long-fated meeting.

Lellorian bobbed like a cork in the ocean—drifting, disintegrating. Stars fell and turned the dunes to glass. There was no sky and then there was no desert. There was no world—it was gone, flipped, turned inside out and exploded. He moved in a void—lost, delirious—and his joints spewed flames. Pain lanced his body, skipping in his blood like lightning, and while flames burst from his eyes. He vomited sand, bringing up the desert.

Light resolved into form, form evolved into structure, and structure resolved into a cupola of shining glass that seemed to vibrate. Four square steps sat beneath columns etched with twisting reliefs holding up an opaque plinth whose cloudy surface was bruised with shadows. Dark ferns and tiny flowers bordered shallow wells sunk into the floor. Perched atop this strange construction was a sloping, octagonal roof—transparent and refulgent and Lellorian thought it the blossom of a desert flower.

But his eyes were drawn deeper where an obsidian tree grew like an open hand reaching for the sun. On its trunk, short stumps shone like open sores, weeping sable amber that was hard and cold. And running his fingers over a pillar, Lellorian felt a film of clear,

reclaimed water, bitter and warm. It was cool rain and crystal streams. It was gentle music that stilled his mind with clear, calm notes. Lellorian drank. Lellorian slept. Lellorian dreamed.

The universe unfurled as a hall of mirrored panes, reflecting streams of light into brighter and brighter lines, until the lines widened, and a golden road led Lellorian through swirling stars. Each mirror opened into new places, unseen, impossible spaces, and he looked on, looked in—a pilgrim through a million, million worlds. And he saw himself reflected and reflected again and again, each one the same, each one different—his eyes dripping ink; wearing a mask black and white; with a sword piercing his flesh. Image after image, face behind face, in a kaleidoscope of selves.

And then Oreel came upon Lellorian sleeping in the resting place of her ancestors and knew anger. The desert rushed deep in her blood and the judge-burden was hers to carry out. Brandishing her Living Blade, she made ready to forfeit his water to the sands. But such justice was not in the mind of the Living Blade, whose frisson-thoughts were a steady heartbeat in her ears. Setting her teeth to balance affront with temperance, she roused Lellorian with the shining flat.

‘Know you where you sit, Stranger?’ she said. ‘What you do?’

Lellorian heard an echo of old *Ferrun* and answered in kind. ‘Maiden of the Desert, what remedy can I restore?’

‘Stranger indeed, justly called, for your tongue is old breath.’ She stepped back. ‘Are you spirit?’

Lellorian spread her words across his mind and found too many gaps for solid answers. He pointed to the mountains. ‘I came from the ... the elsewhere to this place.’

She hissed. ‘Those That Have Gone Ahead do not guard there. Speak quickly, for I will take your tears.’

‘From beyond ... then into that place, and ... here.’

‘I ken this not, but I see you, and hear you, and *smell* you all more.’ Oreel sniffed. ‘That counts in your favour, if not for your graces.’ She stepped into the tower and studied its plants. ‘The tower is left as it was. Tell me true, how was it that you slept and yet be woken?’

‘I ... took ... the water on the ... clear stone.’

‘By the sands!’ She looked at him in awe. She pointed to the tower’s roof and blurred shapes within. ‘You drank their tears and did not pass the veil? How are you called?’

Lellorian had no wish to give his name, nor could the ancient modulations of the *Ferrun* encompass *Tal’Vari* music. ‘I am the Wanderer.’

‘Oreel I am.’ She bowed and smiled. ‘Of all the stories in my blood, a first!’

‘Is it not strange for your people to send ... one as you into the desert?’

‘The desert is my blood. I ken the movements of the Sandstretch and know its waterways.’ Oreel nodded. ‘What others do, I do.’

‘Truly.’ Lellorian could not follow her, could not connect concept and sound. Only the word ‘tower’ stood out. ‘What is this Tower?’

‘You sit upon its steps, Wanderer, and that is to know. You have supped upon its tears, and that is to ken its place in the Stretch.’ She gestured shadows. ‘Here, Those That Have Gone Ahead do come, and from the grief-joy of their passing is this greening able. But come, the sun is bite-bright and I would take you to my tent-kin. Water you shall have and food also. Come, come! And, by the tales I shall tell, be ever-mingled with the desert.’



Someone was calling Gant's name. The sand receded, hissing through the shelves and into the floorboards. The desert sun died. Shelves loomed around his reading-alcove, shading the scribbled notes cluttering his desk. He sighed and closed the book.

'Back here.' Gant suppressed a yawn as a balding head poked around the corner of a large stack of mouldy papers. Sagging under an armful of books, the Archivist emerged, grinning, clutching the lantern of his induction lamp between his teeth. Yellow light turned his wrinkled skin to ancient vellum. Like Gant's, the lantern's directional filter was wide to bloom its light. Gant stood, took the books from the old man and placed them on the desk.

'Thank you, Gant.' The Archivist slipped the lantern from his teeth, clipped it to his belt, and gave its winding-box a couple of *whirs*. Illumination extended a few centimetres. 'I thought I'd find you somewhere in the stacks, not buried back here.'

'I got lost in a book.' Gant handed the tome he'd found to the Archivist. Squinting through wire-framed spectacles, the man studied its cover and cracked bindings. He seemed so small beneath the archive's shelves and Gant couldn't help picturing him buried by books, forgotten. He gave his own lamp a quick charge.

'The Book of Light?' The Archivist handed it back. 'Strange fare for one so young.'

'It's part of my research.'

'Ah yes!' The Archivist nodded sagely. 'The Wanderer. Quite the legend.'

Gant nodded. Salt and sun clung to the air—the archive did strange things to the imagination. At some point he'd stopped reading and started *seeing*.

Gant nodded. 'I've never seen this edition before.'

'Indeed not.' The Archivist coughed. 'It was banned by the Principality years ago.'

'Banned?'

'Burned, predominantly.'

Gant frowned. 'But Vigilstone has a copy?'

‘Your world’s laws are not ours.’

‘Really?’

The Archivist coughed again—Vigilstone’s place in the Protectorate Kingdom was a touchy subject. ‘Any word of your friend?’

‘No.’

‘Ah well, she’s bound to turn up.’

Gant glanced at the Archivist’s books on the desk: several ledgers and a heavy logbook. Their ink smelt fresh.

‘Would you like me to shelve those for you, Archivist?’

‘What?’ The small man turned a dial on his lantern and its light narrowed onto the books. ‘Hmm, thank you. Then you’d best be on your way too, Gant. It’s night out.’

‘I lost track of time.’ *How many hours have I been reading?* Gant thought. No clocks kept time amongst shelved history and the perpetual gloom tricked the body. His stomach gurgled.

‘You spend too much time down here, young man!’ The Archivist patted Gant’s shoulder. ‘History isn’t going anywhere.’

That’s the problem, Gant thought. ‘Aren’t you going home?’

‘Home?’ Shaking his head, the little man plodded off, his lantern slicing the darkness like a lighthouse. ‘I’m the Archivist.’

Gant walked in a bubble of light. Darkness followed. His footsteps clacked on hardwood boards as he passed shelf after shelf, faded titles blinking gold and silver. He felt like an explorer walking the ocean floor. Dust glittered—motes of tiny fish startled by an intruder. *Maybe I’m the first,* he thought. *But will there be any discoveries?* The question didn’t comfort him. The archive, save for the Archivist, was always empty—its tomes unread,

artefacts unrecorded. Back home, nobody read because the world intruded; there were always plantings, births, apprenticeships, cleaning, cooking. On and on and on. Here, it was because of the ghosts, but its desertion always left him feeling gloomy. Books needed to be read and read again, especially those books the world had hidden. *And the Archivist lives down here,* thought Gant. *Like another story gathering dust.*

Clutching a heap of notes to his chest, Gant hurried through the rain. Ever-lights shone foggy white from iron lampposts. He still marvelled at the technology—light without fire. *No wonder Veleen took off,* he thought. *She's probably trying to take an induction lamp apart, learn its secrets, thinking of patents, figuring production.*

He sighed. 'Why'd you run, Veleen?'

Water pattered, formed beads, streaked down his jacket. *Not far,* he thought. *Just follow the train-line, turn left, then right: home, wine, bed.* The train zipped overhead in a blur of glowing windows. If he'd heard the regulars back home describe it, Gant would've laughed. People got on, people got off, snaking carriages charging over steel rails faster than the fastest horses. Veleen had nearly fainted when she saw it, her eyes idea wide, infinite coins clinking through her head.

Laughter spilled from a crowded taproom and Gant heard his name from the pub's second-storey balcony. Music washed out all fiddle and pipe. He waved, sloshing past signs spelling out public theatres and coffee-houses in tiny, blinking globes. Gravy teased in narrow alleys hiding late-night pie-stalls. Regulars jostled around tables, heads wreathed in peppery steam.

He frowned. 'Even the bloody Archivist's asking questions.'

Puddles crept into his shoes as Gant squelched around the second corner and into the home stretch. *And he knew exactly where to find me*, he thought, tucking the notes under his jacket. *What have you done now?*

At first, Gant had put Veleen's disappearance down to those fights she always had with her master—some disagreement over unbalanced equations, an incorrect cog. But she hadn't come back, hadn't been seen for weeks. First her master had disappeared and now Veleen ...

Gant hunched his shoulders and made the final dash to the boarding house's door. Luckily, the light was still on. He fumbled his keys, juggled papers, pushed the door with his shoulder, breathed dry air, and closed out the wet. Within, the common-room was dark and the hallway empty; whoever had wound the outside light had gone to bed. Gant said a silent thank you, shook off his shoes, placed them alongside the dripping others, then tiptoed up the stairs. *Won't be making the same mistake again*, he thought, recalling how Ms. Menezar, his landlady, had sniffed his breath for ale last week. The stairs creaked mockingly.

Three flights up and his legs were aching. The train *thonked* by and the common-room clock struck one. Gant shifted the mess of notes under his armpit and opened the door.

'Gant!' White flashed with the slap. Gant dropped the notes and Veleen jumped into his arms with a fierce hug. 'Where the *fuck* have you been?'

She clutched her glass like a child. Gant hadn't been able to get a word out of her while they picked up his notes. But after he'd tossed his wet jacket, poured two glasses of red, and sat her on the couch, Veleen had calmed a little. She kept glancing at the door.

'How'd you get up here?' Gant scanned his room, noting messes, clothes and books where he'd left them, and the window thankfully unbroken.

She waved off the question. ‘That boulder Ms. Menezar let me in ...’ Gant spluttered. ‘... after she’d given a lungful on the stoop about manners and proprieties, and me thinking “cram your manners, my proprieties are drowning out here!”’

‘Ms. Menezar ...’

‘What did I just say?’ Veleen gulped her wine, wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve, jumped up, and peeked out the door. She closed it quietly and started pacing. ‘Real piece of work that one. Keyhole-peeper for sure.’

‘She just let you up?’

‘Said I was your sister.’ She smiled. ‘Thought she was going to throw a conniption.’

Gant nodded dumbly, sorting excuses for what would be a memorable morning.

‘People are asking about you,’ he said.

She paused. ‘Who?’

‘What’s going on, Veleen?’

‘Who?’

‘What’ve you done?’

‘Who!’

‘The Archivist.’ Gant huffed. ‘Tonight.’

‘Shit.’ Veleen slipped to the window, looked up and down the backstreet. Snoring sawed up from floors below. Gant poured himself another glass. ‘They’re probably watching you too.’

‘You know you’re like a sister to me.’

She sighed and sat next to Gant. ‘I know.’

‘Then ...’

‘I can’t tell you.’ She squeezed his hand and smiled. ‘I need you to trust me. There’s stuff going on that ... Listen to me, talking like the brawn out of some fucking fairy-tale.’

Gant laughed. ‘Not likely.’

‘If I asked you to come with me, to leave, to go, tonight, no looking back, no questions, would you come?’

‘Veleen.’ He couldn’t look at her, couldn’t watch the tears in the corners of her eyes. ‘My work ...’

‘I understand.’ Veleen kissed his cheek and wiped her eyes. ‘It’s important to you.’

‘It’s not that, it’s ...’

‘Trying to save the world one word at a time.’ Chuckling, she shook her head. ‘You really think the Wanderer is important?’

‘Yes.’

Silence stretched between them. It was important—those opening chapters from the Book of Light proved it. History had been covered up, rewritten, parsed until any truth, any resemblance to the past had shrivelled up and carried away. All his life the world had been, well not a lie but a sidestep. And it just didn’t sit right. Somewhere in the night, a bottle smashed with a shriek of laughter. The clanking rail carried people home from work, to work, to the next drink, for love, and to all the other little things that made up a city at night. Gant felt disconnected, a piece apart, trying to look into the train, finding his pale reflection staring back.

‘Well, hero ...’ Veleen held out her glass ‘...you’re one up on me and I need to forget for a while.’

Gant grimaced. Plates clinked and squeaked above the murmur of breakfast. Shatter-hard bacon *plinked* like hailstones against tables gritty with spilled salt and coffee grounds. The air was thick with sausage fat and burnt toast. *They’re pushing the crumbs*, he thought. *Waiting for the floorshow.*

He'd woken up on the floor, daylight skewering through five, empty bottles. Veleen had already left, leaving no trace but an open window and a thumping headache. When Gant had staggered into breakfast all eyes had flicked to the imposing landlady as she bustled about, sucking up conversation, garlic and onion fuming off her skin. His plate was *clonked* on the table with an upraised eyebrow and an expectant hush. Gant lifted a piece of cold, hard toast and crunched. Breaths exhaled.

'Will your sister be joining us?'

Gant sighed and put the toast down with a *clat*. He could feel everyone *not* looking at him while the boulder-like—*how apt*, he thought—Mrs. Menezar brandished a second plate of steaming eggs and a large pot of coffee.

'Only, I made enough for two,' she said, eggs jiggling. Her bulging apron was smeared with grease and tomato sauce.

Gant swallowed. 'No, Ms. Menezar.'

'No?' She pushed the plate under Gant's nose and his stomach recoiled to his spine.

'She's a bit under the weather.'

Mrs. Menezar pursed her lips. 'Poor dear, sore throat'—sniggers were shushed around the room—'after all that singing, I suppose.'

'Singing?' Last night was a locked vault, but the five empty wine bottles provided a large clue he'd blearily ignored. 'We weren't ...'

'Oh yes, lovely voices. The two of you.' Her eyes pinned him like a bug. 'Beautiful.'

Gant ran a hand through his hair. 'Sorry.'

'No, no, no, no.' She sat down opposite him and the table convulsed tectonically. 'We just never imagined such *talent*'—the sniggers turned to chuckles—'would be found under my roof. Imagine! Now, I'm no prude, but ...'

'But?'

‘Bet she had a lovely one.’ Mr. Clapham, the widower lodging on first, winked at Gant over the morning’s newspaper.

‘*But* this house is a respectable house and, no matter what people say about Vigilstone’s liberties’—chuckles became stifled laughter—‘if your *sister* decides to join us again, could you keep the singing to a minimum?’

‘Yes, Ms. Menezar.’

The cobblestones shone glassy in the sunlight as clouds spread and broke into wispy streaks. Gant let the air pour ice through his lungs. Men and women walked arm in arm, peering into shop windows, shaking hands, joking, laughing. Children held hands as they bounced to their lessons, all smiles and yells, pulling their parents along. Shop owners brushed last night’s puddles from the sidewalk into gutters, calling to the passing motor-wagons whose knotted copper engines coughed smoke while men fed coal into hazy furnaces.

A different place, Gant thought, a different time. He struggled to find a word to describe the feeling but could only come up with one: future. Vigilstone was the future. But what was it that separated Vigilstone from the Protectorate Kingdom? Perhaps, Duron was right. Maybe the past was stories—stories that they’d lost. Why was that edition of the *Book of Light* destroyed? It was like a hole, a wound unable to heal. What if the Protectorates couldn’t move on—like Vigilstone—because their history was incomplete, lacking. Festering? *That’s it, he thought. I’m a time-traveller trying to bring something back to the present.*

Sunlight cooked the puddles to steam. Gant crisscrossed streets, the minutes pulling him further into the Vigilstone. Orange trees and slouching willows leant from corners and tiny gardens, waving gently over roads and sleepy courtyards. A group of women collected fruit

in wicker baskets while their children ran through the willow's leafy beards. Lavender bushes hummed with bees.

Narrow alleyways branched into winding mazes where ever-lights were stars in golden clouds of dust. Gant felt he'd passed into a dream. From corner cafés the *clack-click* of old men playing chess tapped from under dense tobacco clouds. They slurped thick, sweet coffee, brushing pastry crumbs and icing sugar from their collars. One was teaching his granddaughter how to play the knight.

Cresting a gentle hill he came upon a class sketching quietly beside a gurgling fountain. Their teacher shuffled from pad to pad, nodding, correcting, charcoal in hand, half-distracted as if a blank, beckoning canvas was waiting in her mind. Gant leant against a safety-rail and saw the city spread like a perfect map.

Towering walls embraced sweeping curves and lattice layouts. Beyond, the Bastion Mountains reared black and jagged, their peaks obscured by churning cloudbanks. *What's on the other side?* Gant thought. *What did the Wanderer leave behind?* Thin ribbons of grey smoke curled from hundreds of motored carriages and wagons crawling around sprawling streets. The squat blocks of metallurgists, barnacled with vast induction batteries, breathed heat shimmers and iron tang. Wires stretched between the buildings—communication lines linking manufactory and warehouse, observatory to studio. Hammers were a distant heartbeat. He wondered what Veleen thought of their workshops. If they were more advanced than the ones she knew in Ith Tol?

‘Hey, mate.’ One of the sketchers waved at Gant. ‘You’re blocking the view.’

Splintered wood and shattered glass mixed with piles of steaming pulp in the ruin of the marketplace. The man babbled incoherently. Mud stained his clothes and dried blood caked his arms around a crisscross of self-inflicted scratches. Vases and stemware were strewn and

fractured—rough jewels in puddles of crushed strawberries and banana. Fighting an invisible battle, the man charged and spun, lashed out, bit the air, screamed. Tears dripped from a ragged beard. The air prickled with fresh ruptures: broken skin, fractured wood, bloody air, and tang of desperate sweat. Stallholders scurried through the wreckage, furtively salvaging whatever they could. The crowd watched silently.

Gant had wandered into the square when the commotion started, but hadn't seen the trigger. Nobody else stopped or shouted for help, no one had run over; they looked then kept on walking. Nothing changed, nothing happened. There was no anger in the crowd, no spikes of fear—nothing but a patient, solemn acceptance. *Anywhere else*, he thought, as the man struck a woman to the ground, *and he'd be dead*. Gant tried to move forwards but grim faces stopped him, made him to watch, forced him to be a bystander.

Words tumbled from the man, unintelligible and foreign, each spluttering syllable filled with hate and despair and terror. They were disconnected, out of sync, unheard hints of meaning, shards of phrases that slipped away. Some unknown experience had shaved his language into inhuman registers—too many gaps and empty spaces. It burst in fragments, snippets like half-heard coughs and growls that churned in the air and forced the mind to scabble over intent. Gant gasped as warring images slammed across his eyes.

Broken bodies.

Fire.

Death.

Hesitating, the man looked around, bewildered like a sleepwalker snapped from fevered nightmare. Seeing a woman unconscious on the ground he groaned and grabbed a sickle of broken glass. Before he could slash his wrists, the crowd surged forward, restrained the sobbing man, scooped up the woman, and carried them away. Within moments the gathering dispersed, leaving a few stragglers to clean up the square.

‘What was that?’ Gant squatted to pick up a small, glass swan, neck snapped, head missing.

‘Sometimes it breaks them.’ Crawling through splintered wood and glass, a young girl shrugged sadly, her hands slick with pulp that could have been blood. ‘Some can’t handle it, you know?’

Gant handed her the swan and shook his head. ‘What?’

‘Witnesses.’

‘No. What can’t they handle?’

The girl frowned. ‘The ghosts.’

Flash. Men crawl, spears through their backs, a stuttering trickle of dying words. Women ... and children, panic, licking flames. Flash. Rain pours into the valley, crashes against the keep in waves. Colder than anything. But it burns. Screams. Lightning turns the world white. White instants. There. Gone ... and the dead pile against the wall. Not bodies but solid mass, charnel red, soaked in mud. Grass drains to black. Flash. The Falcon banner is torn, torn down, torn apart, stamped on while limbs are hacked, broken, ripped off, torn out. They pour out from the mountains—old death let back in, let loose, set free by betrayal. Where did they come from? Why why why why? Not like this. Not again. This is the new world, not the old. A better world. No. He shudders as the voices eat into his brain. Wherever, whenever they are, they are in him now, part of him, and it reeks ...

Gant’s eyes snapped open. Dappled shadows tattooed his jacket, golden sunlight patterned by the leaves of a tall, red maple. People crunched over white-gravel paths that flowed through the trees, around the lake, past small boats anchored by fishing lines on quiet ripples. He couldn’t remember walking to the park or closing his eyes, but the day had moved on and the smooth slats of the bench were cold against his back. A slight breeze carried notes

of crushed eucalyptus. Gant slouched down, closed his eyes for a moment, and jagged back into the madman's nightmare. *What do they witness?* he thought. *What leaves them like that?*

Someone was calling his name.

He sat up and sighed at two, stiff-backed silhouettes, quicksilver lapping at their outlines, blocked out the park. Hours had passed in the instant Gant closed his eyes. Clouds drifted dark above.

'What?' he said.

One of the silhouettes growled. 'Show some respect, mate!'

Gant frowned, peering into their blackness, noticing the high, starch-stiff jacket collars that marked Vigilstone Sentinels. *Bloody hell, Veleen,* he thought. *What've you got me into?*

'Forgive my partner, Gant. Our days are long.' The thinner silhouette sat beside him and a lithe woman materialised, her pale skin framed in crimson curls. Gant felt that he'd seen her before. 'We have questions.'

'Alright.'

Her partner stepped in front of Gant, gripping his sword tightly. 'Where is she?'

'Who?' Gant said.

'I fucking told you, Tasha!' The man growled. 'Guy's a bloody ...'

'Enough, Mal ...' the man spat '... this is informal.' She smiled and Gant's chest tightened. 'Have you seen Veleen recently, Gant?'

Ducks called from the lake, black wings twitching against a sky steeped in pink and orange by the setting sun. Gant frowned. 'You've been following me?'

'No.' She—Tasha—smelled of hours in the sun.

'But you've been watching me.'

Tasha smiled sadly. 'For protection.'

Whose? Gant thought.

‘Had a bit to drink last night didn’t we?’ said the man—Mal—chuckling while he scuffed one of the maple’s roots with the toe of his boot, peeling thin bark, exposing the pale green flesh beneath.

Gant grunted. ‘Why bother asking?’

Tasha placed a hand on his knee. ‘We prefer the truth, Gant.’

He sighed. ‘Yes. I saw her.’ The hand was delicate and warm and the warmth was spreading. ‘And whatever you’re doing, it’s scaring her.’

‘Too bloody right.’ Mal’s boots were filmed in sap. ‘But a scare’s the least of that bitch’s problems.’

Gant glared at the man, but the hand on his knee restrained him. He looked away. ‘What’s she done?’

Mal kicked the tree. ‘Mind your fucking business!’

Tasha cleared her throat, Mal glanced at her, at her hand on Gant’s knee, muttered angrily, and stalked off. Gant realised he’d never caught the man’s face. Around the park ever-lights flickered on, their moon-glow globes bathing the trees in bluish-silver, transforming the winding paths into ribbons of polished enamel under a quiet hum.

‘Mal has been ... angry of late.’ Tasha watched her partner’s retreating back and grimaced. Her voice was distant, subdued, introspective. Gant felt it was weirdly trusting. ‘He’s ...’

‘I don’t know anything.’

‘You met her and her master, the Engineer Desmonia, in Ith Tol, just before the riots,’ she said. ‘You fled together. You arrived together.’

The streets of Ith Tol materialised around him, pulling the thousands of rioting workers with it. Gant tried to suppress the clouds of dust, the sounds of detonating masonry

and blasting fire, the metallic screech of swords and shields, the fatal thumping of the mob. It was in him, gushing up, spilling out—a part of him.

‘Yes.’

‘Nobody has ever reached our gates from the north.’

He tried to forget how it had all gone black, how the world had appeared like a wireframe of coloured lights, how they’d ... jumped into a valley days and days away. Mysteries plagued him. The peaceful, happy months spent in Vigilstone dropped away, leaving Gant hollow. He didn’t, couldn’t understand.

He shivered. ‘I...’

‘It is beautiful here when it rains.’ She squeezed his leg. ‘The lake whispers. Sometimes people come just to listen.’

Gant nodded. ‘Beautiful...’

‘I hear a but?’

‘But what do they witness?’

‘I am sure you have noticed that Vigilstone is different, Gant.’ Wind whispered through the branches and red leaves fell around the twisting roots. She adjusted the sword on her hip. ‘Have you seen any poor? Beggars? Thieves? There are no great upheavals here, no debilitating crime. People are happy and you find that strange—as if misery is *normal*. Everyone enjoys their labour, everyone eats, has shelter, time to live. Vigilstone provides.’

‘The point, Sentinel?’ He’d had enough of riddles.

‘Please, call me Tasha.’ Her skin was alabaster blushing in the dusk, cheeks dusted with freckles. ‘The Witnesses ... without them there would be no train, no engines, no lights.’

‘And the ghosts?’

She stiffened slightly. ‘I cannot say.’

‘Will not?’

‘They are one and the same. You are not Vigilstone,’ she said and an unbridged gap stretched between them. He was an outsider. Gant wondered how old she was, what she might look like hair down. Naked. It didn’t help. He crossed his legs. ‘Not yet.’

‘Veleen has something to do with it, doesn’t she?’

‘Why do you think this?’

‘There was a man today. A Witness, I think, and he was acting like a soldier. A veteran.’ Gant looked into the maple’s deep vermilion. ‘I’ve known some in the taprooms back home in Itharnat. Dad took me when I was little. It’s like they’re closed off or shut away in an empty room with what they’ve done. Sometimes they’re fine, but then ... something flips a switch.’

‘And what did your father say about this?’

Gant smiled and made his voice gruff and deep. ‘Soldiers see things, lad, eyes like yours don’t have to.’

Tasha nodded once, like a shortened bow. ‘There is some wisdom in that.’

‘Maybe.’

‘Veleen stole something, Gant.’ She touched her sword again. ‘For the moment she will be safe if it is recovered ... but her time is running out. She is far too clever. The merchant blood of Ith Tol broods in her, seeking to turn a profit. This is dangerous, and not just for her. She skirts the edge of suspicious associations. You said she was scared?’

‘I thought so.’

‘Well, she plays a scary game with scary stakes.’ Tasha sighed and picked a leaf from the ground, turning it in her finger so the veins pulsed purple under the ever-lights. ‘And, if it were not for the influence of the Archivist, this conversation might be different.’ She chuckled warmly. ‘He speaks highly of you.’

The ducks were silent cut-outs on the water. Stars appeared, windows flickered into life across the city, and the train whistled into its first circuit of the night.

‘And you listened?’

‘I see you.’ She cocked her head. ‘Nobody sees Veleen, not even when she is visible.’

‘She’s resourceful.’

‘Yes. Ith Tol’s inventions are ingenious.’ Tasha rubbed her shoulder with a scowl.

‘Especially those clockwork caltrops. Her masters must be very proud.’

Gant nodded, but said nothing. He thought about Veleen; he knew what she liked, what she didn’t, her intelligence, ambition, her colourful language. He knew his friend, not the persona being described. He knew the engineer, the inventor, the genius, and what drove her.

‘What’s so important she’d risk her life to steal it?’

‘The past.’ Tasha stood and the moonlight burnished her hair into a waterfall of gleaming copper. *Another of Vigilstone’s marvels*, Gant thought, realising he’d never seen anyone so beautiful, dangerous, so fragile, so real. ‘She stole our past.’



‘How goes your study of the Bastion Empire, Gant?’

The coffee-house was packed. Waiters swarmed around clusters of tables, empty cups clinking on hoisted trays. Conversations swelled around Gant and Duron—mixing, rising, falling, starting. Children crawled between their parent’s legs while friends shook hands, met for lunch, sipped quietly in corners. Clouds of steam hissed from a coiled knot of bronze pipes and silver valves, funnelling boiling water through filters dripping earthy blends.

Gant considered the wizard's question and shrugged. 'There's a lot of history down there.'

Scattered, dog-eared pages covered their table like so many fallen leaves—sections jumbled out of order, out of place. Each page represented hours in the archives, centuries transcribed to map the empire whose breakdown had given birth to the kingdom Gant was now a part. Tiny birds chirped on the floorboards, looking for crumbs, flashing into rafters, into early sun. Morning traffic trickled past; a parade of faces momentarily glimpsed, separated by a thin pane of glass. *Do they see what I see?* Gant thought, locking eyes for an instant before turning away.

Duron nodded. 'Perhaps *that* is the problem.' Laughter spilled out of the kitchen, followed by plates heaped with golden pastries, steaming pies, and cold-cut beef dripping with gravy. 'Perhaps there is so much history that it obscures the past.'

'What?' *Great*, Gant thought. *More riddles.*

'History often smooths the past, flattening the topography of event and experience.' Oil-lamps dangled on a net of twisted wire sagging from the rafters. The wizard looked down at Gant's work, his hands casting large shadows on the pages. 'Dates and figures and facts *are* important, but not at the expense of acknowledging that history is constructed and the past is fundamentally human.'

'Like it's alive?'

'Yes, though not as you suggest.' Duron collected the pages, stacked them neatly. 'We can consider the past as an amalgam of stories: mundane, thrilling, everyday, extraordinary, ridiculous, unreal, impossible stories.'

The wizard brushed five pages off the top and fanned them like playing cards across the table, notes crammed in the margins, ink spattered.

The character sketches? Gant thought. 'But they're just ...'

‘Levels of attention,’ Duron said and started reading.

*

‘And my eyes beheld nothing but the spear, for even in the hands of their children are instruments of death to be found. The stars hide for fear of being pricked. Here, the grass may grow red and, walking by and by, you find your boots soon filled with blood. There is a grey life in squat, stone buildings, brooding at the bottom of a windy vale. And, knowing little of battle, I asked a retreating minstrel why Westreach had not been raised upon the hilltop yonder whose elevated vigil would open the plains to peaceful contemplation. She said, “It was to make a well of war.”’

Pano closed his journal and chucked it on the desk. His publisher, Arvi Kamlaris, leant back, leather chair creaking, and threw his wire-framed spectacles beside it. Glare bounced through his third-storey window off the Mirrormount’s green waters. The capital’s great lake was a calm mirror. Ceiling-high shelves sagged under the weight of leathery first editions. Manuscripts were stacked in dusty piles, their soggy pages unread, sedimentary ink fossilising under the pressure of a million words ignored.

‘Why the anachronism, Pano?’ Arvi said. ‘Wouldn’t it be easier to write plainly?’

‘Authenticity.’ Pano skimmed a paragraph at the top of a teetering stack beside his knee. ‘My work must appear archaic and distant to have any impact. It has to speak with an unfamiliar voice.’

‘Fine, fine, fine.’ Arvi waved his hand, stood, and moved to the window. Laughter bubbled along the street while clouds drifted slow over seamless cobalt. ‘I’m sure we can make it work if, and only if, your observations can be supported.’

Pano snorted. ‘Of course they can.’

‘Then release the research.’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

Pano glared at his publisher. ‘You know why.’

To open his findings to public record, to give the Tower’s agents time to discredit his work, his past, his life, was unacceptable. Years of effort were at stake. He had to publish, had to express a vision that would dissolve generations of omission and falsehood. The sections recovering the old Northern Kingdoms were just the start—greater secrets and grander evils existed during the empire’s inception. The truth had to be told.

‘There’s pressure coming from the Tower, Pano’. Arvi sighed wearily, peering down to the street. ‘Rumours of your work are reaching places unused to having their ... legends questioned. Forget an unfamiliar voice. What about unfriendly ears?’

‘Light damn them, Arvi!’ Pano grabbed his journal and tapped it on the desk. ‘This will change everything. The Tower will just have to accept the consequences of obscuring the true nature of their ascension. Who are they to judge us?’

‘Accept? Consequences?’ Arvi laughed bitterly and slumped back to this chair. He opened a draw and ripped out several scrunched letters of censure, desist, redact, and denial. The Tower’s sun and mountain seal glowered red from dog-eared corners. ‘They’re threatening to pull all publications fronted by any editor attached to you or this office.’

‘Let them try.’

‘They’re following me, watching my family. Friends won’t talk to me in the street and I have to watch my back and yours at the same time. Light knows what they’ll do.’

‘Arvi ...’

‘Save it.’ The publisher shook his head. ‘What else have you got on the old Northern Kingdoms they feel needs suppressing?’

‘Take Westreach.’ Pano flicked through creased pages, flashing over his hieroglyphic shorthand. ‘We’ve always assumed they were barbaric. Sure, they were militant, but far more sophisticated than credited: centralised government, filial networks, advanced husbandry.’

‘Husbandry won’t sell copy.’

‘They had no metal. None.’ Pano pointed to a scrawling smear of names and dates. ‘And records suggest that their coastline, exhibiting all the markers of ore-bearing strata, was *barren* ... mined out. This supports my theory that an advanced civilisation ruled the north long before the Northern Kingdoms.’

‘Alright ... but what about this?’ Arvi rummaged through the notes on his desk, picking over a collection of half-eaten sandwiches, splotchy inkwells, and thumb-smudged newspapers. He extracted a scrap near black with his own blocky script. ‘In the Midwalle, men wer of the erth. The cattie was of the mountaine, and the stars clasped in theyr gaz. [fragment missing]’ He looked witheringly at Pano. ‘... when firste I made knowne to them my purpos it was from the lyt whence they cam and to lyt returned. Theyr wordes wer strange and soft, and they did speake with a voice of one.’

‘What?’

Arvi scrunched up the transcription. ‘It’s gibberish!’

‘It’s *period* and proof.’ Pano slapped the table. ‘We’ve been lied to, Arvi. All our lives. About everything! The Kingdom of Midwall was powerful—not a backwards land of bumbling ascetics. No serfs, no slaves, no knights, no kings. On Tower evidence there wasn’t any kingdom’—doors slammed on the first floor—‘and yet the Nomads *lost* thousands assaulting their mountains.’

Arvi raised an eyebrow. ‘And how do you know that?’

Pano took a deep breath. ‘Imperial records.’

‘Which are sealed.’

‘A friend of a friend knows a guy whose cousin’s mother has a key.’

‘More intrigue, more danger.’ Arvi sighed. ‘You’re marching us further into the lion’s den.’

‘My work will pull their claws quickly enough.’ Pano smirked. The hiss of woks and charry griddles drifted up from the floors below; frying onions squirmed through the floor, heady with olive oil and salt. ‘Ithral and Midwall were connected. We’re talking about rigid ethical and moral codes framing universal conformity, environmental harmony, and *psychic* connections more subtle than anything the Readers claim.’

‘You mean ...?’

‘Speaking with *one* voice, above discord’—muffled exclamations rumbled on the second floor—‘materialising from stone and tree and river like extensions of the natural world.’

Arvi grunted. ‘Pure fantasy.’

‘We’ve always been told that the Bastion Empire rules because of the Wanderer’s mental legacy’—footsteps pounded up the stairwell—‘but the Tower’s manipulation of history suggests fragility, if not outright fear. What else are they keeping back?’

The door exploded, showering Pano and Arvi with smouldering splinters. A woman strode into the publisher’s office and light bent around her as if she walked within a bubble. Fires leapt into the manuscripts, blazing for an instant before snuffing out, the energy absorbed by the woman. Pano shivered as the temperature plummeted.

‘What melodrama.’ She studied the room with a *tsk*, raised her hands, and sucked in a long breath. Smoke eddied and streamed towards her palms, condensing into a melon sized sphere. Translucent patterns churned over its surface for an instant before solidifying into milky glass. It *thunked* to the floor. Arvi paled, his eyes bulging white. She sniffed. ‘The Tower knows best.’

‘What are you afraid of?’ Pano tried to stand but invisible bands clamped around his arms and legs, fixing him to the chair. ‘Why don’t you allow the truth?’

‘Truth?’ She seemed to float about the room, gliding gracefully from book to book, stack to stack. A faint breeze stirred off her robes, out and around. ‘Your limited faculties can barely grasp the concept.’

‘You can’t stop me publishing.’

‘Do you know why they call us Translators?’ She stopped beside an ornate hand-press, its tarnished, metal plates gummed and glossy with ancient coats of accreted ink. ‘Readers, our brothers and sisters, is an obvious title—they *read* emotions like a language. They can flip through your mind like a book and rip out its spine. Translators? Many call us wizards, but we just have a clearer understanding of how this world functions. And once you understand material connections and composite elements, turning smoke into glass, air to fire, or blood into acid is ... simplicity itself.’

Pano screamed. Fire ate his veins, his lungs, cooking muscles, boiling just under his skin. Steam leaked through his pores. Burnt hair singed the air. Then, as suddenly as the sensation began, it stopped. Blood coated his mouth.

Wheezing, Pano smiled. ‘Is that meant to scare me off?’

‘Motivate you.’

‘I won’t stop. Not know. I’ve seen the hidden—what you’ve made us forget.’

‘Why?’ She shook her head sadly and pushed her hand into the press. The metal flexed and rippled around her wrist. The light flickered and the world dimmed as she pulled her fist out with a *gloop*. Shining silver rolled around the Translator’s fingers, licking over her skin like mercury on oil then, clicking her fingers, it twitched, elongating into a thick, gleaming spike.

‘Is this crusade so important that you would risk your’—the needle drifted across the room until its tip eased into Pano’s shoulder—‘life, the life of your friend, the lives of his family, the lives of yours? What does the Empire need to hear so desperately that martyrdom is so appealing?’

Pano stared at her and knew that something had been ripped out of the world, a part of who they were, what they had been, which only made them something less. The Tower was symptom of the shift, not the cause, and this Translator was just another a wound bleeding and infected.

‘They need to hear,’ Pano said, ‘about how much we’ve lost.’

*

The moon is tired and we’ve been walking, walking, walking, but the stars are still bright. They glitter the sandstretch, painting our shadows long over the slip-face. We move in silence. I don’t know why. There was no glass-sighting, no birdcall, no day-signs. Nothing ... but we single step, foot in foot, numbers hidden, whistle-wind smoothing our tracks. This is a survival thing.

Mother and father trek far ahead, tribe-mothers and tribe-fathers in their place, keeping the little-ones in line. They think I’m one of them, but I’m not. Kalin strides in front of me and his steps are easy and long and sure and barely eaten in the dune-crumble. Marri is at the back with the wise-woman. She’s our Keeper, but we’re far from the Tribe’s tear-garden and spirit-tree, so she’s tense and snappy. But I love her all the same. One day I’ll be a Keeper, tending Those That Have Gone Ahead. Then I’ll have to splinter and make my own tracks, my own family. Maybe Kalin will join; brothers often do. Of course, the sand makes us all one family; twenty families living as one, stepping as one—one purpose, one heart, one

way. That's how it is, always was, will be. It's how we survive the parch, run the raid, fill the empty with our heartbeats.

We are the Brighteyes of clan *Tahraal* and our Bloodborn fighters are the strongest, fastest, bravest fighters trekking the sandstretch. Father says we red-mingled with the *Radran* and stole their long sight, their clear gaze. Maybe so, but song and story are not his to keep—they are ours, mine. We women hold the past and tell it true. So mother scolds but father keeps spinning tales. I don't mind, his is a low and gentle voice, and every family has its odds, its ends, and we love them because it brings us together. Mother nags, father nods, Kalin laughs, Marri glares, and I talk.

The birthed ones screams. Heat is the tent, bearing down on tribe-mother Jomil and her newborn twins. Goats bleat outside—the herds feel our ways, our times. The labour was long. We save her sweat for the spirit-kiss. It was my first time watching, but I'm old enough to teach the little-ones, so old enough to bring them wailing onto the sandstretch. *It* looks at me and, against all my lore-learning, my chest aches. When we trek, it will be left behind—the Tribe cannot carry weakness. Its arm is stunted and bent ... it will be a kindness. The sandstretch is not merciful. So they give me its sister, wet and warm and wriggly small, and I try not to think about dropping her. It doesn't work. It's all I think about. The tribe-mothers kiss me, embrace me, and I feel my skin slip into the shade-sand. Jomil accepts her daughter, rubs sand on her chest and the sweat on her brow. We recite: a grain of sand atop a greater seif. It's all endings and beginnings.

The little-ones are made of questions, but I'm not built with answers. The girls chant the codices and hum passages from the Tribe-rhyme, their voices pipe-high and sweet. One day

they will be the Tribe's voice, our heart, our law, knowing and wise and strong and stern. But the trek is long and I don't plan my lessons. So... questions, questions, questions and more questions. Where are we going? I don't know. When will we get there? I don't know. Do you think the Wanderer calls us? I don't know. Tomorrow, I will have a plan: the songs, the codices, the rhymes, the laws, the ways, the end.

Sometimes, when my lessons end and the girls return to their place in line, I hear the men with their boys. They speak a different tongue; words like honour and duty and loyalty and blood and brotherhood and glory and battle, on and on until each word lifts into the night and does not exist. They are grains of meaning in a dune I cannot see, cannot touch, is not me. Then ... I realise they aren't truly speaking, but honing, sharpening, forging.

Glass-sight! In the night our raiders return and, high-holding glass-blades, signal victory. In the morning Kalin packs our tent with talk of his sword-brothers—their raids, their triumphs, their defeats. Flatbread toasts on the coals and the dahl is ready. His face is alive. It's like he's there and I'm there with him, looking on, holding his hand, keeping him safe. It's dry and warm and haft-calloused. One day he will join the Bloodborn, but he's not ready—he's too young, needs growing, learn, to feel the slip-shifts beneath his feet, to listen for the drum-sand, to know the water-bird in the basin. He boasts of fooling the Northerners with lightning strikes and night raids, of great stone houses and metal clothes and sabotage and disruption. This is our battle-ken: the fleet-foot, the flash, the shadow-dance. We are the wind-runners, the night-stalkers. I wonder if this is what the boys learn, if their lessons are only of the death-touch. Father stirs the dahl, mother flips the flatbread. We're together, there's food to share, and that's all that matters.

Day-sign! Other Tribes match our passage, walking in our walk, their long lines winding the sandstretch like wind-ripples. They're *Nako*, we're *Tahraal* and we watch and nod. Such a thing I've never seen. South and east and south again. The water-givers are restless. They ferry up and down the line, relaying half-heard snippets scrounged from the elders: the blood-claim has been suspended, there's to be no combat, no duel. No normal, then. I ask them about whys. They say the Wanderer is calling and the sandstretch answers. There's talk of conclave, clan-summit, of reunions in the Cradle, of tradition broken, of a new way that paths to new days. After that their faces are blank; it seems some talk is too grim for gossip, too dark to pass at night. The Tribes are coming together, all their many lines coming to a point, a focus. To an end.

The wise-women sing passages of the long-legend and Tribe-rhyme. Stories stride the tent, brushing shoulders, kissing cheeks. The air is sticky with goat char and hard cheese and dried dates. Weeks have gone since the elders decided to erect the Tribe-tent, gathering all the families under a single roof. Excitement fidgets in our ranks.

A rough hand touches my shoulder and the old Bloodborn, sandstone hard and fierce, holds the kettle under my nose. Its hammered copper bowl sloshes with fermented milk spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg. I roll it burning over my tongue, on my gums, letting it melt in, sink down, just enough to work, to barrier-break and relax. Time unwinds. The wise-women stop and my tribe-brothers strut the centre, spinning, leaping, their taut skin sluiced gold by torches. They dance the Battle of Falcon Ridge. I join the clapping, adding my beat to the little-ones', forgetting my years.

The sandstretch churns beneath, folding back wind-ripple and slip-face, tugging us to the yester-years of victory against the Hophearts of the *Nako*. My eyes had never etched this battle, never made the memory, but I see it now and know it there—the Tribe knows and the

Tribe treks the twisting paths of vein to mind. The tent unfurls to spinning stars, soaring moon to searing sun, around and around, back-tracking quick to faster, hurling us back and back to that backness beyond sight. Only then, on this forgotten stage, do the Bloodborn appear, wearing the dusk robes, under their painted masks of black or white.

They kick sand in our eyes and we gaze through the sandstretch and understand its ever-shifting heart. We're so far in the before that there's nothing there to cling to. It feels like I'm knee deep in cave-sand ... sinking, sucked down, swallowed up, and spat out the other side into an empty land of crashing black. The Bloodborn are not, the Tribe is never, but one man remains, his mask split with shining white and eating black, holding up his hands, holding it all back. I know who he is. I know what he wants. And even though he is a stranger, even though I've never met him, he knows me and speaks my name and points to my tracks heading north. Is this past or future? Have I gone or do I return? He beckons and I follow, joining the others beneath a tree whose green branches pluck out the stars, are the stars, hold the stars and make them shine.

Do you know what a million people looks like? A thousand? Until tonight, I never did. Tribes are small, ever splintered, always alone on the sandstretch. This is our way, the way of the parch, the bright-burn, the night-trek, and it has made us strong—of the sand and of each other. Yellow haze flickers off the ridges, spilling out of the Cradle from a thousand thousand torches and cook-fires. It is so bright that it covers the stars.

The sandstretch is colour but tracks break its wind-ripples, staining the sand with our shadows. Mother says there are no paths on the dunes and no roads in the basins. That we make our own way, on our own paths, free to travel all directions: all roads and none. But all those families, Tribes, and clans down there say different. They announce one path, a single road, leading to him, from him. I stand on the slip-face staring into that rocky bowl.

Mountains surround us and the only way left, the only way out, is north. They've gathered in the centre, around a banner flapping in the wind, whose green field is dominated by a silver tree. It is the Wanderer's and his roots run deep into the sand.

We change.

*

They stand on a steep rise, watching the battle in the valley beneath. Rain patters against the thick leaf Daleeth uses to cover her master while she sketches with a stick of charcoal. The downpour washes out the world in grey. The screams are distant, slightly behind the action as if lifted from another battlefield half-heard, half-glimpsed. Light flashes as the sun reflects, refracts from the clash of glass swords on steel armour. Thunder murmurs in the east.

'Hold it steady, Dal.' Her master sighs. 'The high lord Tarmiz, the Wanderer's sword, *personally* requested my art and it will not be marred by your incompetence.'

'Yes, master.' Daleeth adjusts the leaf, letting the water beading on its tiny hairs to roll down her neck. She shivers—desert heat still clings to her skin. 'I'm sorry.'

'Forget sorry! Simply be careful, do your job, and save us both the time.'

Her master's hand is a blur, flashing details, imparting movement; the clamour of battle coincides with bold strokes, swooping lines, as if her art is guided by what she hears, not what she sees. Daleeth cannot tear her eyes away. For her, the scratching charcoal is in command, slamming battalions together, loosing arrows, spilling blood. Fate is a flick of her master's wrist—a dot, a smudge. For a moment, Daleeth considers dropping the leaf and washing the canvas clean. She thinks about Malos and hopes her husband is safe; it is

becoming common practice to move the Carers closer to the front. There have been ... accidents in the east along the Dagger's coast. Where was the Wanderer then?

'What's gotten into you lately?' Her master snaps her fingers and Daleeth fishes the watercolours from a bulky satchel hanging off her shoulder. She's developing a hump. Her master breaks the charcoal in two and throws it away. 'You should be honoured to play your part.'

'Of course, master.'

'Come now, Dal.' Her master rubs her chin and considers the colours. The enemy's lines are bending, soon they will break. Tarmiz has ordered no quarter: no prisoners, no survivors, no witnesses. Daleeth thinks the world is being washed red then bleached grey by this war. 'You're one of the lucky ones. You get to travel the world and be part of the excitement—a part of the world we're building.'

Her master clicks her teeth. 'Think of the future.' The lines break, order shatters, and the conflict descends into massacre. This far out the soldiers are indistinguishable and their actions unclear. Her master has trouble choosing an appropriate red. 'We were trapped in the desert, constrained by scarcity, surrounded by enemies, apart from the ... action. Not to mention all that sand. This is our destiny, Dal, a blessing of the Wanderer.'

Daleeth remembers her mother's stories—the freedom of infinite dunes flowing gold and silver on the sandstretch. She glances south, but rain obscures the land and everything is hazy.

'And we had nothing: a few goats, some sheep, ragged tents, and too much empty sand.' Her master sighs. She is bored by the battle, distracted by the vision forming in her mind's eye. Daleeth has seen the same expression on numerous war-torn fronts, as if this madness were a still life. Her master yawns. 'The North will be ours—Lord Tarmiz commands it, the Wanderer willed it. Its lands, its riches, and its people will all be ours.'

Daleeth blinks. ‘People, master?’

‘Don’t be naïve, Dal.’ Her master searches for a green. ‘You don’t conquer a nation and let its people run willy-nilly. It’s . . . untidy. They’ll have to be restrained. They’ll have to assimilate. There’ll be resettlements, certain measures regarding royal lines, governance, franchise, taxation. It’s all in the details.’

Daleeth shudders—the soft words have sharp edges. Relocation, census, safe-zone, naturalisation . . . these words smack of dangerous consequences. Her master says these things while she paints and Daleeth is sure this is important coming from an artist. But her mind is elsewhere, distracted by the battle spinning out of control below.

Lightning smashes into the valley, great, incandescent forks that tear chunks out of the earth and flash it to nothingness. The Wanderer’s students have come and the screams are louder, continual, insistent. But the Nomad forces are pushed back, folding south, towards the supply train, towards the Carers.

‘Our people will want for nothing,’ her master says. Pigments mix, run, seep, dry. The brushstrokes are assured, precise, exacting. ‘It’ll be a golden age and the sand will spread across the land.’

The rain hammers against the leaf, drowning everything out, leaving Daleeth and her master alone, on a hill, in a strange land, where men fight and die in the cold. Westreach cavalry charges the Nomad lines, smashing through, wheeling south. *Tahraal* skirmishers pursue and Daleeth breathes again.

‘What do you think, Dal?’

‘I can’t say, master. It’s all too much for me.’

‘Yes, of course,’ her master says, holding out her brush. Daleeth takes it and cleans it in the rain. ‘But you’ll have the chance to paint, to sculpt . . . to pursue any and every dream

you have. Just imagine it. Able to do whatever you want, whenever you want with no restrictions. That's what Tarmiz offers and all we have to do is reach out and take it.'

The painting is finished. Spears puncture the air and tattered banners fly, scorched and muddy. Swords rise and fall, blood splashes against pale skin, filling murky puddles, churns into the soil by pounding hooves, iron feet. Contorted faces wear masks of pain and anger and fear and joy. The battle has become a shifting portrait of death, framed by glorious deeds and honourable ideals. Her master has left out the rain, preferring a burning sun, low and large, that lights a colossal, auric wave reared at the moment of breaking. Daleeth feels it will flood the valley with sand and cover everything in desert. Heat chokes off the canvas.

'Dal! Mind the leaf!' Smoke curls black in the south, spreading thick over the lines of the fifth *Tahraal*. Ash marks the trees of their once white banners. 'A shame ... they've got to our Carers again. Poor planning. Don't you know one of them?'

Daleel stares at the smoke, knowing it is too late, that she is too far away, too small, too unimportant. She shifts the leaf and her master has not noticed that the rain stopped minutes ago.

*

Gileed stood in a wide courtyard, breathing lightly in the swirling ash. Colour bent around corners, streaming faint over burning roofs, into a world cut in shades of grey. Five minds flared close, fleeing the square, flickering red through orange over black. Others blinked on the edge of death like dying moths with dying flutters, their bodies broken, already gone. Brains were tricky things, so much strength and depth ... but easily fooled. Gileed's mouth twitched in pleasure.

‘Inevitable.’ He glanced at the ground, noting puddles of blood shining black. Shattered shields and splintered spears were grey on grey, barely visible against the cobblestones. Fires guttered and black gouts spewed from the toothless faces of crumbling buildings battered by days of bombardment. The city stank of burnt hair. ‘Pathetic.’

Over his shoulder, Gileed saw the tell-tale blue wash and red strobe of Nomad soldiers: resolution tinged with rage. Their advance was slow. The city’s walls had yet to be breached and Ithral’s defenders were mundanely effective against mundane forces.

But you didn’t count on me and mine, did you? Gileed breathed deep, savouring the taste. Bodies surrounded him, tear-streaked faces registering like sooty smudges, contorted, locked in the moment he’d burnt out their brains. *And we’ll kill every last one of you.*

Too long had Ithral and its Midwall puppet-masters remained a thorn in his father’s side. Didn’t they understand that Tarmiz spoke the language of the future? Blinded by obsolescence, these ancient states had resisted, even achieved a few, paltry victories, but their resistance was meaningless. The Wanderer had pierced time and entrusted his oracle to Tarmiz ... and Gileed’s father would not be denied. No room remained for dissent and incomprehensible, useless, fantastical worldviews.

Gileed strode through the courtyard, his mental sense attenuated, hunting for signs of life. Prismatic ribbons fluttered peripheral—rainbow threads twisting from and around his brother Readers. He reached out, weaving his own variegated aura into theirs, connecting mind to minds, thought to thoughts.

No sign.

Eastern quarter clean.

Civilians sighted. In pursuit.

Tenth Heavy Guard in contact—breach within the hour. Forest burning.

No trace.

Western districts expunged. No survivors.

He must have fled.

Malthranis is here. Gileed frowned. *Open yourselves, I'm taking control.*

He shuddered as his brothers lowered their walls, allowing Gileed's consciousness to suppress their sense of self and assume command. Gileed dissolved, redistributed his psyche along the intertwining ribbons of colour, becoming something else, something bigger, something powerful. It was a like a brain, exploded, spread out; his brothers, his body, the neurons, their kaleidoscopic sensory connections, the synapses. But his mind existed outside the process, guiding the thoughts, controlling the link. Intellects combined, perceptions heightened, information transferring at exponential speed. For a moment, stretched by a relativism unburdened by singular limitations, Gileed was a god, looking down on Ithral's streets, mapping its paths, calculating and knowing. The greys of his sight deepened, darkened into infinite variations of black.

Living minds stood out like pinpricks of aqua and crimson and jaundice—a vivid field of chromatic stars moving amidst a roiling, impenetrable sky. Their constellations were predictable, their patterns grounded in causality. Fear led to retreat; rage prompted attack; pain drove slowing, cessation, and death.

Gileed navigated the blending absence, skipping point to point, colour to colour, his expanded, distended self, alighting upon a terrestrial cosmos of interpreted stimuli. He searched for a single, solitary irregularity—a model of behaviour peculiar amongst the gradients of everyday. He soared down alleyways, flashing through material obstacles—houses, trees, soil, walls—like a predator following a scent.

There. An unblinking point of impossible, unreadable white slid slowly to the north. Gileed grinned viciously. *Malthranis!*

Regretfully, he disconnected the link, ripping free from several brothers fastened tight to his persona. Their auras fluctuated for a few seconds then sputtered out. The hunt was all that mattered. Data dispersed, consciousness retracted, and Gileed diminished, dimmed to a near unbearable shell of meat and bone.

He opened his eyes. ‘No escape.’

The soldiers fled. Phantoms pursued them; projections of horror dredged up from the countless interrogations Gileed had witnessed, took part in, moulded and distended, sharpened, honed. He pushed forward, enclosed in a bubble of fear and madness that adhered to any foolish enough to approach. Terror spewed indigo from the Ithral soldiers. Howls echoed in the streets. Those unlucky enough to survive would be haunted for the rest of their lives. Gileed laughed.

Flies followed him, specks of infinitesimal pigment, drawn by the stench of sweat and blood. Eyes shadowed his steps, myriad gradients of blue drooling from windows and keyholes, beating with the palest green—a faint, selfish hope that they’d be spared.

For now, Gileed thought. *For now*.

Wind blew hot, sucking up blazes in the south, disgorging a murky haze that settled streaky patinas on the cobbles of a wide boulevard. The trees seemed to tremble—a violent palsy—as if the air was a choking poison. Branches bent and whipped, reaching for Gileed with arthritic fingers. Roots punctured pavement, snaking, grasping. Leaves flew on non-existent thermals, eddying in spasmodic gyres, slapping his face and arms. They glowed weakly with an obscure sentience bestowed by Malthranis’ secret arts.

Gileed stood in the middle of the street, surrounded by a blinding corona irradiating his world of perpetual grey. Lining the boulevard like candles, the trees stabbed light into the ground, their winding roots a throbbing net binding trunk to trunk in a blazing, rhizomic knot.

But it didn't stop there. Everything was connected, each earthly object pouring its own diverse energies around and down, white upon white upon white, building, pooling, intensifying, light on light on light, until nothing remained but illumination.

‘Show yourself, mystic!’

‘Enough, Nomad ... enough.’ It was propped against a tree: dying. Neither man nor woman, Malthranis was an ambiguous abomination: defying category, beyond comprehension. The creature coughed. ‘No more.’

‘Indeed.’ Gileed tried to read the Midwall mystic but only interpreted light. It was connected, like the trees, to the pulsing network of brilliant white, his nervous system spread into the landscape and down into the ground like the veins of the leaf. ‘It’s time to die.’

‘Death is in all things, Reader.’ It cocked its head. ‘Even for you and what you represent.’

‘Not today.’

‘Maybe not, but the time will come.’ Malthranis closed its eyes and sighed. Gileed stepped closer. Its light was fading. ‘You and yours ... so lost in power. So blind.’

‘Claims the vanquished.’

‘Yes.’ It smiled sadly. ‘You have no idea what you’re doing, no idea about the sediment you’re stirring up. Pursuing that madman’s vision...’

Gileed kicked the side of its head. ‘My father is a great man.’

‘Such *great* men’—blood seeped from its mouth, instantly absorbed when it dripped to the stone—‘often tear down everything and everyone around them. Have you ever seen emptiness?’

‘I am Nomad, filth!’ Gileed stamped on its leg with a sickening crunch. ‘I am desert and know its desolation.’

‘If you think that is emptiness, then you are truly sightless.’ It struggled to sit up and winced. Many of its nerves had ruptured, died out into opaque plasticity. ‘You Readers are such zealots with your rote-word adherence and righteous ignorance. And the Translators are no better, looking at the world closer and closer until they’re made ignorant by detail. You have turned that man you call the Wanderer into a god. You have debased his purpose and corrupted yourselves. You have taken forces into yourselves that you can never comprehend, let alone control. You are open to be gnawed.’

‘We court perfection.’

‘A matter of perspective.’

‘You’d have us living like you?’ Gileed yanked a glass dagger from his sleeve. ‘Deifying the earth? Worshipping dirt? No, Malthranis, your kind are done. We’ll destroy you and everything you symbolise. Progress has no patience for your perspective.’

The dagger slipped in easily. Malthranis gasped and grabbed Gileed’s arm. Their eyes locked and, for a dreadful moment, the Reader perceived colour. He twisted the dagger deeper, ripping up and in. Blood washed over his hand.

‘Tell me, Gileed.’ It pulled him closer. ‘When this place is torn down, when the land is ash, when you have broken it, destroyed it, consumed it—what then? What will you put in its place?’

Gileed couldn’t be sure, but as the last flicker of life left its body, the world became fractionally, blessedly, a little less bright.

*

Look at Hamil. No, towards the rear. He stands, honoured, one face in the thousands of faces lining the banks of wide Mirrormount. He has seen battles, seen death, seen life. He has *seen*.

But his war is done and the sacrifices he, his brothers, his father, and his father before him made, have led to this place.

Centuries of conflict pivot on this moment. The Legions stand in perfect rows. Beside them are the mustered remnants of the Northern Kingdoms. Over there—that's a Westreach dragoon, spurs and all. To the left— those are squads of Longrun riverfolk leaning on stout, yew bows. And beyond them both, looking on, standing aloof, are the grim fighters of blasted Ithral. These nations, once powerful, have been ground down, broken apart, but a will lives on. Hamil knows this, knows about survival.

It is a momentous occasion. Bitter foes surround the peace table, their leaders, weary, wary, despondent, hopeful, debating sticky points of law, allotments of territory, and the proper treatment of refugees. It is to be a new world, and if you look close enough, you'll see him, the man who will be emperor: the immortal, the saviour, the visionary Tarmiz.

But we're not interested in him, this is not his moment, even though he would claim it. We're not interested in his sons, not even the mysterious Gileed leaning silent and grim with his mind-reading brothers. No. We return to Hamil, at the rear. Just look at him—eyes shining, shoulders square, uniform neat. He doesn't stand out. He's not special ... and yet this soldier, this inconspicuous sword of the rank-and-file, draws our attention.

But why? Why does he affect our sight, fix our gaze, stick in our minds as something incredibly important? Look closer, look at his eyes, into whatever it is—soul, spirit, chakra—that drives him. This is a man who believes and it is written all over him: indelible, absolute.

Move in, closer, closer ... there, right behind his shoulder and, for a moment, this moment, see what he sees, feel what he feels. He sees his commander making peace and feels pride. He sees former enemies accepting terms and feels satisfaction. He sees the end of war and feels joy. But these are simple things, things a soldier familiar with conflict's horror

might call lip-service, pomp, so much fluff. Then where? Where does Tamil's conviction stem?

Pull back, up, out, past the circling birds and float just below the clouds. The Mirrormount is a blue-green looking glass catching the sun in silver wrinkles. Now you see it, yes? An island rears from the lake, high and wide, with a round plateau. And on that verdant table there stands a mighty tree. These things were not there before— not ten minutes ago—but there they are now, because of a legend and his song.

Hamil does not recognise the man's face, the voice, but the song is imprinted upon his mind, tuned to his blood. The Wanderer. He stood in the Mirrormount's still water, pulled back his hand and cast in a seed. Then ... he sang. There were no words, but in that song Hamil saw the unfolding of the world, a future bright and better. The waters parted and an island breached, and on that island was a tree.

Then the Wanderer spoke and he said: 'Let this island from the depths be a bastion for all. Let it be a beacon of hope, of peace, of life. This is my gift and that is your promise!'

*

Duron dropped the last page on the stack. Eons unwound and settled as time was released from the constraints of narrative, set back on its familiar, steady track. The coffee-house was empty, tables rubbed clean, cutlery polished, napkins folded. History had absorbed hours, chewing through the day well into a hazy dusk. Wait-staff ate sandwiches around the kitchen door.

Duron placed his hand on Gant's work. 'This is history, Gant.'

'But they're just ... drafts.' Gant scratched his head. Having his writing read aloud, hearing clumsy sentences, finding words that should have been, could have been, were and

weren't used, had left him feeling wrung out. *It'll never be finished*, he thought. 'Half-baked ideas.'

'Perhaps.' Duron nodded, retrieving his pipe from a voluminous pocket. 'However, the rise of the Bastion Empire—the map of the ancient north, uniting the Nomad tribes, the Incursion years, Ithral's Devastation, the raising of the Imperial Seat—is a story, our story, every citizen of the Protectorate Kingdom's story. And ...'

'And?'

'And I think it needs to be told.' Duron smiled and pushed the pages across the table. Hawkers wound their voices from the markets. Figures walked by, some stopping to order coffee, steeling themselves for a night of barter, drinking, dancing, eating. Those looking to combine all four took theirs double, black and syrup thick. A quick slurp, then back into the growing press.

'Anyway ...' Duron lit his pipe with a click of his fingers. 'These stories lay the foundations for answering your question.'

Gant frowned. 'What question?'

The wizard shook his head with a smile, found a page, and handed it to Gant.

Gant looked at it for a moment, then read: 'Ink fades. Given enough time, everything shifts and now crumbling scrolls present our world with a difficult choice: can we accept our myths as truth? How many times have we heard the stories of Taleel the Just or Talazar's Falcon? Are they just stories or something more?'

'Everything must take its proper place, its proper time, and history is no different. When I began researching the Wanderer and the empire he helped create, I never imagined that I would be doing so in Vigilstone. Equally unimaginable was that the walls separating present from past would crumble.'

‘Vigilstone’s archive may shake the foundations of the Protectorate Kingdom, and it will do so with traces and memories. Perhaps history repeats. The Bastion Empire’s violent collapse, the Schism, may be happening again, and I wonder if the Protectorates, built from those pieces strong enough to survive that greatest of ruins, can avert similar disaster. If the spreading violence and destruction are merely echoes sounding through the ages, another question must be asked: what part, in our time, does the Wanderer still have to play?’



‘And?’

Gant watched the gentle rise and fall of Tasha’s breasts as she read his stories. She was lying on a pile of their wrinkled clothes and he couldn’t understand why he’d asked her opinion of his work moments after sex. *Stupid!* he thought. *But, what’s done is done.*

They sat alone in the dim light of two induction lamps, clasped by the womb-like darkness of the archive. Her skin glowed gold under their lanterns, dust tumbling slowly like bubbles in ale. The archive smelled of aging, oiled leather. Gant smelled of Tasha. Creaks tip-toed beyond, ancient wood breathing, settling, straining under shelves, books, ink, and the press of slow time. She nodded occasionally and flipped a page.

‘This is what you do down here?’ She put his pages down and regarded Gant frankly. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from her skin. He wanted to be inside her again, to move with her, against her, smooth, to feel his mind release and float. ‘All those hours?’

‘Yes.’

‘We had no idea.’ She sat up and stretched, gathered up their clothes, separated them and threw some to Gant. ‘It is a noble pursuit.’

Regretfully, Gant dressed. ‘It was my first time.’

Smiling, she stepped to Gant and kissed him, pressing through him, pouring into him, filling him up. 'I hope you liked it.'

'Of course.' Gant laughed nervously. 'Didn't you?'

'Pleasure is always a gift.'

Something about Tasha's answer threw him. It was too opaque, too easy to understand *and* misconstrue. It carried overtones implying a difference outside Vigilstone: that sex was something else, had been changed somehow. *What are the rules?* he thought, retrieving his lamp, winding it slowly. Books appeared on infinitely receding scaffolds. Gant replayed their conversation by the lake a week ago. *She could be playing me.* That's what Veleen would say: some angle.

Gant frowned. 'That's no answer.'

'Do you believe that people can change? That there exists, in every heart, the capacity to grow?'

'I don't know.'

'No?' Tasha reached for her sword, inching the blade from its scabbard as the Archivist's lantern flickered in the distance. Gant jumped into his trousers. 'Your take on history suggests such a capability in you and, implicitly, in civilisation's historical movement. That this movement has, so far, catastrophically failed, is no indictment on the impulse, only on the formations the impulse has inspired.'

'You mean the Bastion Empire?'

She nodded. 'That model was a symptom of the same infection plaguing the Protectorates.'

'Alright.'

'It is an important voice, a necessary voice.'

'When will I see you again?'

‘In some ways you are like a Witness, Gant.’ Tasha smiled sadly, leafing through a book left open on the shelves. ‘Trying to see through the history of history.’

‘When?’ Gant didn’t know whether he was asking after Tasha or the possibility of seeing what the Witnesses actually did for Vigilstone. *I’m betraying Veleen*, he thought. *But ...*

Tasha strapped up her sword and smiled. ‘I do not know. Maybe never. Maybe tonight. Whatever our intentions, the world has its own thoughts.’

... maybe that’s the right thing to do.

Rain battered Vigilstone. It fell in sheets that stained the city grey and poured rivers through its gutters. Days went by when all Gant could do was pull his chair to the window and watch the drowning streets, fighting the cold as it wormed through the floorboards. Sometimes figures scurried between shallow overhangs and archways, trying desperately to dodge between drips. The streets were emptied, the stores closed, while the city hunkered down and waited for the sun. Sometimes the constant tattoo sounded like explosions, far off, echoed.

In the mornings Gant wrapped himself in a blanket and sat in the common-room with a book, watching Ms. Menezar while she bustled about, stoking the fire or refilling cups from a bottomless pot of hot chocolate. But after a few hours the words would blur and Gant retreated to his room and its chilly chair. Nodding off, he’d snap awake, thinking he was sitting in the rain. He felt wet, felt the slapping impacts, felt bone-cold and world-weary, and as the rain soaked into the city Gant thought that Vigilstone was seeping into him, that he was a sponge soaking it up.

Sometimes Gant tried to write. Blank pages stared up at him, under his pen, dull, open, and waiting ... but the words wouldn’t come. He had a story in mind, knew all its characters, their world, the plot, but something held him back—an unseen hand gripped his

wrist. Surrounded by water, his imagination had dried up. Gant was conflicted, his head stuffed with static, clogged with the fantasy of Vigilstone and its unique, impossible presence in the Protectorate Kingdom.

He was pinned between two worlds—paralysed. At times, Gant couldn't remember his home, couldn't recall the old roads of Itharnat or the long lines of his father's face. Those things belonged to another Gant in another life. Curling up in his bed, he would shake, unable to sleep, battered by Vigilstone. Rain tap, tap, tapped on the window, eager to come in and soak Gant completely, wash him away and leave nothing but an empty room.

Gant leant into the wind, swimming in the rip, pulled out from land into unfathomable depths. Rain scythed down the street like a guillotine, howling, rushing, streaming over cobbles gloss black and slippery. Taking refuge under a shopfront awning, he stared into the bright eyes of a small girl and boy. They smiled and ran away, flitting around their parents who were busy sweeping water into flood grates. The children had been sandbagging the shop's entrance. As Gant turned to leave, the boy returned to the window and pressed his hand against the glass. Gant covered the tiny hand with his own and the child nodded gravely.

Against the current, he struggled north on aching legs, towards the city-wall. Hours eroded and washed away. Bronze statues watched from corners, their mottled, green arms raised in benediction, peaceful faces streaked with dissolving guano. He paused under the rusted supports of the train-line, the rain muted into dripping fragments of *plip, plip, plip*. Moss furred the pitted uprights, transforming metal into more-than-metal—a living metal. Spider webs glittered with dew. *Plip*. Ferns tangled with thick spinifex, not reclaiming, but re-filling the space, coexisting with the structure so the rail seemed organic by proximity. *Plip, plip*. Lovers had scored their names in the rust, peeling back flaky red to show the bright, shining steel beneath. *Plip*.

Before long, Gant reached the northern wall and stared in disbelief. Enormous trees extended like towers, their massive boles grown into the fortification's masonry, branches cultivated to form a living frame on which concrete and granite had been set. Above the level of the wall, their branches had been stripped and the trunks hollowed for watch-posts. Above this, leaves gleamed red and yellow from an autumnal canopy. Gant forgot the rain, forgot Veleen, forgot everything. Standing, staring, he wondered if Vigilstone was made of anything recognisable, anything normal.

Following a massive root, he discovered a steep stairway and ascended to the battlements. Vertigo reared. Gant closed his eyes and crawled on by touch as the storm blasted in, slapped around him, grabbing at his legs and arms as if he were a doll. He fought for balance, wrenching away from the wind trying to lift him up and over into the storm.

'Steady on!' Gant's eyes snapped open to a smiling beard—a soldier held hard to his arm. 'Up you come.'

Gant collapsed against a trunk and laughed. 'Thanks.'

The soldier hefted a spear and shook his head. 'Don't mention it, lad. What we're here for, right?' He grinned. 'Come on inside.'

Warm air churned inside the trunk, heat bleeding off a small space-heater purring opposite the door. A round table sat in the middle of the room, a chisel on its top; deep carvings, stained black with sweat, chased each other all over its dark grain. Suits of plate armour rested against the bottom step of a narrow staircase spiralling further into the tree. Two racks of swords and shields looked old and seldom used alongside dirty jars of lapping powder and oil on a makeshift shelf. A pot of coffee bubbled on the plate of a tiny induction cooker. The soldier handed Gant a pitted, tin cup steaming with cinnamon. It was thick with cream and sugar.

Gant sipped eagerly. 'Thanks.'

‘Pleasure, lad.’ Ladling out a cup for himself, the soldier breathed it and sighed.

‘Wonderful stuff.’

Gant nodded. ‘I’m not intruding?’

‘Course not! We don’t get visitors up on the wall. But when it rains it pours, they say.’

‘What?’

‘Another.’ The soldier gestured behind him. ‘Out there. Said we might have company, so I stoked my fire and put the kettle on.’

‘Another?’

‘Mmmmm, that chap from the Arcanum. Came in with you, right? What a day. Four of you *invited* in!’

‘Duron’s out there?’

The soldier snapped his fingers. ‘That’s the name!’

‘I’d like to speak with him.’

‘Said you’d say that too. Keep the cup, lad.’ The soldier took a sip, sighed again, and flicked his head towards the opposite door. ‘On you go’—Gant opened the door and was assaulted by the gale—‘and mind the breeze!’

The sky was a lead cowl bruised white and black. What little warmth he’d gained fled when the door slammed shut—the tin cup was a fading ember clutched protectively in Gant’s hands. In the rain, the wall disappeared in grey on grey, and he imagined he was walking on air.

Duron was unmistakeable, propped against a merlon and smoking his pipe inside the shell of an invisible bubble. Smoke streamed within. As Gant neared he felt an intense heat on his face; the sphere of super-heated air was flash-cooking the rain. Steam hissed off in

ribbons. Duron looked over, waved to Gant, and the bubble's ambient temperature lowered. Taking a deep breath, Gant pushed through the slight resistance of its unseen membrane ... and on the other side, his clothes were dry, the coffee reheated.

'You've finally made it.' Duron smiled around the wooden pipe. Keeping the world at bay, the bubble was eerily quiet, muted and separate. 'Don't mind if I smoke, do you?'

'No.' Gant sipped his coffee and watched rain roll over the land in whipping belts. The Bastion Mountains were shadows wrapped in low cloud, craggy foothills extended like fat hands into valleys hidden from sight. *They're out there*, he thought. *Doing what Witnesses do*. 'I've been wanting to talk.'

Duron puffed a few clouds. 'What do you make of Vigilstone, Gant?'

Tasha quivered on Gant's skin. 'It's like ... like a dream or a story. Someone's thought it out, lifted it off, and plonked it down next to the Protectorates.'

'Apt.' Duron nodded. 'We might do well to consider Vigilstone a social experiment. However, the city delves far deeper than alternate economies and labour relations. In a very real way, Vigilstone is, for lack of a better word, conscious. It is mindful of itself and what it wants to achieve.'

'But what? I can't see it.' Gant leant against the wall. 'I'm too close.'

'What does your research suggest?'

'Nothing.'

'Interesting, no?' Duron narrowed his eyes, the bubble contracted, and the foothills enlarged as if Gant were peering through a lens. 'That someone looking into the patterns of history can find no precedent for Vigilstone whatsoever?'

'Only in the legends of the Wanderer.' Gant frowned. 'And in that first edition of the *Book of Light*—but even that doesn't truly compare.'

‘Indeed.’ Duron nodded thoughtfully. ‘If we were discussing biology, our topic might be evolution.’

‘Maybe, but I don’t think cities evolve.’

‘Look at the mountains’—the image enlarged further—‘and look upon time mapped by sedimentary layers. At a basic, aesthetic level, a mountain grows. True, it is propelled by tectonic forces, but the visual is analogous to growth. Can a city grow, then? Yes. Buildings rise, territories expand, infrastructure connects, superstructure governs—it is a process reminiscent of cellular mitosis.’

Gant frowned, trying to count the layers of the mountains on a sheared cliff-face. ‘Are you telling me Vigilstone is alive?’

‘Is history?’ Duron waved a hand and the smoke choking the bubble condensed into a swirling ball, transformed into a small, cloudy marble, and shot out into the rain. ‘A city is not a collection of buildings, but a collection of people.’

‘The Witnesses.’

‘Indeed.’ Duron tapped out his pipe. ‘It is not for nought that any tale regarding Vigilstone invariably centres on the Witnesses. The two are linked. We might say that they have ... grown up together.’

‘Someone told me they see ghosts.’

‘Euphemism.’ Duron shrugged. ‘They are haunted by the things that haunt this world, that haunt the Protectorate Kingdom. As we can study this mountain and map its striations, the Witnesses, if I am correct, have found a way to map strata of another kind, perceiving something that shapes us all.’

‘What?’

‘History.’ Duron stared at the mountains and Gant had never seen his mentor so shaken. ‘They can *see* history.’

The Witness prepared to die. Two days had worn away since the storm had passed, leaving the city musty and cold. Leaves knifed through the sunlight. The square was packed shoulder to shoulder, humming with a hundred hushed conversations. A call had run through the city, climbed into windows, and swung through doors: a Witness was dying ... and Vigilstone had come out to pay its respects.

A simple wooden platform had been erected in the centre of the square. The Witness—the same man Gant had seen unhinged in the market—stood atop, facing the crowd, calm and alone. It seemed like an execution, but the air was off: there was no excitement, no anticipatory catcalls, no anger. *It's more like a wake*, he thought.

'See what they do.' Veleen elbowed him in the ribs. 'The guy can't hack it, so they off him.'

'Veleen!' Gant looked around nervously. She was thinner, almost gaunt, and shadows stained her eyes. 'What're you doing here?'

'This is their perfect society, Gant. A sick, fucking joke.'

'You're wrong'—Veleen snorted— 'about them.'

She sneered. 'You've been blinded by that bitch.'

Gant bit back a response. Silence spread over the crowd and a faint susurrus whispered through the trees.

The Witness cleared his throat and smiled sadly. 'Endings exist,' he said. 'What I have done, I did for you. Life can be ugly. What I have witnessed has been recorded. And so we better ourselves.' Taking a vial from his robes, the man drank and died.

Veleen spat. 'Pointless.'

Gant started as a woman—the same woman the Witness had knocked unconscious—leapt onto the platform. She seemed very small, crying softly into her hands, mourning the

man who'd hurt her ... the last person the Witness had touched. After straightening the man's arms and legs, she placed a white flower on his chest, kissed his head, and smiled sadly. Soft singing drifted through the square. Others followed, repeating the woman's gestures, flowers onto flowers until the man was covered in petals. Veleen shook her head in disgust.

Then, four figures approached the platform. They held themselves proudly, nodding slightly as people stepped aside. They each held a large, glass prism scrolled with silver intaglio. Lenses shone within, catching sunlight, breaking it indigo and violet. *Witnesses!* Gant thought, the hairs on his arm tingling.

The singing swelled and the figures positioned themselves around the platform, winding their strange devices with slow, steady turns. The air stirred. Gant's teeth buzzed. Dust eddied and scratched about the square—hissing whorls crackling with fallen leaves and bits of grit. Light blazed, instantly, blindingly, brighter and brighter, white on white on white, until Gant thought the whole world was a star. Heat built upon heat, as the sun was mirrored, focussed, its fire harnessed, until nothing remained but light itself. The air whined. Ozone burned his nostrils, coated the back of his throat. Gant's ears ached and blood trickled from his nose, peeled away from his face, floated for a moment before streaking towards the platform. Veleen clamped her hands over her face, blood squeezing between her fingers, screaming silently, holding back what the light was trying to take.

Slowly, the light parted, concentrating into four, incandescent beams. Flashing down from the sun like liquid fire, the light speared into the prisms, blinding, boiling, filling the glass boxes until the air warped and the world refracted. And when the prisms couldn't hold anymore, when the caged stars throbbed and shook, the coruscating fire beamed into the platform and flooded the square.

The crowd swayed and chanted, their voices barely audible above the keening wail of strained reality. Tears coursed down Gant's cheeks, streaming off his chin, flying into the

dirge. Timber melted, the flowers flowed, and the dead man dissolved into a pillar of smoke. Music howled, the earth shook and, like giant hands, the light moulded the fabric of materiality; the platform shuddered, destabilised, shimmered, its planks stretching into curling fingers and snaking roots. Pavement cracked and parted while the platform anchored itself into Vigilstone's hard foundations with waving roots. The flowers burst, shredded, and flickered into leaves with flickering veins that were fed by the smoke like fibrous nerves. Brighter and brighter. Louder. Louder. The smoke spread to cover branch, root, Witness, platform, stone and leaf ... coating, embracing, joining, binding.

Abruptly, the music ended. Echoes boomed around a changed world for several minutes. The platform was gone, replaced by the widespread arms of a pale elm whose translucent leaves filtered the sunlight into the softest greens. The Witnesses lowered their boxes, bowed, and retreated into the crowd. The gathered people pressed around the freshly forged tree, touching its roots, kissing its bark, breathing it in like a cool breeze. Slowly, they trickled away, returned to their homes, opened stores, set out chairs and tables to the smell of roasting coffee and camomile tea. Birds descended, trilling happily, and found new perches. Gant and Veleen were the last two, together, alone, staring at the tree, lost in thought.

'Think of the profits.' Veleen grinned. 'They're years, decades, ahead of most rolling out of Ith Tol.'

'You don't understand.'

'Who wants to?' Contempt snarled and she pointed at the tree. 'They hoard these treasures and there's something wrong with *me*?'

Two feet between them and it seemed a gap too far to leap—and it was opening wider. Gant could still see her on the other side, but her words were indistinct, her face fuzzy. Something scraped behind them.

The Sentinel, Mal, grinned and licked his lips. 'Found you.'

Gant's knees jarred, legs pounding into stone, freezing air licking his throat. Veleen disappeared around a corner, Mal close behind, leaving a trail of bodies, tipped chairs, and angry shouts. *Conka-conka-conk* was the train overhead, pacing them down laneways roofed with passionfruit-dripping lattice, clogged thoroughfares, and roads lined by ever-lights and conifers. Veleen was a blur weaving between shoppers and wagons.

Haring onto an open boulevard, Veleen reached into a pocket and threw something to the ground. The blasting cap barked, coughing thick, white smoke and, no more than a wavering shadow, she vanished. Gant paused, hoping, gasping. The smoke cleared and Mal emerged: a wild animal sniffing for scent before stalking down a side-street. Gant neared the spot where she'd stood and found a small gouge in the pavement. Behind him a door banged open and Veleen streaked by, pulling Gant behind her with a grin.

They hurtled through a fruit market, knocking over bulging crates of oranges and bananas. Gant dodged, slipping on juice sluiced thick like blood, jumping over carts and bouncing watermelons. An animal roar pushed them faster and they disappeared down an alley. Gant felt Mal's breath hot on the back of his neck, but he couldn't turn, couldn't slow down. He had to keep going.

'Gant!' Veleen spun to a halt, a miniature crossbow glinting on her wrist. 'Move!'

He tried to jump, but the *thwip* came too quickly and the bolt ripped against his palm, spurting on with a sharp hiss, and caught Mal in the throat. Impossibly, the Sentinel laughed and stumbled on, gurgling, smiling gouts of blackish blood. His shadow stretched, bulging at the arms and legs as if knots of muscles had been slapped on like clay. *What is he?* Gant thought.

'Fuck!' Veleen tugged Gant upright, pushed him forwards. 'Go!'

The alley seemed to contract, kick sideways, and twitch. Gant pumped his legs through sand. *What was that?* he thought. *Just a shadow, but ... there was too much blood and it moved before he did.*

‘Wake up.’ Veleen slapped the back of his head and the thought scattered. ‘We’re almost there.’

Gant looked up to see the train clacking its way around a curve in the track, steam billowing around its head, squealing towards a bank of wrought-iron stairs that zigzagged up to a narrow platform. Several people waited, leaning against a safety barrier. Gant clanged up while Veleen paused at the bottom of the stairs, fiddling with a blocky package on the ground. Grunting, she stood, and jumped the steps two at a time.

The train jerked up, its gleaming pipes belching heat in hazy ripples. Gant and Veleen waited for its doors to wheeze open, clambered aboard, and collapsed onto a bank of green-leather bench seats. Kneeling up, Veleen pressed her face against the window, and searched the platform. Seconds stretched before the conductor rang his bell, the doors rolled shut, and the train stuttered forward. Mal crashed onto the platform and locked eyes with Veleen. He stepped up to the window, howled, then slammed his head against the glass, spreading cracks in clicking lines. She recoiled then flipped him off as the train juddered into speed and left the platform.

She grinned humourlessly. ‘Nice knowing you.’

The explosion pitched Gant onto the carriage’s floor. Veleen resettled him on the seat and brushed glass out of his hair. He looked back, ears ringing, mouth metallic. The platform was gone. Smoke curled into the sky like oily fingers. Sulphur pricked the carriage. Spot fires smouldered on rooftops, in nearby streets, and bodies burned, broken and black amongst the twisted wreck of iron and stone. Sirens wailed.

‘Let me look at it.’ Veleen took his hand and gently prodded the wound left by her crossbow bolt. Humming to herself, she rummaged through her pockets and pulled out a thin vial filled with something that looked like mercury. ‘Just a scratch.’

‘That was a bomb.’ Gant flinched as she sprinkled a few silvery drops from the vial. It hissed like acid, quickly knitting the skin back together into a pale scar. The carriage’s lights hummed and blinked. ‘We’ve got to go back.’

‘There’s no helping them now, Gant.’

‘But ...’

‘I can’t turn the train.’

Gant stared at her in horror. She seemed so calm, completely in control. ‘You killed them.’

‘It’s them or us, Gant.’ She wiped the dried blood from his hand. ‘That Sentinel would’ve executed me, fucking murdered you. I acted ... just like during the storm.’

Gant frowned. ‘The storm?’

‘Those weren’t just thunder claps out there.’ She sniffed. ‘We blew a factory.’

‘We? Blew? What in the Light are you talking about?’

‘There’s something wrong here, something evil. It needs to be destroyed.’

‘You’re a terrorist!’ Vigilstone whizzed by and Gant wondered if Veleen saw what he saw—instantly knew that she didn’t, that she couldn’t. Carried along by the rhythmic *clack* he felt that their lives were travelling in opposite directions, carried away on different carriages.

‘I’m a patriot.’ She paced the cabin, crunching on fragments of glass. Wind slashed in from the shattered windows. ‘If they won’t let us out, I’ll bring the whole fucking mess down on their heads.’

He couldn’t stop shaking. ‘You didn’t just steal something.’

‘Oh, that’s how it started.’ She reeked of ash. ‘There are heaps of us. People like me, fighting for freedom.’

Gant couldn’t bring himself to look at her shadow. ‘People died ... are dying.’

‘Collateral damage.’

‘I don’t know you anymore.’

The train approached the next platform and slowed. Nobody was waiting. Veleen moved down the carriage as the doors opened and Gant stood up as she stepped outside. They stood face to face in the doorway.

‘This is my stop.’

The doors closed, Veleen waved, then the train rattled on. He could still hear the whine of distant sirens. Gant sat, put his head in his hands, and cried.

He was lost, but letting the archives blot out the world gave Gant some comfort. The narrow beam of his induction lamp illuminated the stacks with shadows. Silhouettes and non-space surrounded him, black on black, suggesting paths through the maze of text. The present made no sense and the future was incomprehensible. Veleen had shaken him. He gave the lamp a couple of turns and unveiled unending rows of dusty books. It was cold. It was quiet. The lamp’s handle whirred loudly in his ears, its vibrations boring into his hip around and around, turning in concert with his spinning mind, faster and faster, around and around and ... darkness caved in. The lamp was dead, burned out, and smoking. Everything was outline and absence.

Deeper in, faint light appeared, cool and blue, floating just above the floor like water mirroring starlight. Arms outstretched, Gant shuffled down the gaps between shelves, cutting and turning, disturbing dust, stirring up long dormant currents ... but the light remained just out of reach.

Turning left, turning right, Gant felt he was running in circles. Sweat stung his eyes. He stopped. Salt rose from his body and thirst sucked at his lips as if he'd been trekking in a desert and the light was a mirage. He couldn't see it, not really, just its aura ... its effect. He needed to know why, all the whys—nothing was more important.

‘Sorry, Archivist.’

Gant started flicking books to the floor, but more waited behind, and more behind them. Burrowing in, he pushed tomes behind him like a mole, feeling the weight of them against his shoulders, on his legs, filling in behind. The tunnel shook as history caved in. Just as he thought his arms would give out, he emerged on the other side and fell to the floor. The shelves rumbled balefully. He sat for minutes, waiting for the whole place to come down and bury him alive. Eventually the rumbling subsided and Gant sighed. There was no going back.

Light wafted from a milky, glass tube about the length of Gant's forearm. Picking it up, he saw that the tube was packed with smaller tubes, hollow conduits, and twinning lanes coiled in helical braids. Its blue-white light seemed to stick to his hands like honey. A drop of blood dribbled from a cut on the bridge of his nose, splattered against the tube, seeped in and disappeared. The light dimmed for a moment, blazed spectacularly, and then the tube spoke.

‘It was not long ...’



[a man speaks] ... before the Keeper hummed to our door to sing with me. His robes were silk, bronze and midnight, and his hands smelt of flowers with salt water. It was an old robe and seemed his only one. I remember that and I remember his smile.

Pacing around the room he asked many questions—what I liked, how I spent my days, what I knew—and my answers seemed to please him. The air was hot and dry. Day became night and my eyes were heavy from watching him. Then he closed his eyes and called my parents from the kitchen. They wore nervous smiles.

He started singing. It was not melodious, but ... arresting, beautiful. Nobody from the bazaar could have repeated him. It was *his* song. Like his robe, it was old and like no other. There were no accompanying words or it was all one word that did not end. It filled the room like smoke and I heard a heartbeat low and strong—in my head, in the walls, in the earth. Sand trickled from the ceiling as the stone blocks buckled and rubbed. Music washed over me, into me, speaking to me like an old friend telling me of its life. I tried to say its name but all that came out was the dirge of the old Tribes that carries the dead to peace.

In that moment, I was as I am now; the years opened as if that wall that separates the now and then had become a glass window. Wrinkles sank into my hands, wind blasted away our house, ripped my parents apart, and I sat on the sand, ancient and alone, watching the stars failing in the darkness. I opened my eyes and his lips weren't moving. I had taken up his song—it had jumped from his mouth into mine. That is how they tested for *Tor'tenet Uzum*: the Memory Keepers.

His teeth were pieces of the moon when he smiled. Placing a hand upon my head, he blessed me: 'This child belongs to the dead.'

[questioner 1] Drivel! I asked you a question!

[the man lapses into frantic laughter and the voice of an older man speaks] The truth? Who's to say what others see when they take a look. What do you see from behind that glass wall?

[voices whisper uncomfortably] Yes, I can see you. Why am I in these freezing shackles? I

saved *you* or have you forgotten? Does that mean nothing? I've seen the face of his world, the true face, and have been surprised again and again and ... well, too much truth makes me uncomfortable. I used to think the future was what we turned our feet towards, set our hands to making, but I know better now. We make the past, try to remake it, and turn our backs on the future doing so. Life ends. What're my crimes? Saving lives wasn't my duty, death was my duty, and still you blame me? It was the boy! He didn't know I was ... and they were dead already ... *[the old man screams in agony]*

[questioner 2] Enough, Dumaden, you know his worth to the Tribes.

[the old man continues] Like your shadow, you cannot escape fate ... *[his voice breaks, then reverts to the original]* ... and fate had delivered me to ... *[static]* ... because water bound people together in Nomad's Tear. When I was small, sitting under the olive trees, I watched the bucket chains, saw bodies become a river sweating and swearing in the sun, hand to hand and not one drop spilled. That is the measure of a people: not one drop. The desert forces adaptation. When I grew, I heaved those buckets, taking flat bread and honeyed wine with twilight jokes and honest laughter. I was one of them, alike in every, ordinary way, save one: I could not cry. In this I was alone. *[the man breaks down in tears]* What was it that they saw? Did they see me as a deep well unwilling to give up its water? I felt bone dry...

[questioner 1] Better to kill him now, Jaleem.

[questioner 2] Peace. I've heard your arguments, Dumaden.

[a child speaks] The Keeper's name is Bimen but I am too scared to talk to him because he is hard like a root. The street is different and cold and some people stare at us. Most don't. Bimen seems old but stomps like a soldier. Stomp stomp stomp, pulling me along and I like how they jump out of his way.

The sun drops and we walk and walk past candles in windows, men with lamps, and girls talking by the wells. I can smell beer from the taverns, where teamsters and merchants fight. It's a cool night and I'm cold but don't tell Bimen because he is humming and ghosts come out of his mouth. We are walking through Heroes Square and I bump into Bimen because I'm looking at the cobbles when he stops. He chuckles as he picks me up. His hands are the tips of branches. I'm his shadow.

'I'm sorry, my boy, I should be more mindful now that we are two.' He has an easy smile and his voice is deep and soft. 'What are all my years for, yes?'

I try to apologise and blush—I never met my grandfather but I know he'd be like Bimen. He smiles again and everything is okay.

'Here we are, Gabraal.' Bimen points. 'Our Well of Tears.'

We stand on the edge of a deep bowl cut with big stone steps. They led down to a large stone building shaped like a cross with a pointed roof between two glass domes. A hole opens in the middle and an olive tree grows out, spreading its bent arms over the lowest steps, and we stare into a cloud of green and brown.

'Come, my boy, time doesn't idle for young or old, and the night has purpose yet.' The smile stays on his lips, but it is different now, a sick one, like my father's when he forgets something important. I want to run, but my legs are stuck and there's no going back. He has taken my tongue, my feet, my mind, so I nod and follow him into the strange building.

'In this place you call me Bimen,' he says. 'You have come here without knowledge, without history, without tears, without *music*. You shall leave here with all four. I will gift

you two, one will be found, the last you will earn. That was my path, as it was his who taught me. It is human to forget, and a Keeper's sacrifice to remember.'

He offers me a cup of warm, salty water and I drink. Numbness spreads and the room draws new lines that are from somewhere else that doesn't fit. But I know them, know their names, because I've seen them every day. I'm not me, not I. We ... I can't breathe. Bimen is a pillar of smoke standing in silver water; his reflection dances and screams in pain. Thump ... thump ... thump ... is the earth-beat. From the smoke is a voice of thunder, breaking my bones with words that pop and fizz.

'We are the tears of the desert.' It says. 'From water does all life come, and in death does all water spring. In this you are my brother'—the smoke pours into my mouth, my stomach—'in this we have died together.'

I die [*the man returns*] and was reborn.

Understand. I died a complete death, provoking complete rebirth. In death, I witnessed the blood in my veins as a winding river flowing backwards, taking me past the faces of my ancestors, reaching back to the desert days. They were in me, a part of who I was. We are *made* of such face. Perhaps I was insane. All things are possible in this world and I believe that those faces watched me then, watch me now, let me feel what they had felt: the dead weight of a sword, the smell of a baby's head, the taste of blood.

Back, back, back they went, and I followed, carrying their banners, marching with the Tribes. History bubbled in my veins. Ruptures and connections led to a single, fragile point—my unremarkable life made remarkable with the knowledge that centuries of impossible chances had led to my birth. The mind baulks at revelation. That is why you hate me now, hate the truths I carry, hate what it means for your future. Well ... truths are hard, not because they are painful, but because they are unbelievable, sometimes unconscionable.

I woke and was insane.

It passed.

The bed was hard, the sheets soft. I sat up and nearly vomited from dizziness. The stars were humming.

‘Patience, my boy.’ Bimen was sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed. With effort, I looked around: a low ceiling, unadorned masonry, dark wood, green smells, open windows facing west. ‘You have supped of the tears of the dead and died in turn. Give yourself a moment.’

‘Where am I?’

He smiled. ‘In bed.’

‘What happened to me?’

‘You die.’ He shrugged. ‘You live.’

‘Was that the past?’

Bimen nodded. ‘History, your history, and the history of yours. We can only work with what we are given.’

‘How?’

‘A better question.’ Bimen slapped his palms on the stone floor. ‘Deprive the body to release the mind—that is old wisdom, Gabraal. Some things never wither, others merely dither. There is life in death and death in life.’

‘Will I see it again?’

Momentarily, two Bimens sat in front of me: the Keeper who had taken me and another skinned in fractured bark that fell away in a fine dust when he moved.

He smiled sadly. ‘Once seen is never gone.’

‘Why choose me?’

‘I chose nothing.’

To this day, I have a problem asking the right questions, and Bimen delighted in opacity. Even now, some parts of him are kept from me.

I was uncomfortably aware of being judged. ‘Why am I here?’

‘That is the right question!’

[questioner 1] Why are we enabling these delusions? I thought we wanted to bring the Prophet to light. But this madman spins his life in circles!

[the old man speaks] Had the Prophet been the Wanderer you wonder? Did we see him or was our want to see so desperate that he appeared to us like a spectre from the past? Could it be that he was in another time and I, looking through a crack into another world, was a time traveller? What is history after all but time travel? *[the old man screams as whips crack]* The Wanderer had come out of the south bringing destruction to north. Oreel had found him, had not killed him, and now he returned for her children. Events were disintegrating beyond comprehension and I was a tiny raft cast adrift in a sea of shifting dunes. There could only be blood.

[questioner 2] Who are we speaking to now, Gabraal?

[the old man whimpers and, for a second, two voices murmur. The old man sniffs and the original man comforts him, then takes over] Nomad’s Tear was colour and noise. Sandstone surrounded everything with gold. Mounds of turmeric and saffron clashed with dark, red wine and silverware. Markets bulged with dyed silk, wooden huts, pistachios, cooking fires, funeral pyres, and fresh bread. Incense was the city’s perfume; cardamom and honey its subtle flavours. Sweet tea could be bought on every corner and you could find any street by

nose alone: the alkaline stench off clustered tanneries, to cafes brewing spiced chocolate. Bazaars fumed, industry spewed, houses sweated, and I learned to recognise which street I walked even in the blackest hours.

[static hisses] ... could feel the tension. It was like a bit of grit in the corner of your eye. You could see it in the way people from Ironsand or the Eye would shrink around Porthold or Tarmizeral imperials. It was not fear, but wariness—that sense you get from cornered animals.

I asked my father about this one day when we were kneading *challah* and he told me it was History. This explained nothing. History is history after all, and we are woven from its many threads. He told me that after the long wars, the Nomads had broken in two: the Tribes of Oreel and the Children of Tarmiz. One longed for the warmth of sand, the other wanted to rule the world. Honey stuck to our fingers, cutting the smell of yeast.

I let his words become a rhythm to work the elastic dough while he told me that there were things the Tribes of Oreel remembered, things Tarmiz's children had forgotten; things the Children had learnt, that the Tribes thought unnecessary. He said that the Children had become a people of false idols, worshipping the thrones they built, blessing the swords they made. He said they had left the Light for misshapen lanterns and that the desert warmed only the blood of the Tribes now. This is why we must bleed, yes?

[questioner 1] The Prophet! Tell us about the Prophet!

[the boy speaks] I am twelve and a half ...

[questioner 1] The Prophet, murderer!

[whips crack and the boy screams, then the original man resumes—his voice is thick with pain] A crowd had gathered at the Well, lining the steps, murmuring with excitement—a low hum under the usual noise thrumming off the nearby smithies. Time had stopped and made them statues. I thought they were staring into the sun. Then ... he appeared like a silhouette before silver flames.

Tiny leaves orbited his hands—emerald shards, bright and fine, glowing in the light. I had never seen such leaves before. Sometimes they would spasm, nicking his wrists, drawing blood that spread down his hands and stained a tattered cloak held together by dirt and sweat. You could smell the fear as people pointed to the mask he wore: the eyeless black and white of ancient times. I watched him until the sun died and it could not have been more than a moment. Voices were cast at him like fishing lines.

‘Prophet, my future?’

‘Should I sell my store and move?’

‘You’re a fraud. We don’t want your lies!’

‘What are we to do with the Empire?’

‘What about my family?’

‘Deliver us!’

I climbed up the steps, brushing against shoulders, sensing the fringes of building violence as the mob pressed together. People were weeping and shouting, reaching out to the Prophet as if to touch him, devour him.

‘Listen to the wind! Harken to the sand! They know their places and remember their purpose. You want the future? I keep it not, for I am blind. Offer not the guiding hand, for that is the path that leads to destruction. I am but a witness to the Was of this place, which is to say the Will Be of another time.’

‘You see the past?’ I asked.

‘The past?’ His body jerked. ‘Fools! You are unseeing and unmindful of what it is and *what it covers*. You have wrapped yourself in this thing you call past, hoping the present will not touch you, that the future waits patiently. But death does not move and life does not stop moving. Everything walks towards execution. Forget the past to which you cleave—it wields too many blades.’

‘Wanderer!’

It could have been hundreds that called out. It could have been my voice, standing there, in his long shadow, where my world had vanished. The Prophet trembled and rolled his shoulders. Tension oozed off his robes—a hard accretion of rage and misery and the sour tang of sweat. He was a man split, inconsolable and ... he hated us.

‘The Light,’ he cried, ‘whose voice is the song of the universe, spoke to me and said: “Go into the People of Tears and let my will be known. Death comes and comes again and I demand that blood be paid. Shadows have reached into the hearts of my children and they will be bled out.’

His mask regarded the crowd, reflecting faces on its white half. “‘The sins of the brother shall visit brother, sister to sister, mother to son, father to daughter. The People of Tears must find the path, must break their backs on the wheel, and come into the knowledge of death. Only then will my will be found and all Should Bes exist.’” The Prophet sighed. ‘Such music was gifted to my ears to play unto all endings.’

The gathering murmured.

‘You want the Wanderer?’ he said. ‘Have you not had your fill? This sacred building holds his statue in its heart and you would do better hiding behind it than his worthless memory! Solid rock is better than empty air when swords are drawn.’

My gaze was drawn into the dead blackness on his mask’s other side—a doorway into a wasteland of savage beasts and war. ‘You *have* seen the future then?’

The mask turned to me and his body slumped: a defeated man, stooped and tired. ‘So, you ask your question and the possibilities narrow. Very well, you shall receive the full price of your tuition. As you are a keeper of history, so too will history be written with your bones.’

He nodded. ‘In the waste of Tarmizeral did the Light come into my mouth, so I, his servant, could conduct his mind to the People of Tears. These are his words: “This is my price: the price of grass. Flesh will be burnt and throats scratched. I will strip the skin from reaching hands and cast praying lungs to the hungry beasts that dwell in the thoughts of the scared, the angry, the envious, the greedy. I will sing my song through the land, ripping up the weeds of my enemy. None shall be spared the desert of my wrath.”’

His voice was like a singing Keeper’s—a polyphony of voices speaking in harmony. ‘Once, I beheld the future’s many lines, saw how they moved, intersected and disappeared. That is to say, I saw the past from a present. A pattern ... always a repeating pattern.’

The Prophet reached for his mask, his finger bent into claws. The tiny leaves slashed his arms and the many voices dropped away, leaving only one—strained and hollow. ‘But I’ve always been blind. And ... and it’s all been too ... complex. If this is a dream and I the dreamer, then we have a nightmare. Figments. Revenants. Perhaps you dream, dreaming me. Maybe I’m just the cipher of your time?’

He dropped his arms and his body became rigid. The other voices returned like a swarm of wasps. ‘I have seen a mark burnt into the sand. An empire risen and empire fallen. There is no future other than the past we are doomed to repeat. I have seen and ... the Wanderer is dead. He is a palimpsest of death, written on and re-written with the same bloody reality.’

Then, the man disappeared. No theatrics or illusion, just ... emptiness. Did he truly appear? Was there a man in that silhouette or just a space that we gave a tongue?

[questioner 2] You see, Dumaden, he has what we seek. The evidence is damning and you know what the other inquisitors are uncovering.

[questioner 1] Yes, yes, yes. But our people demand justice. All his prattling has not connected the Prophet to the Wanderer.

[questioner 2] Was he the Wanderer, Gabraal?

[many overlapping voices speak] Have you fools ears? All roads vanished—replaced by a corrosion of all realities. That is the shape of fate—you can see through it, see the world beyond, but never reach through, never touch another possibility without shattering all others. Action changes the vision and I killed my own father!

My body desired connections your human wasteland could not provide. The dunes surrounded me, the sun was hidden, and the stars plucked out; the moon was blasted, broken in two and vomiting ashen slag. Night boomed and dark blood wormed cold up my legs—crawling rivers transforming my body into a growing world. Trees sprouted over my stomach, their winding roots punching through my spine, out my feet, as all the stars burst from my lungs and out my mouth. I fell to the ground, green pooling around me, seeding into the desert. About my face, the stars, a spinning nebula of silver that became the smiling face of Elet ... yet so much more. It was every face that ever looked up from the earth.

I dissolved and saw eternity. Somehow I had reconnected with the circuitry of my people's construct—the Law interfaced and integrated—but it was indistinct and elusive. I could not reach them. I was looking through smoked glass—too much distance separated me from my past, my present, and my future. There was a name, but I had forgotten it long ago.

[questioner 1] What the fuck was that?

[questioner 2] Bring him back, Gabraal!

[questioner 1] That was the fucking Prophet, Jaleem, and you think we can control this monster?

[questioner 2] There must be truth and this poor man has it locked away somewhere.

[questioner 1] Poor man? Best to cut his tongue out, kill him, then burn the body and leave the ashes to the wind.

[questioner 2] Gabraal, can we speak with the Prophet please?

[the boy speaks] I'm covered in dust when I get back to Nomad's Tear. The Imperial Seat was scary and the open road is wild *[the boy mutters about brands and fire and darkness and water]* But I liked the canals, even though there was ash in the water. I was there for the evictions, the tallies, the killings, and they are in me now. It's like I'm in a story where people burn other people, put people on spears, hurt people. Bimen speaks about right and wrong sometimes. It's boring. Everyone should be able to tell the difference.

[questioner 2] So he was there. At the beginning. Strange that his Keeper—this Bimen—allowed him to travel at that time.

[questioner 1] Not if he's making it up, Jaleem. But I'll leave it to you. I can't watch this *thing* anymore.

[footsteps fade]

[questioner 2] Tell me about Bimen.

[the man continues] Autumn was always my favourite season. Cool air blew from the west, lifting coastal mist to breathe relief onto the city. I spent my time in the courtyard sitting beside rustling drifts, reading books in falling leaves. I read whatever Bimen's small library had to offer, I flicked through histories, verse, and treatise, under the gentle sway and creak of the olive's ancient branches. Years unwound in a single afternoon, my nose buried in the musty smell of old print.

It was during my fifth autumn when news reached Nomad's Tear of the Prophet stirring up trouble in the east. Rumours ran marathons from the Imperial Seat, all of them breathlessly troubling. His appearance pushed people in dangerous directions: dissent preceded, riots followed. Reverberations were being felt in the streets; minor scrapes between divided citizens. Splinters irritated the city's fragile skin: taxes increased, travel was regulated. Some felt like prisoners, other like spies, like rats, like nothing, and the rumblings were growing louder. Refugees grumbled about new laws concerning 'sedition' and 'heresy'. Movements were watched, migration encouraged. People were vanishing.

Bimen had me cramming Imperial history: unending lists of names and places and dates and numbers, on and on and on. I felt dusty and cracked under a splitting headache. Searching out Bimen, I found him lost in thought beneath the olive tree. I ran my hands over its wrinkled trunk and listened to its life—how it drank the sun and ate the water of the dead,

how it loved the tickle of birds and mice, how it remembered the departed as faces over faces over faces, each one as dear to it as a leaf. It lived in years that passed like seconds. It slept in winter and sung in spring, and it would sleep soon and ... I lifted my fingers. A second had ticked by, maybe two, and yet my body had already begun to think treeish. Never fool yourself into believing that trees are just trees—they are living things with voices of their own.

I brushed a leaf from my shoulder. 'Bimen?'

He mumbled under his breath and shook his head. He looked tired, small, and dried.

'Bimen.'

He chuckled softly. 'Ah, how are you, my boy? How goes history?'

'That's just it, Bimen.' I tapped the book in my hands. 'It doesn't go. It's already been. I need stories in the autumn, one for every fallen leaf.'

'What do you think you're reading, Gabraal?'

'Facts.'

He smiled and took the book from me. 'This was written by someone, my boy. By someone, for someone. It is interpretation and agenda, selections, omissions, fictions and truths. History is a very important story. Dangerous too.'

'Dangerous?'

'Indeed.' He nodded. 'What is the difference between the Empire's history and the Wanderer's legend?'

I sat beside him on sun-warmed stone. 'History records the past.'

'And?'

'And legend is myth ... heroes, far-off lands. It's made up.'

Bimen nodded for a while. 'You are right, yet wrong. Let me ask you a question, how do we know the events in that history actually occurred?'

‘Because ...’

‘Because this or that history claims it so? You were not there when the Empire was built, you did not see the what, the where, the who. Our history is written not transcribed.’

‘Should I just ignore them then?’

Bimen laughed. ‘By the Wanderer no! Read them, study them, compare and sift them. Ask your questions, Gabraal, and find your answers.’

‘And legends, then?’

‘Where history takes the truth and makes it fictional, fiction takes the impossible and makes it true. There is much to find in fiction if you know where to look.’

[questioner 2] You loved him.

[the man sighs] He was dying and I ... I was afraid. Tiny roots out of his feet and ... the Well was eating him and hungry for me. The room was dark and my shadow tried to catch me with strange hands. Icy touch. We were dying. He deserved more, but a few moments was all I could give him. It was covering him. All I could do to ... a skin not mine, so hot. I was his dream, always was. He’s alive in me, dreaming me still, dreaming me forever.

[questioner 2] Calm down, Gabraal.

[the boy whispers] Bimen teaches me everything he knows and I have a headache from all the words. They rattle in my head and try to spill out when I open my mouth. I’m full with mathematics, geography, grammar, history, politics, astronomy, botany, chemistry, anatomy. Sometimes he has me stare at the stars or sketch willow branches. I play with sap, make poultices, and taste roots and grasses. I boil leaves for resin, for ad-he-sives, for sol-vents,

salves and cor-ro-sives. I am a cup without a brim, filling up. *[chains clink as the man struggles—he shouts and moans in confusion. The boy giggles]*

I never see Bimen now. He reads all day in his study. Sometime we cross paths in the hallway or the library— a smile, a nod, but no words. Months go without a glance and that's good because I love it here, love the leaves, love the trickles, love cool marble tiles shining in the spring. There are no minutes or hours anymore, only chapters and books.

Today Bimen ran into my room and dragged me to see a butterfly. It was leaving its cocoon in rainbow stripes and he lectured all day and night and I ate his words like I was starving. His voice is music and it pools in my ears, each word a drop of water making ripples in me. I reverberate.

Most days I sweep and the courtyard claps my footsteps back to me. The glassy statues of Oreel and the Wanderer stare kindly. Sometimes people come to talk to them about their problems. Sometimes they just cry and touch their feet, leave flowers, leave pastries. I lose myself sweeping and raking and cleaning. Bimen watches me. I wave. He always smiles, but what does he see? Did he sweep too? I imagine Bimen the boy and feel that when he looks at me he sees a bit of himself. Time shows me this.

[questioner 2] So time did unfold for you?

[the man answers slowly] You have to understand what time means to a Keeper.

[questioner 2] Enlighten me.

[the man continues] Loneliness is the province of a Keeper. Performing funeral rites does not procure many dinner invitations, and while we offer families comfort and peace, we do not

seek out these things ourselves. Stacks of books teetered dangerously as my room was crammed with learning; vellum manuscripts and wrinkled parchment became my pillows, my rugs. Ink clogged my nose, words blurred my vision, until my brain, bubbling like a teapot, was a potent brew of wide-ranging inquiry.

It is said that blood is thicker than water, but we Keepers know that it is oil that bound us together. On the days of High Holiday, when the city stopped its usual commerce, people of the Tribes would gather at the Well and wait for their sacrament. Throughout the year, Bimen and I juiced fallen olives in a small press—olives grown from the tree fed by the dead. Passed through the crowd in earthenware jugs, golden oil was tasted in dusk's cooling breeze.

Then Bimen would sing. Simple phrases held in plainsong carried his chant like the blossoming of a flower. Soft and gentle, his voice weaved about the steps—a tap on the shoulder, a whisper, a suggestion. The song grew, slowly, surely, faster and stronger, deeper and higher. It was the storm-front that blasts away fear and doubt, leaving only awe. In song was the Well of Tears transformed into a maelstrom.

[singing overwhelms the recording and the questioner chokes]

Next ... his voice split into two. I could not believe it the first time—those two, distinct voices blasting from a single mouth. High and low they reared, point and counterpoint, folding and falling into seamless harmony. Two voices became three, then three became four, voices adding to the music in an undulating chorus. It boiled and swirled, soaring and crashing like waves—a vast ocean of music, untamed and powerful, flooding from the mind of a stooped, old man. There were words under the surge, washed through it, part of it, tumbling and calling, old and ... alive; words not to be understood, but heard and felt to echo in the forgotten parts of the human heart.

All at once your hearing dropped out, eyes blacked out, and you *felt* the music. There was no air. Vibrations shimmered through the step's hard stone, into your feet, your legs, your chest, your fingertips. Everybody was illuminated.

Visions sparked in flashes, moments parsed from other lives, other worlds dreamt for an instant which stretched forever. Faces, lands ... flash ... holding a baby, tilling a field ... flash ... anger, sadness ... flash ... holding a spear and laughing in the sun.

Flash.

Flash.

Flash.

I cannot explain it, because I do not truly understand it. This music, this sensation, is not a thing to be dissected rationally, but an experiential whole beyond analysis. It was all around, in and of me, fast and vibrant, crashing impossibly through consciousness into pure sensation. Connection, but more intimate. Empathy, but truer and immediate. Art, but unconstrained by artifice or medium. One mind, but greater—encompassing and close. A complete moment, shared unrestrained and free.

The moment passed and the world returned. Ozone charged the air and the steps were silent. Rising slowly to their feet, the people drifted from the Well, dissolving into the night without ceremony or ritual. Sharing ourselves, opening our dreams, hopes and desires, we had become one; they had touched a totality of existence and needed no other comfort. I tapped my foot, testing if the stone was real, if its world would give. Bimen's music had left me unsure of solidity.

Later that night I could not sleep. The moon was bloodshot and the clouds stretched like split stockings. Lying on my bed, I stared at the ceiling and held my breath. Drip, drip, drip: a constant rain in the rainless desert—decomposing bodies in the glass towers rendering flesh and bone to water. Time's cogs had rusted and refused to tick. But faintly, stifled by the

night, I heard the whisper of a breeze like the wheezing gasps an old man on his deathbed. And I knew, that in a city of thousands, only I was left awake, listening to the death rattle.

Days later, when I asked Bimen about the song, he smiled as he always did. Everyone had returned to their homes, leaving us alone on the Well's bottom step. His face was tired, but his eyes were star bright, glittering with the music ... turn it off, please; these words are not for all.

[static hisses] ... is a secret. I tell it not out of charity or misplaced notions of legacy. There is no altruism left in me or in the times I run from. No, I tell so you might feel the weight of my choice. Through us, individuals experience what a Keeper faces in the death-dream—only less personal, less dangerous, more ... inclusive. We did it to ensure that the desert survived, that the dead were remembered. You see it? Life and death together— a single moment using the imagination as a fulcrum balancing the two. We cannot escape death, inquisitor, nor should we seek to try.

[questioner 2] My colleagues want you dead, Gabraal. You are ... problematic. That secret is dangerous ... such control is terrifying.

[the man speaks] You believe?

[questioner 2] Irrelevant. Events correlate. Believing the *Book of Light*, even a fraction of it, means your song comes from the Wanderer.

[the old man returns] Passing me was a glorious Imperial Legion, gone to rust, with their tattered banners low and covered in grime. Sinking knee-deep into mud, shoulders bruised from pelting rain, I heard them sobbing, their footsteps like choking gulps. They were pack mules dying under weapons and armour. Gone was the Tree and Mountain, all its shining words forgotten, broken, forgotten. I tried to call out, a dirty spectre in a ditch on the side of a shattered road, but my clacking teeth refused to open. They were not soldiers, but children, traumatised, cradling dented helmets and broken bones. I felt wretched, they looked rabid.

[questioner 2] When did you see this, Bimen? At the onset of the Purges? The Schism? How is it that he can see through your eyes, Gabraal? Gabraal?

[the original man resumes] When I returned, Nomad's Tear had changed. Familiar streets were alien and strange: a maze of wrong turns and empty stores. Black clouds drifted over the sun like a flock of birds, filtering its face orange and sickly. Spot fires spewed smoke in thick ropes. Hollow faces regarded me blankly. Passing the coffeehouses and roadside vendors, I noticed food left uneaten, drinks spilled, and stores unattended, vacant, deserted.

My eyes stung. The Well was crowned in flames, its towers broken, and the olive tree burned. Toppled statues were shattered corpses. Tiles were fractured and leaves crackled in the strangling air. Smoke pried at my mouth. Coughing and blind, I stumbled into the courtyard as a concussive crack thundered through the stone. The earth shifted. Blinking furiously, I saw the olive tree's branches bright with cinders and its trunk charred black. Bark dropped in thick, smouldering scabs, leaving puffing scars and glassy sap that oozed like puss. Lava pooled around me, under me; my hands were blistered, fire ate my lungs, and white smoke clawed out of my nose and mouth. Olives popped while their unseen dreams exploded. Salt and flesh. Ruddy coals were piled atop the tree's roots and the handle of a

glowing poker stuck out like a sword plunged into a bloated corpse. My skin was wet paper peeling away from the coals.

‘That’s him!’ The voice was behind me. ‘That’s the *one* I was telling you about. The quisling.’

Sweaty hands wrenched me to my feet. Several soldiers stood in the passageway to the library and the olive press—Bimen hung limp between two as the others watched. A finger pointed at me from a freshly sleeveless arm; the traitor had narrow shoulders, a thin neck, and large, smirking lips. It was Alno.

One of the soldiers stepped forward, his uniform pristine, impossibly woven to defend against heat and grime. I had seen this captain before I left for the capital—a man of duty.

‘Is this true, lad?’ He looked troubled. The wreckage of Bimen stared at me, his eyes screaming run! But I could not move, the captain’s stare froze me. His fingers drummed against the hilt of his sword. *Tap, tap, tap. Tap.* ‘Is the man your master?’

The captain’s eyes were kind and that made him horrifying. He was a man of compassion who had chosen terror, torture, and hatred. Every inch of him wanted me to shake my head, to deny my place, deny myself, as if being me was shameful. Pop pop pop went the olives. I nodded defiantly and a great sob burst from Bimen.

‘Told you, captain, told you!’ Alno laughed. ‘Got you another one.’

My vision ... changed. Trails of blood circled Alno like fish and, from his back and arms, marionette’s wires stretched towards the captain. But the wires did not end there. Where they attached to Alno, the wires pierced the captain, punched through his body, and disappeared into ... a void. Black shapes swarmed within black space. There was a presence, a spidery predation, patient, unfeeling, and Alno and the captain were two masks it had chosen to wear.

‘Mind your mark and keep your tongue.’ The captain’s face was immobile, but his eyes reflected the burning tree. ‘I would kill you, but such selfishness is not my duty. Further, it would be a mercy not stipulated in my mandate. Leave and hide knowing you will be counted at the end.’

Alno paled. ‘But, your lordship, I ...’

The captain whipped around, but Alno was already running. We watched him go for a few seconds, then the captain sighed and motioned for one of the soldiers to attend me.

You will be counted at the end.

‘I am sorry, lad, truly, but you admit this man as your master? The captain was giving me another, hateful way out. Bile scolded the back of my throat, thrashing in my stomach. I nodded again.

He shrugged. ‘Very well.’

‘Please!’ Bimen cried, and a clear liquid seeped from his forehead. They had torn away the left sleeve from his robe and his arm was swollen and weeping.

One of the soldiers cleared his throat nervously. ‘Captain, he’s but a young’n.’

Got another one for you.

The captain pulled the poker from the glowing coals; the heat had turned it blue in places, the tip phosphorescent white. Heat kissed my face.

He smiled apologetically. ‘Orders, lad, you understand.’

I didn’t feel it, not at first, but watched it sear my flesh, watched the skin retract and blister, hiss and blacken. I watched its mark burrow into my arm, becoming an irremovable, irreparable part of me. I watched ... then pain like a scythe through the top of my head, slicing down my spine, my legs, my body arching backwards, bones cracking like dead twigs. I screamed.

Bimen coughed. ‘... a boy ... innocent boy ... no ...’

The captain threw the brand away as if it were burning him, as if he had a right to feel disgust; the soldiers looked sick and I hated them too. I was shivering with cold, thirsty, fevered. Shallow breaths rasped against my throat. I didn't hear the soldiers leave, and when I looked up, the captain was transfixed by pity and horror, bent down to help me up. His arms were covered in coarse black hair and horns twisted from his cheeks and head; bright embers burned yellow in his eyes and his breath was sulphur. I wanted to howl, but bit my tongue. Maybe ... before ... once, he had been a good man. However, the good things he clung to with honour and duty and loyalty had made him the slave of something abhorrent. The future snapped my mind and I blacked out.

When I came to Bimen was cradling my burning arm like a newborn baby. I took his other hand in mine and squeezed it weakly, but that only made him cry. He hugged me, rocking us back and forth while smoky ghosts drifted through the courtyard. Olives pop pop popped and screams whispered from the towers—the interred dead were being consumed like kindling. I saw the brand: a tree before a mountain, bordered with a single ring—the Bastion Empire's imperial crest. A mark in the sand.

'...but a boy ... but a boy ...' whispered Bimen. I was too tired to cry or speak and had nothing left to give him, nothing of comfort or kindness, but as his tears trickled down my cheeks I knew he wept for all of us.

[questioner 2] Go on.

I want you to know that the boy—the child I was—died then.

[questioner 2] Noted. We come now to your crimes.

Yes.

[questioner 2] Omit nothing. We know you have not been entirely ... forthright to this point.

There have been evasions, but ... we must know about the song.

As you say.

[questioner 2] Continue.

Patrols clamped the city in stalking packs that squeezed life out of the streets. Windows became scabs of broken wood and nails, shutting families into sandy mausoleums. Homes were communities unto themselves, shut off and withdrawn; avenues were redrawn into boundary lines beyond which the world turned aggressive, animal. Survival, no longer abstract, was the word to live by, and Nomad's Tear reeked with confused desperation. People were living on a new frontier.

What little food survived the flames I fed to Bimen. Fever brought frenzied whispers and his pulse was hurried, faint, irregular. Bruised eyelids roved feverishly, chasing things only he could see, and his arm swelled black and puffy around the brand. I tried to clean it. He screamed and blacked out. Dreams plagued us both.

On the fourth morning I left Bimen dozing fitfully and crept into the courtyard. The sky was soft steel brushed with smoky lines. Currents of soot slipped across the tiles, welling from every crack and corner as if drawn up from an underground spring. I looked for my broom, but could not find it. The tree was cold, black and white, scarred, broken and brittle. But something called to me—a fragment of a melody, a tiny voice. Buried in a nest of

skeletal branches was an olive. Dissolving at my touch, its desiccated flesh left behind a withered pit.

Life pivots on chance—an encounter, a child skinning her knees, a moment missed, a chance taken. Like my father's honey bread, the pit was sweet and soft, but when it cracked in my mouth a million voices burst free, pouring spectres over my mind. One simple word blazed and sparked and took over the tumult until ... one word, one name.

He was in the desert, singing the sand to life, dreaming the world, taking up its threads and weaving it anew. We were the sand and he was the wind leaving tracks that would not fade. His lips moved and all the tribes obeyed. He held the future, the past, compelling the present to take shape. He was a force of nature, unmerciful, more powerful than the wave, the storm.

He was the seed and the calm water, standing on the shore, singing desire into mighty roots that reached across the land. He was the dam that had broken itself, powerless to stop the flood. Shadows bored into his eyes, spilled from his heart, and on his shoulder perched the Lord of Birds. He was three trees bound by a thousand years, two towers forged in different worlds, and a simple question spawning answers infinite.

A word, a name, a nomad, an exile, a shaper of cities—he touched every life but walked alone. A simple song beneath all things come and gone and yet to be. Shouted by the chorus of dead whose voices had been layered into a tiny olive pit, heard by a broken boy in his broken home, whose teacher was slowly, surely dying.

One word.

One name.

Wanderer.

[questioner 2] Hallucinations caused by fatigue, pain, and malnourishment.

If you say so.

[questioner 2] Logic demands ... all 'arcane' powers have rational explanations. You cannot suggest that a Keeper, possessing an education far beyond that of *any* citizen in the Empire, believed that ...

[the man sighs] I make no demands on logic, inquisitor, and education only gets you so far. There are mysteries that require a leap of faith.

[questioner 2] Religious?

I have faith in myself.

[questioner 2] Ridiculous! Your faith, so called, made you monstrous. What you did ... how you did it ... cuts against everything a Keeper should be.

[the old man laughs] The Wanderer knew it—knew well enough to forget. Drove him mad, made him blind ... blinder. Some small part of him remained the Wanderer, true, but the Prophet was his protection, holding him back from driving that green sword through his chest. The Prophet was the madness on the surface of his brain, protecting and infecting. Like a mask, the longer you wear it the harder it is to take off. Truth is a poison the mind metabolises very quickly—too much, too soon, can kill. You should never search for your future because you'll probably find it. We tell ourselves not to look back because we are the

forward-facing people, eyes front, staring down a one-way road. But he had *been* there and ... and I could look because I was a Keeper and Keepers belong to the dead.

[questioner 2] I would have the rest from Gabraal.

[the original man continues] I was laughing. The soldier was not, wavering slightly, eyes glazed by wine. Something about my stillness seemed to confuse him and I imagined him thinking—why is this boy, this branded boy, outside their Encampment? Why isn't he running? Why isn't he pleading and crying? Kill him.

Before he could heft his spear, the song tore from my lips, impaling the man's chest and head with tongues of rippling sound. Heat warped the air and vibrations ruptured the membrane holding matter together. Stones dissolved into dust, leaving rising patterns that looked like oil stirred through water. Blood streamed from his mouth as my rhapsodic words lifted him into the air, hammered through his hands, his legs, held aloft his struggling body, and choked his final scream. After, I sat for a time, breathing sunlight, then returned to Bimen and discovered him lucid for the first time in days.

'I heard noises.' His voice was slurred. 'I thought ... no ... a song. Recognised it ... tried ... sing along.'

'The song was mine.'

'Our song? Good that you have learned it, my boy. Afraid ... be forgotten.'

He was mistaken. It was not that song the Keepers learn, that music of the dead used to weave the dreams of the gathering for the vision ceremony. No, it was ... darker, less profound, more practical, primal: a fundamental score to life and death, an awesome music that knew the workings of the world.

[questioner 2] Explain...

Silence!

[explosions blast around the word as it repeats with thunderous echoes]

[the man continues] ‘Not forgotten, Bimen.’

‘You always ... quick learner. Proud of you, Gabraal.’ Bimen coughed. His hand was small and cold in mine. ‘Why?’

‘They were scared of us ... about what we could do. Even the memory of a song is dangerous. The Tower perceived a threat, a thing of earth that the Wanderer *kept from them*, but we retained through Oreel.’

‘Save.’ Bimen gurgled. ‘Survive.’

Bimen died as he lived: thinking of his people and tending to their dead. I carried his frail body to the olive tree, placed him beneath its scarred branches, making sure his face was in the sun.

[the man mutters and his voice splits into different registers, recreating a conversation in a busy room. He mimics every sound—clinking glass, laughter, opening doors, cooking—and several distinct voices rise above]

‘I hear tell ’tis worse in the Satrapy. All kinds o’ nonsense! Certain, the Potentiate Colonies are causing troubles for all and the like, and I’ve never been one for the Outlance myself, stiff-necked bastards the lot of ’em! Never been one for the Empire neither, but these are dark tidings.’

‘What tidings, Davan? Too deep in your cups I reckon.’

‘Well may you laugh, Alno, but tales rest atop tales. Borders been shuttin’, no ins or outs but Legion steel. Bandits plaguing goodly folks, people disappearin’ in middle night, and the Tribes all packin’ for the sands.’

‘Deserters, the lot of them!’

‘Prisoners, I says. Monies taken, beaten in the street, bloody murder! That’s what *I* hear. Believe you me, nothing good will come.’

‘You’ve got more grog in you than blood, Davan. Always have, always will.’

‘As you say, Alno, but sad days are comin’, for truth. You’ve been down with the camels, chatting to caravans. Taking sleeves! I’m not saying that it’ll come to the desert, but ...’

[questioner 2] Enough, Gabraal! Bad enough those brothers are dead without you playing parrot with their memories.

[the man resumes] They are all part of me now, inquisitor.

[questioner 2] Nothing matters but the Wanderer and what he did to us.

We are not innocent.

[questioner 2] We salvage what we can, Gabraal. You knew that and acted.

History acted, not me. There was no choice, only cause and effect. Consequence. You must understand that I am not a man, but a symbol, and I am not without intent.

[questioner 2] Yes?

I was made of voices, lost in them, becoming an 'us' that howled. Bimen cried pitifully between my ears. Nothing I said, or did, or thought, consoled him, and the others, watching, seething, waiting, were angry vibrations in my teeth. Fires burned from piles of broken furniture, torn clothes, rotting fruit, and bones. Smoke masked the sky, blinding the sun, staining the city in a red, unending twilight. Pockets of silence. Sudden noises, far away. Nothing. Picked apart buildings sagged under the weight of falling ash, their haggard faces bruised and broken, teeth punched out. I poked through those ruptured houses, finding nothing of a home in any of them ... such comforts had been *dragged* out to the curb and stomped on. But I will not bore you with what those houses told me.

[questioner 2] You *spoke* to the buildings?

Everything speaks and buildings more than most. Life *seeps* in and makes them more than timber and stone. All you have to do is listen.

[questioner 2] I am.

Armed men lounged in shade, dicing and drinking in front of hundreds of faces pressed against windows, squeezed through wire fences, mashed like egg shells into the dirt. Hastily erected buildings groaned under the strain of rooms stuffed with Tribes-people. Blood and shit dripped from cracks. In alleyways, men and women were raped and beaten, onlookers whistling marching tunes through a fug of red wine and pipe-weed. Hot air blasted my face as

I watched the soldiers—men and women meant to protect—sit on stolen chairs, around *liberated* tables, while my city, my home, was pillaged piece by piece.

The Prophet's words ate into my heart, acidic on my nerves, forcing my body to act, to remember things it had never known. The voices in my head took over the song, teaching me how to mould it into vicious shapes and cutting chords, which sounds I needed to rupture, crush, and scour.

Soldiers dissolved in clouds of vaporised muscle and bone, puffs of red sucked through the streets by a wailing vortex. Thousands of voices spat off my tongue, singing without melody or rhythm, slicing through steel, powdering granite. Explosions fed off the memory of detonating olives, boiling wood and stone and flesh with disintegrating clouds. Skin became liquid and blood became glass. It was ... [*static hisses*] ... shaving bones to slivers that I called up, ground to dust. I cavorted through my sonic storm like a child dancing under summer rains. I breathed it in, tasting them, their fear, their dreams, and it ... made me. Maybe they make me still, making me your monster.

From their life I rendered new sand to build a shining desert. Dunes unrolled about me, flowing through my fingers. I knew peace. The sand moved in and out, around me, of me, as if I were a sieve, breathing in and out, forming whirling basins around my footprints. Bimen stirred, but held his silence.

[*questioner 2*] You murdered them then?

Killing was a function. You must tear down before you can raise up, no? The soldiers ...

[*questioner 2*] Irrelevant! I refer to the buildings, the ghetto, *your* brothers and sisters.

I do not ask for understanding, inquisitor, only that you take these words and make sure they live on after me.

[questioner 2] You ask a great deal. And regardless of wishes, many believe this recording will do more harm than good.

No. We will need that song before the end, but not now, not yet. The Prophet had seen that, I think, though the Wanderer had chosen to forget. It was his song of course, and he had faced the same frightening temptation. That power is ... ah, but one voice cannot call forth the new world. One voice can wreak devastation, but it has trouble taking up empires, *changing* them—bettering them. You need many; many upon many. The greater part of the song will die in him but its memory lives on in the survivors ... and they will never forget what I have done. Reality can be changed in an instant, where nothing is what it claims to be.

[questioner 2] Gabraal ...

Those left alive, hiding in attics and basements, I gathered for exodus. I gazed over faces filled with pain and hope, revulsion and awe. Not one of them cried: water had to be preserved again. The dead had revealed the path the Wanderer had taken and we would have to cross the desert. Many asked why we went alone, why I did not become the ‘sandstorm’ and save ‘us all’. I could have done this, but ruin and oblivion waited there. No. We would return to our roots, guided by the dead, surviving for the living.

Sometimes I wonder if it is easier to die, scarred by time and memories. My voices argued that death and life are one and the same. It is not. Those around me shuddered. Life breaks your heart and burns your lungs. Death is ... release. We need both I think. It was

midnight, Nomad's Tear was far behind, and the sky was full of silver jewels. Rain coursed down my cheeks. The Prophet's words welled to the surface. Tears in no eyes but one ...

[*questioner 2*] That is it? Your story?

There is one thing more. A tiny thing, cherished ... a seed before planting. Swaying olive branches wave pale shadows over the pages. A warm morning breeze takes fallen leaves in lazy spins and I stop to watch them dance. Rising high, they twist around gnarled branches, whisper over wrinkled bark. The light is clear. The air is cinnamon and salt. Bimen has not yet stirred, my chores can wait. I walk through the leaves and their long crunches fill the silence.



Night dyed the plains purple. Tasha snored quietly, arms outstretched, her blanket creased and tangled, while Gant sat against the tree, watching the stars. Vigilstone slept, little more than a yellow haze hours behind. Clouds wandered invisible across the sky—slow moving holes drifting east. Gant was too excited for sleep, and the glowing recording-tube seemed to throb inside his jacket. He'd asked Tasha about it, but she knew nothing, said it was his now. He wondered about the recording, what that man—Gabraal—had gone through, all those voices, the song, the Wanderer ... the guilt. It was disturbing yet uplifting; for all its despair, the recording was *real*, first hand and untouched. For all the time he'd spent in the archives, nose to word, ink on paper, Gant had felt he was scrabbling up the side of a mountain, straining for a foothold, pebbles clattering around his ears, reaching for a stable ledge: the tube was solid ground. Tasha tossed and snuffled.

‘Three days.’ Gant reached out and took her hand. ‘Until I see what the Witnesses see.’

Huon pine carpeted the Bastion Mountain’s western reaches in green, yellow, and brown, spreading to the base of vast, toothy peaks. Silver clouds skidded east.

‘Why’d you sleep with me?’ Gant picked his way through shattered branches. Cold air wriggled into their clothes for warmth, a silent soak against muddy grass squelch.

Tasha grabbed his elbow, turned him around, and smiled. ‘Why do you think?’

‘Veleen might call it manipulation.’

‘Veleen sees the world differently.’ She picked up a wind-stripped branch and snapped it in half. ‘Her training, her experience, they tell her that people are to be used.’

Gant covered her hand with his and they continued arm in arm, their reflections wavering puddle to puddle. ‘I’m afraid.’

‘Because she’s working with the dissidents?’

‘You knew?’

She shouldered him playfully. ‘We are peaceful, not stupid.’

‘I was there, Tasha. I saw it, saw her. That explosion ...’

‘I know.’ She squeezed his wrist. Little birds hopped about the vegetation, chirping merrily while scratching for grubs. ‘We did not act in deference to you.’

Gant nodded. ‘But now you’ve got no choice.’

‘As you say.’ Her hair whipped against Gant’s shoulder. Vanilla wafted. ‘She has taken her side.’

‘I’m sorry ...’

‘Gant.’ Her lips were salty against his. Tasha smiled. ‘Your pain is my pain. That is Vigilstone.’

Time had carved the land into jagged edges, cutting planes, broken granite and shale in a grey mosaic of shattered plates that ripped the wind to low whistles. Vitrified puddles glistened like weeping sores from repeated lightning strikes. Nothing grew. Desolate and barren, the north appeared as if some ancient meteor had impacted and turned the land to bare, blasted rock. Nothing remained, not even a memory of life. They'd been climbing for a day, the world receding below. It was cold. Tasha struggled ahead. Gant's fingernails were chipped, his hands numb and bleeding. Rocks shifted, dribbling pebbles in dusty trickles. Columns of smoke rose behind a steep rise, wafting the smell of charred meat and root vegetables.

He gritted his teeth. 'How far?'

Tasha stumbled, showering Gant with freezing grit. 'Just over this rise.'

The camp was sparse—nothing more than a loose huddle of tents at the bottom of a narrow defile. Cook-fires glowed, lighting groups of three or four: heads close, hands outstretched. Firewood was stacked in neat rows of uniform logs around tents whose canvas walls were roofed in a clear material open to the sky. Larger logs had been cut down and used for stools and makeshift tables. It seemed a lonely, forgotten place.

Tasha exhaled sharply. 'Come on, Gant.'

By the time they'd descended many of the Witnesses were aware of Tasha and Gant and were watching the pair with various degrees of curiosity or irritation. Gant studied them, tracing the dark lines of their hard-set faces, trying not to stare into the disquieting gaze of their impossibly dilated eyes.

Two black-clad Witnesses approached: one, a gangly boy all of fifteen, the other, a craggy veteran who could've passed for the boy's father. Simply dressed, they were oddly attuned to their surroundings. *Solid*, Gant thought. *They're very ... here, present.* The man strode forward, gaze flicking to Gant. His eyes were almost entirely black.

He nodded to Tasha. 'Sentinel?'

'Our apologies for this intrusion,' she said, 'but the city requests that the Veil be shown to my companion.'

Murmurs rose from those watching on. The boy regarded Gant frankly. 'A first!' He clapped his hands, grinning wide, and the man's face softened. 'Not often. Right, Gunril?'

'True enough.' The man shrugged. 'And who are we to refuse Vigilstone? Come along then, no time like the now.'

'No time, no time.' The boy sang. 'No time but noooooowwww.' The other Witnesses chuckled and dispersed to their fires, the boy's mood some obscure token of acceptance.

Walking through the camp, Gant noticed that many of the Witnesses seemed to be his own age. The boy jounced along beside them and Gunril made cursory introductions; the older Witnesses nodded, the younger ones ignored them. Steaming strips of meat were handed around and scoffed.

Gunril halted in the centre of the tents. 'He'll need a guide.'

Nobody stepped forward.

Gant frowned. 'What about Tasha?'

Tasha shook her head. 'I stay here, Gant.'

'Alright.' Gant shifted uneasily, waiting for someone to answer Gunril, but they kept eating, kept ignoring.

The boy raised his hand with an easy grin. 'I'll take him.'

'What did Natasha mean?' The boy, Caleb, walked at Gant's side, stepping lightly from rock to rock with practised ease.

Gant kept his eyes down. 'How old are you?'

Caleb tilted his head to the side, spun on a boulder, and hopped down with a sharp clatter. ‘How old are *you*?’

‘Twenty-one.’ Gant looked up at the clear sky and sighed. The sun was high, but the light was failing as if it was being siphoned. Shadows lengthened north. *Something’s dragging it*, he thought. *Like gravity.*

‘Sixteen.’

‘Aren’t you a bit young for’—Gant waved his arms vaguely—‘for this?’

‘How old do I need to be?’ Caleb kicked a rock and sent it hurtling forward with soundless ricochets. Echoes boomed. ‘Old enough to fight is old enough to see.’

‘But ...’

‘Nope. That’s how life works, Gant.’ It was as if the boy had suddenly grown up. Caleb smiled. ‘What did she mean?’

The earth shuddered. Gant felt it rumble up his legs, in the air, his head. Pebbles hovered and turned to dust. The wind was a knife, the sun a tarnished coin. *What does it do to them?* Gant thought. *They’re alone out here. Hard and cold. What’s so important?* The questions made Gant’s tongue heavy. He knew Tasha wasn’t telling him everything, that she was keeping things back about Vigilstone, about Veleen, about himself.

‘I don’t know,’ said Gant.

‘What? No guesses?’

Gant sighed. ‘My research.’

‘What research?’

‘Why all the questions?’

‘You’re new and shiny.’

‘New and shiny.’ Gant glanced at the sun again—noon, but the day had shrivelled into twilight. Gloom crept behind, a sea of light ahead, and he was caught in between, searching

blindly for the way ahead. Glare bounced off metal-rich deposits and stone changed to glass, revealing radiant veins of bronze and silver sizzling with barely contained energy. Throbbing, beating, breathing in a place where life couldn't take hold, the earth was suddenly alive with light.

Gant blinked. 'I'm writing a revised history of the Protectorate Kingdom and the Bastion Empire before it.'

'Mm-hm.' Nodding as if it all made sense, Caleb rubbed his eyes. Gant could've sworn he'd seen something black trickle down the boy's cheek. 'Figures, then.'

'What?' Gant stared deeper and deeper, his gaze penetrating unyielding layers of dirt and rock like they were tissue paper. Down and down and down and down, until he perceived the light like a voice that spoke creation.

'You're one of us ... pretty much.' Caleb smiled. 'You're just coming to it from the other end.'

Granite closed over and the light faded, stifling the voice until it was nothing more than a windy rattle. Unbidden, all the images Gant had gleaned from maddened Witness reared. His eyes itched with them.

Gant shuddered. 'Other end?'

'Prying it back to see the glimmer.'

'And you?' Gant turned around—day had become night. Caleb was a blur in the darkness. 'What is it the Witnesses do?'

The boy beckoned. 'See for yourself.'

The battle raged. Men broke upon the fortress's walls, crushed, skewered, howling, transforming the valley into a pit of smoke and gore. Soldiers lined battlements, throwing rocks, pouring oil, fighting like animals, biting and tearing, stomping bones, while axes rose

and fell. Corpses were piled high, used as ramps for men scrabbling on hands and knees to reach the melee's jaws.

The rough steppes of the Bastion Mountains rose above the fighting—their craggy peaks capped in flickering storm clouds. Below, great, granite roots and scrubby slopes were visible behind the towering fortress like a clawed hand seen through gauze. Time held no power over those ranges—ancient and eternal. They remained solid while ages faded, generations coming, going; they'd seen the years of the world and knew the seasons like old friends. This battle, those armies, their lives, and their fortress were nothing but mist, evaporating.

The keep was burning and its tattered falcon-banners fluttered in gutters of rising ash. *Impossible*, Gant thought. Caleb sat beside him on their ledge, his gaze fixed on the struggle for the plains. No order prevailed, no lines or formation—nothing but a blind, hacking riot where uniforms were meaningless under layers of mud and gore, friend and foe mixing in a furious sea of swords and shields. The ground thundered with cavalry and heavy plate that churned the earth with muddy, crimson lakes. Pale faces floated in puddles, eyes staring at the sky—unblinking, unseeing while crows feasted.

'Nasty one today, Gant.' Caleb clucked his tongue and rubbed his eyes. Gant was certain they were darker, blacker, the pupils wider. Reaching into his coat, the boy drew some wire and a little glass bottle. Pulling at the wire, Caleb shaped it into a rectangle then set it down, unstopped the bottle, and poured its contents onto the wire frame.

Caleb held up the bubble-lens and the battlefield resolved into grisly detail. 'Look for yourself.'

Two soldiers, back to back, stabbing, turning, slashing, howling, fought doggedly against five. Blood slicked their arms and masked their faces. Briefly, the fighting lulled, and seven stood, still amongst the writhing frenzy, breathing ragged clouds, grass blurring around

them. Gant had heard of such moments: the regulars at the bar spoke about them on cold nights, when whiskey smoothed the fraying edges of their memory—moments of absolute clarity. Five watched two and waited, smiling wickedly. Then, one of the defenders ran his sword through his comrade's chest. Gant cried out, the bubble popped, and soapy water stung his eyes.

‘Always worse the first time.’ Caleb patted his shoulder and Gant heard two wet *crrchks*. ‘It gets to you.’

‘It’s ju ...’ Gant opened his eyes and the sentence faltered. Caleb sat, staring out with empty sockets—two, ink-black orbs glistening in his hands. With a sigh, the boy dropped the eyes into a pocket with a glassy *clink*, pulled out two, stark white spheres, and pushed them into his head.

‘Glad I packed spares.’

‘What are you?’

Caleb turned to Gant and regarded him with his new, shining eyes. ‘We learnt a long time ago that telling wasn’t enough. People weren’t getting the message. They had to see, if only partially, for themselves.’

‘But your eyes.’

Caleb turned to the battlefield. ‘What’s a witness, Gant?’

‘Someone ... that sees something.’

‘Nope. That’s an observer, maybe a bystander.’ Several large engagements spilled into each other. Arrows darkened the sky like a swarm of wasps. ‘A witness is *active*. A witness testifies.’

‘But your *eyes*.’

‘Truth has a price.’ Caleb shrugged. ‘And it needs to be known, yeah? Our glass eyes record what we see so that others can too.’

Gant tried to process the information, but his brain stalled: the figures below wavered slightly. ‘What are they?’

‘Ghosts.’ Caleb’s eyes stared down and tiny, black dots materialised on the eyes’ cloudy surface. *Ink*, Gant thought. *It’s like they’re being filled with ink.* ‘Memories.’

‘Duron thinks that Witnesses see through time,’ said Gant.

‘Nothing so fantastic.’ Caleb hugged his knees. A light rain began to fall and Gant turned his collar up. ‘Ages ago a battle was fought here, so brutal, so bloody, so overflowing with hatred and fear and death that it *marked* the earth.’

Visible, tangible history, Gant thought. ‘It’s like a book.’

‘More like a library.’ Caleb opened his mouth to catch the rain and Gant was struck by the strange duality in the boy. He wondered if all the Witnesses did was *see*, and if their seeing was like writing—their eyes like pen and book together. *What happens*, he thought, *when they run out of pages?* An elm tree twisted in his mind’s eye. Caleb dropped his head and flapped his lips. ‘All the betrayal and slow agony, all the destruction and futility, weakened that membrane we call time.’

‘It’s ... happening?’ Gant watched the battle and frowned. ‘Now?’

Caleb nodded at the mash of past in present. ‘Happening then, happening now, always happening.’

‘And nobody knows.’

‘I know. You know. Vigilstone knows.’

‘Why?’ asked Gant

‘To better us.’

‘But nobody else.’

The boy reached over and put his hand on Gant’s shoulder. It was a familiar, brotherly gesture—a thing shared between old friends.

Caleb beamed, but his wide, white eyes were sad. ‘Not everybody’s ready.’

The brazier’s heat seeped into Gant’s skin while the tent’s walls flapped in the wind. A pot of lemongrass tea bubbled over ruby coals, its fragrant steam coiling through the muddy yellow of hanging induction lamps. The walk back to the camp was a daze. Bare rock leeched warmth through the tent’s thick carpets. He couldn’t stop shaking. Death eddied through his mind, rattling against the well-defined conceptions of his life, dulling some, breaking some—the ghosts and their war had stuck to him. Tasha sat in silence, eyes concerned.

‘I need you, Tasha.’

She stood and moved around the brazier, weaving through the steam like liquid. Clothes dropped to the floor and her skin was moonlight. Kneeling, she pushed Gant onto his back, caressing his chest, his legs, with electric fingers, live and crackling, easing his muscles, stripping him bare. He felt himself harden and his heart raced as Tasha shimmered, rivers of coppery, red hair splashing over her shoulders, around her breasts. Gant sat up and kissed her, the hot press of her nipples lighting fires in his chest. Easing him in, Tasha groaned and arched her back. Rocking back and forth she was the sea, the wind, the stars, and Gant, like a sailor coming into port, let the tide bring him home. Tasha shuddered and collapsed against him, her legs squeezing tight as her mouth found his. Gant breathed her in as if he was drowning and, through the tent’s roof, the stars arced and swirled. He imagined the earth hurtling through space, spinning, grinding, its continents drifting, mountains rising. He saw boats carrying people from coast to coast, carriages and horses pulling them over never-ending highways, discovering villages and towns, settlements and cities bursting with life, thrumming with the beat of a thousand, thousand hearts. But in that moment, amidst all that movement, Gant and Tasha were, impossibly, wonderfully, immortally still. *It won’t last,*

he thought. *But I can't let it happen and happen again, with no-one batting an eye. Not anymore.*

Gant kissed her ear. 'Will Vigilstone let me go?'

'Yes.' Tasha rested her head on his chest.

'Why haven't you exposed their eyes to the Protectorates?'

'Expression is important.' Laughter burst outside; Caleb was singing, his boyish tenor splitting through the higher registers. Tasha smiled. 'Vigilstone has *grown* into the knowledge of the Witnesses. Grown with it. For Vigilstone, there is no other reality ... so we find it difficult to impart.'

Tasha sat up and went to the brazier. Taking the pot off the coals, she poured two cups of tea, took a sip, and passed one to Gant.

He clutched its warmth. 'Veleen ...'

'Veleen thinks she has stolen the key to unlock a technological door.' She looked up at the night. 'However, it is only by understanding the actions of the past that Vigilstone was able to overcome certain human deficiencies.'

Burning his tongue on a sip, Gant nodded. 'You're enlightened.'

'We are *unburdened*.'

'And me?'

'Too much time has passed. Vigilstone is separate, isolated, threatened. We have forgotten how to speak to outsiders and now they fear us.' She shook her head sadly. 'They shape their past, try to tame it, make it other than what it was. And you ...'

'And I'm writing a different version.' Gant sighed. He couldn't escape his past and Veleen was *his* problem. 'I'm caught between two worlds'

'A different vision, a different voice.' She gripped his hand. 'You are the fulcrum where they can begin the process of reconciling past with future.'

The coals coughed and Gant stood up to vent the smoke. Cold air brushed his skin with goosebumps. Tasha wrapped her arms around him and put her head on his shoulder, hands moving slowly down his chest. When he turned into her embrace, Gant understood happiness.

‘I’ll always need you.’

Steam spilled around Gant and Tasha as they joined the knots of morning walkers. Massive cogs ground their teeth and Vigilstone’s northern gate clanged shut. Oak spars locked in place while chugging boilers pushed gilded roots from the thick walls like an organic portcullis. Watchtowers cried: ‘Witness returned!’ Gant grinned, enjoying the morning’s sun.

The road split and they followed its tributary onto a wide parade of tessellated tiles. Steam-carts and pedalled rickshaws sped up and down, passing laughing couples and nattering families strolling beneath lines of willow and elm. Temporary stalls displayed glass beads and leather goods, ornate time-pieces, reams of recycled paper tied with twine, and bushels of jasmine tea. Tasha strode off in search of chocolate. Sitting under an elm’s dappled shade, old men and women poured juice from rattling presses, taking baskets of oranges from breathless, sticky children. Gant grabbed two glasses, found a whitewashed bench, and watched the traffic.

They don’t look any different, he thought. But they are. Caleb had said they were free. Drivers waved to each other, called to the shaded juicers, horns honking, engines sputtering. Tasha dropped beside him, took her glass, pecked his cheek, and handed Gant a square of dark chocolate lumpy with almonds. The train whistled.

Gant glanced up at the sun. ‘They give up their eyes so we can enjoy this.’

‘Yes.’

‘That Witness, the one who died on the platform, he couldn’t see this could he? All he could see was the battle. His mind was ... stained.’ Bravery had taken on new meanings.

‘Caleb said that their optic pieces can overflow.’

Tasha sipped her juice, grimacing as it cut through the chocolate. ‘Soldiers always take on risk.’

‘Soldiers.’

‘They fight for us, Gant.’

A shadow cut the light between them. ‘But what the fuck for, Tasha?’

Gant didn’t see her pull her sword, but heard steel ring out, and felt pain bite his shoulder. Mal flashed a smile, nodded, his sword trembling against Tasha’s. Gant clenched his teeth while the man tried to force the blade down further into his shoulder.

Tasha scowled with concentration. ‘Mal!’

‘Best to kill this one to draw out that thieving bitch.’

‘What are you?’ She shook her head. ‘What is in your head?’

‘How long can you keep it up, Tasha?’ He licked his lips, staring hungrily at Gant. Veleen’s bolt was still lodged in his throat, the skin around it necrotic and bloated, chunks of flesh missing on his chest and arms from Veleen’s bomb. ‘I wonder.’

Tasha grunted. ‘Mal.’

‘Is it worth it, Tasha? You tell me. Tell me!’ Gant shuddered as Mal’s shadow stretched like a newly wakened animal. ‘Come on, Tasha, he’s bleeding.’

She growled. ‘I will stop you.’

‘Shut up, bitch. You think you can stop me? That I *can* be stopped?’ Gant gasped as Tasha heaved and tearing Mal’s sword from his shoulder. Mal licked Gant’s blood off his blade. ‘I’m the now, Tasha, come to destroy this place.’

They squared off under the willow's draping leaves and Gant thought he'd stepped from reality into story. Time oozed like molasses. The wind stirred up the dust and the silence was punctured by stifled cries. People ran. Silver flashes sparked, Tasha and Mal exchanging blow after cracking, screeching blow. The sun was a spotlight and the willow coiled about them. Leaves exploded in percussive puffs and fluttered like dead butterflies to the ground. Mal hammered his strikes, rage moulding his face and Tasha spun, her sword gliding, arcing, singing through the air. Gant watched, paralysed, wanting nothing more than to launch at Mal, but unwilling to put Tasha at risk.

Mal spat when their blades met at the crossguard. 'You can't win, Tasha. You're tired. Weak. Meaningless.'

Sweat dripped from Tasha's nose. 'Why?'

He licked his lips. 'Vigilstone wasn't enough.'

'We have all we need.'

'But not all that I want.'

'Want? What do you want that you would turn your back on our future?'

'More!' Mal snapped his head into Tasha's face. 'I want more!'

Tasha staggered. Mal slammed the sword from her hands and, bumping into a willow's trunk, she folded to her knees, blood spilling between her fingers, down her arms, as she tried to stem the flow from her nose. Mal laughed, his shadow raking its claws over her legs, over the tree—a monster, blind and vicious, railing against everything.

Gant coughed on the stink of rotting corpses. He felt powerless in the face of such raw hatred, such concentrated violence, but when Mal raised his sword, when Tasha moaned, he pulled the recording-tube from his jacket and leapt. Catching the sunlight, the tube blazed white and blocked Mal's strike. Its light exploded and the man screamed inhumanly, covered

in coruscating fire that peeled back pallid skin and decaying flesh to reveal shiny, blackened bone. Gant held forth the sun and let it burn.

‘No.’ Two voices tore out of Mal’s throat and the shadow struggled against his legs, trying to pull itself free. Oily smoke spewed from his mouth, his nose. Reeling, Mal stumbled onto the street and into the path of a hurtling wagon. Horns blared, wheels crunched, and nothing was left but a long, greasy smear. People rushed over, laying Tasha down, pressing bandages to her face. Hands grabbed Gant, pried his fingers from the tube, and slapped pressure on his shoulder. Someone was shouting his name, but Gant could only hear three words carried back by the wind: I. Want. More.

Blank pages stared. Gant had retreated to the archive, hoping its shelves would lend some order to his thoughts. Ink dripped from his pen and spread in splats. His shoulder itched.

‘I want more ...’ Gant sighed. Mal’s words tumbled in his head like a tune he couldn’t shake. He closed his eyes and sat back, wondering what had broken the man, changed him, crept inside and whispered to his rage. *He was dead*, Gant thought, *but something had been keeping him alive, possessing him. A disease.*

‘What?’

Gant’s eyes snapped open. A round, black mouth stared him in the face, gaping balefully from a metal tube clutched in wood and silver. Sulphur and saltpetre reeked from its darkly worked handle. He thought it echoed the fine crafting of Vigilstone’s steam-engines or its wind-up ever-lights ... but slightly off. It seemed directed to a point, engineered towards a disturbingly single-minded, absolute, aggressive simplicity. Gant frowned—for all its striking acid-etching and inlaid ivory, it felt wrong, felt ... vicious. Veleen grinned and it grinned with her.

‘Nice, right?’ Veleen motioned for Gant to get up from behind the desk. The muzzle bobbed and twitched like a hawk, like it had a mind of its own. She pulled back a lever with the sound of a popping joint. Its shadow bruised her cheek and sulphur puckered the air.

‘Little thing we cooked up in Ith Tol. Flint-lock, powder charge, lead projectile.’

It radiated violence from her hand and she held it like a snake—as far away from her body as possible. In her other hand she clutched a large, glass sphere, wrapped in thin tracks of golden filigree. Inside were three gold disks, evenly spaced, each holding a set of jet-black orbs: four in the middle and three in the levels above and below. *The eyes!* Gant thought, standing beside the desk. Veleen took a step back, keeping the barrel aimed at his chest. Shadows curled possessively over her shoulders.

‘Why’re you here, Veleen?’

‘What?’ It seemed as if she didn’t understand him, like he was speaking a different language.

He pointed to the sphere. ‘Do you know what you’ve stolen?’

‘They call it a Panoptic Globe.’ Veleen hefted it like a ball and the edges of Gant’s vision flickered, tore, overlapped. ‘There’s something in it, but I can’t see.’

‘Why come to me?’

‘You know how they think.’

Gant crossed his arms. ‘And you don’t?’

‘Take it.’

‘If I don’t?’

‘I won’t stop.’ Her face twisted and Gant didn’t know her. *Who changed?* he thought, light bouncing off the barrel, reflecting in strange patterns over the shelves. His induction lamp dimmed fractionally as its charge unwound. ‘If you don’t help me, I’ll kill you.’

Gant held out his hand. Veleen glanced around the shelves, shuffled forward, dropped the sphere on his outstretched palm, and jumped back. Gant stared at the orb, tracing its winding, golden circuits, catching his face in the glass. The lines of gold warmed at his touch and the black eyes inside started spinning. Vibrations buzzed his hand, up his arm. It started to burn and the eyes within became spinning blurs.

His sight was pulled into the sphere and the shelves wavered; light stretched, then ripped and fluttered like ribbons in the wind. The glass eyes broke down, releasing their inky liquid into the sphere, filling it up, blacking it out. The shelves stretched into battlements, the light shot out flames, grass sprouted from books, pages burst into rain, and the walls shattered into rolling plains. Gant stood in the middle of the battle, exposed, open, surrounded by charging soldiers, their faces broken by screams and slick with blood.

Blink.

Gant stood on the battlements, arrows whizzing past his face, beside men heaving cauldrons of steaming oil up and over. Bodies stared blankly from the bottom of the wall, slashed by rain, bristling with arrows. Lightning made everything white-blue then black.

Blink.

Children cowered beneath the wagons. Cooking fires smouldered under heavy pans of beans. Sacks of grain were split open and disgorged. Horses pounded sodden turf, ploughing the earth with shallow trenches as the infantry closed. The children cried. Men closed, lowering their pikes. They neared the wagons and started stabbing.

Blink.

A surgeon slumped from wound to wound. Tired eyes. Men sheltered in the lee of the wall, arrows *plinking* around them. Nearby, the gates shook under the jolts of a battering ram. Bone-saw at the ready, the surgeon pointed at the screaming man and his helpers took firm grips. The teeth separated the knee like wet paper.

Blink.

Men stomping ladders into dead comrades, broken wood with the sound of broken bones.

Blink.

Women hurrying with water barrels, eyes hollow, faces drawn, closing the eyes of somebody's husband, someone's son, while their city crumbled.

Blink. Blink. Blink. Blink. Blink.

The battlefield shimmered and the visions destabilised, folding up, spooling back into the sphere, into the eyes that had witnessed and recorded. Veleen was retching violently. Gant kept blinking, unable to stop, unable to clear the pictures or dispel their memories.

Veleen coughed. 'What the fuck was that?'

'A Witnesses ... a record.'

She shook her head and gestured to the sphere. 'Hand it over.'

'It's not what you think, Veleen. If you take this into the Protectorates, blood will follow.'

'Bullshit.'

'They're not ready.' Gant glanced at his lamp—the light was failing. *One chance*, he thought. 'Not for this, not yet. It's too hard, too ... forgotten.'

'Think of the technology, Gant. Of what it's worth. I'll be famous. Rich. But I need you. I can't make it show me what I want to see.'

'You don't get it. There's nothing but those visions and they'll drive the world mad.' He inched closer to the desk, keeping his eyes on the barrel. 'It's unfiltered past. The Protectorates only know the history that's been written for them. These eyes would make a lie of everything.'

She shook her head. 'I don't care.'

‘It’ll mean anarchy.’

‘Gant ...’

He knocked his induction lamp from the desk, plunging the alcove into darkness. The barrel barked with a flash and the sphere shattered in his hand. Acrid smoke curled white in the darkness. Crouching behind the desk, Gant searched blindly for the lantern, hoping he hadn’t broken its fragile globe. His hands brushed metal, flicked glass and, following the insulated cord linking lantern to battery, found the winder and gave it a few turns. A spark stuttered to life. After a few more *whirs* the darkness retreated into the stacks, scurrying to corners, into the vaulted ceiling.

Ink coated his hands and a story sat in his head, waiting to be told. Veleen had seen a treasure chest, the technological marvel that was Vigilstone, and wanted to plunder its riches but, for all its promise, the treasure was dangerous. Unthinkingly wielded, the city’s fundamental sight might incinerate the world—destroying without changing. Its true technology wasn’t its steam-powered engines, its induction lights, even its glass eyes. It was social—a meeting of science and humanity reborn from the crucible of bloody history. The visions were seeds that needed to grow. Slowly. They needed translation, the right expression. Gant was a Witness now and he was beginning to grasp how to render his testimony. He was Vigilstone, a part of it, and he could feel the city beating in his heart, filling his lungs, clearing his mind. Veleen was gone, nothing but a ghost, a memory—fading. Sitting at his desk, Gant looked down at the pages and started to write.

Starlight.



Starlight.

Swordkeeper Taleel watched the flickering constellations in the midnight cold. Years ago, his father had told him that the stars were the spirits of fallen soldiers watching over their loved ones. Now it seemed there were too many new faces up on high. Cold licked his face. Huddled under a damp cloak, he watched the ghostly clouds of his breath dissolve into threads. The Third Legion's campfires were heaps of ruddy coals hissing suggestions of warmth. Men and women slept in their armour, still holding weapons, fine dew glittering on coarse woollen blankets. Not wanting to lose his night vision, he refused the illusory comfort of the fires and gazed into darkness flecked with snow. It looked like ash. Taleel pulled his cloak closer, hoping that by the morning he'd still have all his toes. Frozen and alone he reclined into childhood memory, letting the banked heat of his father's forge warm his back. It seemed like a lifetime since he'd asked his father why the stars came out at night.

'Why?' his father asked, using a rag to clean the soot off his calloused hands. Honest hands. Every night Taleel traced the deep creases of their wide palms, touching the plough blade his father had just put down, the horseshoes tempered before that, the wheel-axles before that. Each task was carried in his father's hands, shaping Taleel's thoughts with crackle, clank, and hiss. 'To light the darkest hours and watch over the sleeping. Stars know better than most how lightless our world can be.'

It was like the Fablespinners' tales Taleel heard in the story-courts of Crescent Market, only sadder and closer, truer ... his father's tale—as if he knew those stars and their faces. Taleel watched them shining in his father's eyes, pale and proud, with silver helms and glowing swords. But what did his father know of soldiers? He never made swords. The hand that cannot make a blade should never wield the sword. That was another thing he said, usually when Taleel came home from the Great Parade after watching the city's Legion drill.

‘And the moon?’ Taleel pressed closer, watching steam rise from the corded muscle of his father’s bare arms. The moon was mirrored on the water of three tempering barrels, rippling grey and green over his father’s face.

‘Well there’s some would say the moon is the sun’s body quenched by the cold seas of space.’ His father smiled warmly. ‘Others sing of the Long Emptiness, a time without light or life, when the sun and moon were made by a great mind whose thoughts had built the universe and whose grace grew the world.’

‘But what do *you* say?’ Taleel had heard the same on every street corner from men in white robes calling out in the name of God, their god, a new god. But the talk of strangers and their stranger notions mattered little to him. There was only the Light and no god sent it forth. Taleel knew this, the same as every child in the Bastion Empire.

His father’s hand skimmed the surface of the oil barrel, spreading ripples over its bronzed reflections. ‘I say the moon is a mirror ... the mirror of man. A reflection of all that is beautiful and good in us.’ His fingers shone golden in the night. ‘As long as our moon shines, hope remains.’

‘And if it goes out?’ Taleel knew that his father’s answer would be the most important he would ever hear—it would shape his life and give it meaning.

‘If that day comes, Taleel, the night will be the least we have to fear.’

Sighing wearily, the Swordkeeper shrugged off the memory, letting it freeze and shatter as the cold wormed its way through his cloak. This far south such weather would roll down from the Bastion Mountains, sagging over the land like thick wool for half the year or more. He couldn’t afford to be weak while everything he knew and loved fractured and burned. Smoke teased on a knifing breeze. Taleel sat in the darkness staring at the glittering faces of the dead, huddled before the glow of dying fires.

‘If that day comes,’ Taleel whispered, ‘the night will be the least we have to fear.’

Taleel had never seen anything like it before. Crows hopped through the corpses, furtively scratching into blood soaked snow, black feathers puffing from croaking scuffles over eyes and tongues. Mountain tops stood grim vigil, a row of looming tombstones cloaked in dark, cotton clouds. Squat bushes hunkered desperately to storm-scoured rocks; stunted and brown, their spindly branches were like jagged, skeletal fingers. Ribbons of steam wavered in crisp air, rising from the dead in slowly dissolving coils heavy with decay. The bodies were still warm but rot had already set in and their flesh was rank with disease.

Picking a path through the carnage, Taleel heard nothing but the mutter of hungry birds and whispers on the wind. Another battalion fleeing south, running at their limit and near dead from cold; they’d stumbled blindly into a barren valley, been surrounded, taken unaware, and massacred. The Third moved silently from body to body, prodding with spear-butts in the sour hope of finding a breath of life. Nothing. Taleel watched impassively, having seen similar scenes many times: final moments, silent screams, and mouths held open by half-uttered words. Never a peaceful end.

It had been a fierce struggle ended quickly. Plate steel was *ripped* open and shredded, empty husks that rattled with the click-clack of hungry beaks. Swords had been twisted, spears shattered, and shields splintered. Dismembered bodies lay sprawled in shallow puddles of grey melt-water.

Brutal and uneven like an animal attack, he thought. *All fang and claw.*

Sulphur tickled Taleel’s nose. As primal as the wound patterns appeared, sure, practiced hands had guided the killing strokes. Running a hand through his hair, the Swordkeeper knelt in slush before a boy, recognising what was left of the face. Yanking off a heavy glove, he traced a hollow where a chest should have been, thinking it could have been

made by a warhammer if not for the fist-like indentations. The blood on his fingers was still warm.

Three or four hours at most.

Taleel saw no signs of the attackers in the aftermath, no discernible track, no signs of vector or path. Rumours were that when the Tower broke insanity had grown, been unleashed ... but rumours were little help. Real insanity and horror spread before him.

Everything has changed.

‘Here.’ Taleel beckoned the others, hearing their curses as unseen faces masked by fresh snow made footing an evil business. ‘Find the Falcon. He’ll want to see this.’

Lorel sighed. ‘I warned you this was coming.’

The tent sagged with tension and weariness. Marching out the day, the Third Legion had left many miles behind, but their progress was arduously slow. There had been no time to lay carpets, yielding the Falcon the luxury of packed earth radiating cold. Everything was punctured by winter. Iron braziers smouldered drowsily, weaving smoky threads from sulky orange coals. Soot tattooed the tent’s canvas with shadows frozen by the chill. At this time of year, when the snow falls were mush by noon, the southern passes were treacherous and soldiers could only be pushed so far. Already rumbles skittered around the camp and Lorel heard talk of sunlight and bacon and dry socks carried on the air.

Five nights without a sign. Lorel grimaced. Far too long ...

Cushions were strewn haphazardly over the dirt, thrown and forgotten by the Falcon without the dickering interference of a courtly chamberlain. They did not belong with the Falcon in any case, who, like his soldiers, was a weapon. Spears leant in groups, wrapped

loosely in colourful banners, their honed edges gleaming crimson. In the dim light, Lorel couldn't make out the designs, but knew their stories, their histories, had seen all their victories and defeats. When the Falcon had called to all willing to follow him into the south many had answered: survival was the only option.

Lorel shivered. Ramifications plagued him, the consequences of returning from his exile, of returning home. He thumbed his blade, tracing the worn leather scabbard that cloaked the thin sword and its green steel. Forged of interlocking leaves, it had been his last true song, a fitting reminder of the violent path he had set for these people: combined for violence and drenched with blood. Madness had left Lorel too much a man and his throat was dry and stripped. At the time it was a price he'd been willing to pay, but the cost was growing steeper every day.

Marlee, he thought, her face nothing more than a diffuse phantom in the smoke. *Have I killed you too?*

'Peace, Lorel,' said Jeflom Talazar, the Falcon, commander of the Third Legion. He was hunched over a folding table spread thick with maps and pieces of parchment. 'I hear you. Chaos rides behind us and we have no time for an "I told you so".'

'Sorry, Jef.' Lorel bowed from the waist. 'But I did tell you.'

Jeflom chuckled softly. 'Yes, old friend, you did, and one day I hope to do the same.'

'No doubt, but ...'

'But we must keep our minds in the south.'

Making room in the clutter, Jeflom unrolled a large map across the table. Lorel saw that many scraps of paper were scrawled in his friend's narrow hand; others crawled with spidery, archaic scripts that even he could barely decipher. Reminders of libraries no more than ashes and dust, most referenced the Wanderer and a few ancient names he recognised but the ink they were written with was faded and fading.

History, he thought, old and crumbling.

Lorel studied the map, taking in the mess of figures and symbols that fought for space over the Empire's disparate territories: estimated military strengths, deployments inked in running lines, factional boundaries contracting and expanding in fluid, zones, and sites of spreading 'corruption' in charcoal smudges. One bled in the south-east, not twenty miles from their camp's location: a black smear nesting near the mountains of the Southspire Bastion—malignant, cancerous.

East and south ... where she was going.

Jeflom continued, motioning towards the mountains. 'We are here, north of the Spire, at least five days march without the baggage train, and who knows how long with it. We could be weeks in this cold, without adequate supplies, without word from the north. From Tarmon's Point to Castellan Folly, the eastern lords wage their own private wars. The Colonies are in open rebellion, tying up what little remains of the Imperial Guard. And the Tower... by the Light, the Tower. Brother fighting brother and death stalking all the walks of power. Everything is lost.'

'And we run into the unknown?' said Lorel. The question plagued him like a bad cold, fogging up his head and leeching his energy. It was a question that circled a catastrophic answer: would humanity survive on the other side? Something moved at the corner of his eye, a suggestion of an arm, a hand, moving in the swirling smoke. Gone. Lorel frowned. It had looked like a young man, sitting at Jeflom's table, pouring over a pile of books and scrolls.

'We are vessels for what duty dictates and honour demands,' said Jeflom. Lorel shook his head and returned to the map. 'Everywhere chaos seeps into the land, my land! Tainted. Only beyond the Bastion Mountains does any hope remain.' Zeal breathed fire into Jeflom's uncompromising need for hope. It both scared and reassured Lorel—the Falcon would fly to the utmost end.

This is what I've made of them, Lorel thought bitterly, knowing that it could be their greatest and worst quality.

'Jef, you saw what your Swordkeeper found.' Lorel picked up the tattered helm the scouts had recovered. Long rents dripped down its pitted length, the silhouettes of jagged claws. 'No sword drew these, no spear, no axe. Darkkin ...'

'Name them not!' Jeflom threw the map aside, spraying ink into a brazier with a hiss. Black smoke flared for an instant and the tent closed in. 'Not to me.'

'Denial will not make them any less real, any less dangerous.' Lorel didn't know how much he could say, how far he could push. 'Reflections ...'

'By the Light, Lor, let it be.'

The flames cracked violently and the darkness extended from the tent's corners in creeping tentacles. Jeflom blurred—a distended silhouette in a living shadow play. A veil existed between them, elusive, impenetrable. His friend would name it duty, but for Lorel everything was choice. *He* had chosen, eons ago, skewing all other choices before this man had been born. Duty was a word that masked the fact that the Empire was an ironmonger churning out living weapons.

Lorel grimaced. 'You know what I am?' *What I pretend to be.*

'Of course!' Jeflom's knuckles strained white on his sword's hilt. 'You Voidstalkers did wondrous things: wondrous and terrible. But there is a price, Lor, fixed to every action. You cannot touch the impossible and escaped unchanged.'

'We ...'

'Had too much power by half and it ripped the Tower to splinters.' Jeflom seemed to deflate, shrinking into a man empty of his accreted legend. For the first time he looked a defeated man.

'What about Taleel?' asked Jeflom hesitantly.

Ahhh, my double, my reflection, thought Lorel, bending over to retrieve the scattered maps before leaning against the table. It shook under his weight and he frowned at the instability of the moment. *He accepts me for friendship and yet ... he is unsure of the true believer. And why not? He's too much like me, too sharp, too hard, too dangerous.*

He could sense the flow of history around him, pulling him in two. On one side death, the other despair, and this Taleel, this ultimate expression of the Empire's destructive potential, stood at the nexus, back to back with Lorel. The Swordkeeper was a mirror, reflecting nothing but the years of Lorel's influence—the encroaching desert, the fall of Ithral, the seeds of empire, the grief, the loss, the destruction.

Lorel exhaled. 'The Swordkeeper is correct. There is nothing gained by sailing blind into a storm. Luck may have pushed us this far, but I fear the odds are quickly stacking up. If the Darkkin'—Jeflom snorted—'have penetrated this far south then we must assume that nowhere is beyond their reach.'

'Safe assumptions are seldom made.'

Lorel's gaze pierced the tent, its canvas made translucent like a pane of glass: fires and storytelling, armours, cooks, surgeons sawing bones, anaesthetised screams, picketed horses snorting fog, sentries, then ... nothing. The world beyond was empty.

'Information may be more important than speed,' he said. 'We need to know what waits beyond these tents.'

Jeflom laughed without humour and his shadow coughed against the tent. It seemed a sickly image, a sorrow that the man chose to ignore. 'I know what eats you, Lor. How long has she ...?'

'Five nights.'

Jeftom placed a calloused hand on Lorel's shoulder, bringing them face to face. 'I will not allow you to go out alone like some bravo with his head emptied by fortune and glory. I know you care for her.' Jeftom raised a hand to forestall Lorel's reply. 'But five nights?'

'No.' Lorel moved away, his skin burned where Jeftom's hand had rested. Suddenly the tent was stifling hot, his lungs fought for breath, and his eyes stung. Numbness spread over his chest and arms as if the heat was eating his nerves.

'I will place Taleel in your scabbard then,' said Jeftom.

Lorel bowed his head, as the world jumped onto new paths, different lines. There were always new roads to build. Lorel had forged many himself and, try as he might to step aside, he understood that they all ended with him and his reflection—this Taleel—brought together, face to face, back to back. He felt like something was pulling the strings, just out of sight, writing his life into moments of confluence.

He shrugged. 'Very well.'

'Why is *this* one so important to you?'

Lorel stepped out into the swirling night and breathed freezing pain. Feeling was better than the alternative. He had travelled that empty path once before and knew what waited for him there.

'Because she knows the truth.'

Lorel jumped back from the silver flash of blades, twisting and ducking as the creatures closed, flowing, fluid, transient; human shapes bulging, rippling with fracturing bones and ruptured flesh, their snarling faces misshapen by yellowed tusks and broken teeth. Dust coughed with every step, wrapping hungry tentacles around Lorel's legs. Their blades flicked

precise, fatal lines, clashing with shrill, metallic screeches and digitalised animal agony.

Lorel's teeth buzzed. He was losing ground and the edge of the cliff grinned.

Emptiness breathed close, innnnnn and ouuuuut. It had taken root in the depths—aberrant lines of code born from exaggerated emotions, somehow attached to a vast, malignant entity warping the sensory fabric of the Law's virtual reality. He could see it in the south: a strobing, white nexus fracturing under a pressing mass of dirt and stone. Ozone crackled in ionised air. Without his kin, the interconnected data-projection of the Dream was strained, crumbling without the harmonised minds to prop it up. The Law was breaking.

Where are they? he thought. *Where have they gone?*

Cardboard cut-out mountains stabbed their teeth into gelatinous clouds, bleeding inky cirrus across the sky. Once, the Dream had been a symbol of harmony; now it was a fractured, blistered mirror, its images drained to grey and sketched with charry outlines. Swirling winds eddied and wheezed mausoleum air that cackled and moaned. Trees flickered green and rotten, brown then gone, and the stars were lead-sinkers pulling the sky apart like puckered strips of flayed skin. The moon was a bloated corpse.

A nick on the arm tore his muscles like a dried leaf. Lorel's blood leaked incense curls that attenuated into webby smears. They held for a moment before being sucked over the cliff and into the abyss. A single drop of blood allowed the Law to kaleidoscope through a thousand years, spilling Lorel into a lake of memory. This had been his place ... ages ago, but the filters had been broken and the firewalls brought down.

Silence crushed, noise exploded. Heat shimmers rent the dull sky, rips and tatters that swayed like moth-eaten shirts. Lorel's mind twinned with the creatures, brushing and weaving in the Law as connection and refraction—a disjointed interface. He knew the dangers; the Voidstalkers had known them too. These two ... monsters had been his comrades yesterday. There was peril at the edge of the unbalanced, shared dream that warped

the Law with forms that attacked form, distilled nightmares lifted from the waking minds of human consciousness.

A true face.

Not all things were real in the Dream, where everything and nothing was possible all at once. It was a space filled by inescapable contradictions: visions of the future, past, and present, subjective and fragile, in conflict yet dependant—shifting realities whose edges met and sparked, frayed and intertwined. Continuity did not exist; the Dream was built of fragments—not broken, but fragmented. Something had degraded the Law’s compiling engines, unravelling the infinitesimal equations that chose imagined aspects which were accepted or denied image construction.

Laughter scuttled in the shadows. The creatures snarled and lunged with monstrous, inhuman speed and, in a very real sense, Lorel knew that his friends were dead, that the terrifying awareness had subsumed them and was trying for him now. He lashed out with sweeping cuts, found no openings, but earned a moment’s respite. It, whatever *it* was, was quickly discovering a different challenge; more secure in his sense of self than his companions, Lorel held his mind in check, reigning in emotional outliers, controlling his baseline. He could feel the emptiness like a mosquito in his ear with the whispering voice of a beggar, whose sibilant words were just beyond hearing. That was the trick: to hear, you had to *choose* to listen.

Their choice was anger born from despair, he thought. A monstrous reality created two monsters.

Stains streamed across Lorel’s eyes, the dripping curlicues of some forgotten future. The corpse-moon blinked and the earth convulsed. He stumbled, and watched their blades decapitate his after-image. The spectral possibility burst in a jet of red mist before vanishing through the shadows. Laughing with avalanches, the mountains shrugged and became

vitrified slag heaps. Lorel saw himself everywhere, in everything, staring out from every surface. His world was made of glass and the cracks were spreading. Lorel breathed in his image and choked on too much self.

Blink.

Black, red, silver.

Blink.

Their blades flicked out like a snake's testing tongue. Lorel spun and leapt, his own sword a gleaming, green blur with comet's tail. They called to him, nothing faces with human voices and he felt the Law syphoning his memories through the cut on his arm, adding to its archive of corrupted data. He was here in the flesh and it was dying. Lorel slashed past defences. Blood hissed and rot clogged the air. But the creatures fought on, shambling masses in a mockery of life and death, fulfilling neither category, but aping both.

I will remember your names!

Blink.

All he could do was fight, fight and keep fighting, until his last breath was spent in rejection. When your body fell in this version of the Law death was uncertain. The two *things* attacking Lorel were testaments to gruesome resurrection.

I will remember my name!

Blink.

Lorel reversed his sword, held it to his chest, and felt his heart drumming frantically down its length. The blade slid in effortlessly and a jet of fire tore through his lungs, igniting the air as it boiled up his throat. His eyes drank light from the world, trying to staunch the wound with the raw fabric of the Law. He smiled. Things continued—death was only an aspect of life. The beasts had stopped, huffing like bulls, watching their prey as his blood washed over the edge, into the blackness. They could taste him now.

Blink.

Lorel screamed into the emptiness. 'I still choose my own fate.'

The Law imploded. Outlines rushed into the chasm of his pierced chest and he vomited shadows. Complete blackness, then ... golden light, sapphire water, music, and the dappled shade of the Tree's endlessly falling leaves. He felt the dull ache of unreachable memory: a reminder that some things were never possible. Lorel wept into silver branches and the tears were beads of glass. Stars falling, leaves swirling. Consciousness ... snuffed.

Soft fingers brushed electricity down Lorel's arm, twitching muscles, shooting cold up to his shoulder, down to his wrist. Fingertips pressed softly against his eyelids, searching for signs of activity; purple coronas bruised to yellow like unfolding flowers. Lorel's hands clenched at the touch and the fingers hesitated. He could smell the ocean.

'He's coming around,' whispered Oreel, and Lorel knew he was still dreaming because she'd been dead a thousand years.

'Very well,' said another voice. 'I shall ... leave him to ... your house's ministrations.' The cadence was disjointed and furtive, matching the skitter of his retreating footsteps.

A bureaucrat, thought Lorel. He tried to smile but met resistance.

'Already ... checking ... up ... on ... me?' he croaked, and cold settled over his chest—a spider web of icy threads radiating from a wide-spread hand. He fought the urge to flinch.

'Try not to move,' she murmured, the echo of Oreel draining from her voice. 'I'll cut the Bind shortly.'

A Carer, thought Lorel, trying to move, to run. *I have to get out of here!*

Gradually the cold withdrew on itself, pulled from his limbs like a thread from a hem. Without the restrictive input of the Bind, Lorel's muscles warmed quickly, taking heat from the air until only one knot of chill remained, pulsing a steady counter to his heartbeat.

The Carer's heart, Lorel realized with alarm. But it vanished and he slammed down the barriers around his mind. Humid air lapped thickly over the bed, bringing boat sounds and the kiss of water against stone.

The Imperial Seat, he thought. *From one nightmare to another.*

'Open your eyes ... slowly.'

The presence moved away and the warmth on Lorel's face muted. Shadowy blurs resolved, focussed into wooden furniture and rusty iron fixtures branching over bare, whitewashed walls. Melted candles of cheap, yellow tallow dripped glabrous stalactites. Thin bars of sunlight fell over Lorel's bed, cutting the room from shuttered windows. Golden dust glittered in the air.

Squinting, he sat up, the movement tugging healing skin stuck to tightly wound bandages, and began massaging the tingling pinpricks from his arms and legs. Blood stained the tiled floor and a deep basin was filled with blackened bandages.

'Proper sensation will return in a few minutes.'

Lorel looked up quickly, looking for Oreel but she was gone, replaced by a Carer leaning by the window, watching him intensely with a bright smile. She seemed so natural, totally solid, at ease with herself and confident in her abilities. Like Oreel, yet her own woman. He felt haunted.

Beautifully impossible, thought Lorel, unable to suppress a chuckle.

'Something funny?' said the Carer, throwing the shutters open and forcing Lorel to shield his eyes from the glare. She brushed forward, muttering under her breath. After a moment he opened his eyes.

I should die more often ...

‘An Imperial Carer.’ Lorel absently scratched his chest. She slapped his hand away and adjusted the bandages. ‘Perhaps death would have been easier.’

‘Perhaps.’ She flicked his toes, nodding slightly each time Lorel flinched. ‘Then you wouldn’t be wasting my time. It’s not often I get the chance to pull swords from chests and have my patient live.’

Lorel grinned tightly. ‘I thought it was the best thing to do at the time.’

‘A *funny* one.’ She sniffed once, apparently satisfied, and began a clinical inspection of his arms and hands, running cool fingers over hardened scabs and ancient scars. Lorel lost track of time. She smelt like the sea ... or the desert after an electrical storm. Now and then folded into each other, and Lorel couldn’t separate the Oreelness of her. ‘Next time, try to put your sword somewhere less ... vital. An enemy perhaps?’

‘I’ll keep it in mind.’ Lorel shifted nervously at her touch; it seemed, intimate and knowing—an action repeated in soft, quiet hours. He rolled his shoulders in crunchy loops. ‘How long have I been out?’

Squinting at his bandages, the Carer sighed. ‘A week.’

‘Too long,’ Lorel muttered. *And there is no knowing how far it has spread now*, he thought. *The Law corrupted and the Tower vulnerable.*

‘Hmmm?’ She bent down to collect his bloody bandages and Lorel breathed golden hair, sun-bleached and straight.

Definitely, the sea. Sand and salt. Just like hers ... Lorel fled from the memory.

‘Are you done?’

Lorel’s eyes snapped open. ‘Sorry?’

‘Sniffing my hair?’

Lorel nodded absently, transfixed by the tug of recurrence. ‘Ah ... Lorel,’ he said, offering a trembling hand. Did she really look like her?

Her laughter was a rising peal, lilting chimes infectiously honest. Lorel liked it; it reminded him of ... silver streams ... falling leaves. Like home. He could not help but laugh as well, but the sound was so alien that it was quickly replaced by a fit of coughing.

How is she doing this? How can she sound like that?

‘I know.’ She looked down at his hand, laughing still, and spun away. Half out, holding open a screen-door, her smile faded. ‘I’m Marlee.’

They’d been running two days and nights but were still no closer to their quarry. Taleel focussed on the ground. Loose rocks dotted broken earth dyed blue in the starless dark. A high moon pulled shadows in front and behind. He thought his shadow was moving before he did, moving differently for an instant, before aligning with his actions. He didn’t care, it didn’t matter.

I can’t trust him, he thought, staring holes in Lorel’s back. The man spoke little and divulged less. Disciplined and alert, he seemed a born warrior, natural, with an air of noble training and grace that spoke of casual efficiency. Taleel understood why the Falcon thought him dangerous.

Lord Talazar had come to him early, the morning newborn, stalking through the frost without a sound. Taleel had bowed at the waist, stabbing the tip of his sword into the hard soil.

‘May your sword reflect the Dawn, my lord,’ Taleel saluted, his words drenched in the desert times from before the Empire. Personally, he had little time and even less use for

such tradition, but his grizzled instructor had said 'ritual was the whetstone of men'. Taleel had taken it to heart, had remained sharp.

'The Light shield and keep you.' The Falcon nodded.

'Orders, my lord?'

'You are to accompany my friend, Swordkeeper.' The Falcon's eyes were distant, fringed with fatigue. Weakness, perhaps. Rumours trickled up the ranks that the Falcon forsook sleep to fly the night into morning on waking dreams of victory. Taleel didn't speculate, didn't allow himself the space to wonder. 'Follow and listen.'

'Forgive me, my lord, but this Lorel?' The question hung between them in mist. 'The men think ...'

'Yes, Swordkeeper?' The Falcon stared south, his eyes questing up the mountains. There were lots of positions in the hills for ambushes.

'My lord, as the Third's Swordkeeper, it falls to me to safeguard the Legion in all things.'

'They say I have embraced the scorpion, yes?'

Taleel hesitated. It was foolish to believe the Falcon would know less than everything about *his* Legion. And the Third was his, no matter the Swordkeeper's misgivings. 'They are soldiers, my lord. They know only what they see, what they hear. And ...'

'And?' Facing him now, the Falcon's eyes were cold, piercing, and hard like his namesake.

'And this Lorel smacks of a Voidstalker.'

The Falcon sighed. 'Have you ever forged your own sword, Taleel?'

The shift in thoughts startled Taleel; with some intuitive leap the Falcon had reached into the Swordkeeper's buried past, dredging up images of his father bronzed by forge-fire.

'My father was a blacksmith, my lord.'

‘I do not know the intricacies of metal craft, Swordkeeper, and yet I have never held a blade that was not mine.’

‘Command me, lord!’

The Falcon swept back to regard Taleel. ‘I would make of you a shield, but I fear you would be ill suited for that purpose. Still ... I must point you towards the future.’ He paused, looked dreadfully tired, unconscionably weakened. ‘The blade oft obeys its own laws, Swordkeeper—its own peculiar gravity or its own sharp choice.’

‘Choice, my lord?’

‘Yes.’ The Falcon’s eyes were lost in the mountains again. ‘You may have to kill Lorel.’

For the first time in his life doubt weighed unbearably on Taleel. Fog walled off the night. His shoulders ached as if he were carrying a twenty pound kit. But, running through the darkness, he realised how easy it would be to carry out the death sentence. He was a soldier and that was what he did. However, that wasn’t a choice, but a compulsion to meet danger with violence. Instinct whispered that more than his own conscience rested on this choice.

The Falcon had entrusted judgment to Taleel—friendship, a burden Talazar could not shake. *An unnecessary burden*, thought Taleel. As a Swordkeeper, he was the Legion’s touchstone, upright and unflinching, unfailing in his dedication to the strict tenets of the Swordpath. He was the sword of the Legion and, one way or another, his cuts fell heavy. Taleel had always followed a very straight, very narrow road.

‘He could not make the choice.’ Lorel stopped, his eyes, two iron points, watching Taleel emotionlessly. He nodded. ‘Would you use that now, Swordkeeper?’

Taleel felt the sword’s comfortable weight in his hand and how his body responded to the bared blade: his heart was pounding, hands steady, time slow. ‘I could.’

‘But that begs the question.’ There was a hint of laughter in his voice. Taleel refused to understand this man: soft and hard at the same time, always half-mocking and aloof—like he’d seen and done it all. ‘Should you?’

I hold his life on my sword and he laughs at me, thought Taleel.

Lorel smiled. ‘Have you noticed that we sound the same?’

Taleel frowned. ‘No.’

‘What does that tell you?’ said Lorel. ‘About you? About me?’

Taleel had no answer. Shrugging off the silence, Lorel loped away again, cutting a tunnel through the fog. Darkness filled the space between them. Sheathing his sword, Taleel was forced to follow or remain stranded in the shadows. Snow began to fall in cloudy drifts. He followed, but his shadow hesitated for an instant then trudged after him.

Taleel couldn’t suppress a shiver. ‘Where are the stars?’

Lorel halted at the head of a wide defile that opened onto the wooded fringes of the Southspire Bastion. Tracts of ragged hills, haired with sparse copses of conifer and pine, extended north from blue-tinged mountains. It was a broken land of stunted grass and powdered stone—a wilderness where solitary things died from exposure. Beyond, the Seatroad River curled and, branching with a hundred tributaries, slashed across the region like the discarded skin of a giant serpent.

Rumours in the capital spoke of gold and silver bared in shallow riverbeds, and the Imperial Seat had always been accommodating to those frontier sorts seeking footholds into riches. Mining contracts were awarded to any able to prove desire—contracts were plentiful. Stake and claim were to be made and local elements suppressed, supplanted, or subsumed.

Before long, solid fact penetrated bureaucratic greed: the land was good for nothing but trout farming and mud speculation. Imperial interests tapered dramatically. The legislative finger atrophied, then fell away. Left on their own, prospectors and mining families were effectively abandoned to the hard and fast law of survival. Not surprisingly, the clink of hammer and pick was quickly muffled by the predations of bandits, mercenaries, bravos, no-hopers, tricksters, thieves, and cut-throats. They called their frontier township Restspire.

A half-truth covering the real prize, thought Lorel, scanning the lead sky for birds.

The ruins.

Rising beneath the mountains like the bones of some giant sea-creature, towers stood balefully, cenotaphs to a departed people. Crumbling into cleft and crevice, they'd been devoured by passing years. When Lorel had crossed the mountains, those ruins were empty, stripped bare and abandoned without name or memory. And yet some inexplicable, hidden, subtle agenda had positioned the Imperial Seat towards the Southspire under the guise of wealth. Try as he might, Lorel couldn't shake the feeling that something important was waiting in its silent, sleeping stone.

'Do they still work these parts?' The Swordkeeper picked frost from his sword's crossguard.

Lorel frowned at the man's single-mindedness and pointed to the shallow delta of a muddy river. 'If we follow the river we will come to Restspire.'

'You think she's in there?' The Swordkeeper grunted. 'An *Imperial Carer* in a warren of mercenaries and criminals?'

'Perhaps,' he said, pulling his cloak tight. He set off towards the river. 'Either way ...'

The Swordkeeper crunched behind. 'Either way?'

Lorel sighed. Day by day, the Swordkeeper was becoming more like him, moving like him, acting like him—it was in the way he watched, the way he breathed. It was not a change, but a ... solidifying—as if his character were setting in a mould. And Lorel had seen the ghost again, watching their confrontation last night, standing in the fog, holding some kind of flameless lantern. Since he'd first seen it in Jeflom's tent, Lorel swore that its body was clearer, less translucent. It was getting stronger—more real ... present. 'Can't you feel it, Swordkeeper?'

'It?'

'Witness the earth'—Lorel faced the Swordkeeper—'and tell me what you perceive.'

For a moment the Swordkeeper held Lorel's gaze, then looked around, near then far, his eyes quick and sharp.

Training imprinted it into the fibres of his body, thought Lorel. Every inch a product of imperial will.

'We're standing on the lip of a bowl and the ground is squared like roughly hewn steps leading to the river,' said the Swordkeeper. 'Little to no cover. Large rocks, west faces covered by moss. No trees, bare shrubs. Uneven terrain—shallow dells and flattened hills. The river, frozen, turns behind its mouth, hidden between two granite spurs. A frozen waterfall. No animals.'

Lorel nodded, retracting his mental senses; his attempt at minor translation—the heating of the air around his body—had found no usable energy and failed. It was a wasteland.

'Succinct, but what you see is not all that is see-able.' He squatted, ran his fingers over the frozen earth, and started to hum. 'The earth is dying here. Even in winter's bite life persists, but there is no struggle here. Something has drained this area empty.'

Taleel looked over the defile again. 'So what?'

Lorel continued as if he hadn't heard, tasting a faint sourness in the air. 'You can see it, feel it. Taste the air. There are tracks all over this place, but not a trace of life. Have you noticed that there are no snow drifts?'

'Drifts?'

'It snowed last night, and yet... ' Lorel gestured at the dry dirt. 'Curious, no?'

The Swordkeeper narrowed his eyes, shifting his weight to the balls of his feet: a spring ready to explode.

'This place has forgotten the touch of wind, water and sun,' whispered Lorel. 'It is *void*. A crumbling shell of cracks and dust, breaking apart under the strain of its own nothingness.'

The sky spewed clouds that spat incandescent forks of light. Thunder groaned. The ground heaved, widening the desiccated fissures like wounds being pulled apart. Wind stabbed up from the fractured earth and dark stains welled with the scent of burning hair.

'Run!' Lorel pointed towards the frozen river, his words swallowed by the approaching storm. He could feel the slick taint of the monstrous shapes forming in the clouds.

Boulders broke free of gravity and hurtled into the gale only to crash like meteorites, carving deep gouges into emaciated soil. The earth screamed. Glancing over his shoulder, Lorel saw the clouds descend in churning funnels that disgorged gleaming pools of bituminous sludge.

'They have arrived, Swordkeeper,' said Lorel, his words muted and slow as if spoken under water. Vision spots, heart thump ... thump ... thump ... and the darkness became a rolling desert of wriggling sastrugi and glassy dunes. Rotten vegetables coated the back of his mouth. The Swordkeeper retched.

We're caught now anyway, thought Lorel, preparing to shift into the Sight.

With a conscious flick, Lorel altered his perception to pierce the spectrum of the in-between, connecting his perceptual filters with the Law's unconscious gestalt—uncovering what lay beneath reality without plunging into the dreamscape. Grey expanded over the land, as he opened himself fractionally to the Law. It was like looking at a bleached landscape punctuated by points of extreme colour; rainbow hues and matte saturation, shimmering cascades and mottled shades. Despairingly he faced the darkness and recoiled. It drank the light, absorbing all the colours of the world into its paralysing, absolute, entropic nothingness.

The Darkkin were coming.

Flowers bobbed on the water, fanning ripples across the mirror-pool. A breeze through the cedars fanned petals red, green and yellow, across the water, through Lorel's pale reflection: a stranger with sunken grey eyes, dark hair, and hollow cheeks.

I need to eat, he thought, dipping his hands into the water, merging with his mirrored self. The garden was quiet, an improbable oasis in the capital's urban sprawl. Water trickled from a narrow canal skirting the recovery complex attached to the rear of the Carer's House. Maples brushed red-fringed leaves over gold-green grass. Tall conifers cast dappled shade and a solitary willow cast its silvery tresses into the canal, fishing like an old man with a stooped back.

Other patients stepped through vibrant flower beds, their feet bruising herbs that lent the air a kitchen's nose. His stomach growled. Left to drift in the moonlight and the gentle slosh of lapping water, Lorel understood why travellers from all over the Empire came to sit by the Carer's House and find peace.

That and the tree, he thought.

Straight from legend, the great oak was a soaring tower. Rising from within the House, it thrust thirty storeys into the sky, spreading a canopy of golden leaves that wavered over several city blocks. Come noon the sun fired the foliage with a golden aurora and, gazing up, the tree seemed to have gathered all the firmament's stars into a great lamp. When the moon was full, a long reflecting pool beneath its boughs would paint its pale bark in flowing mercury.

Its planting was a hazy memory—protected by the same levy that held back the flood of bitter experience that threatened to wash Lorel away. He recalled snatches of the ancient singing, older than the Empire itself. It had been his best composition. But he had forgotten the phrases and lost the notes. He sighed. It wasn't noon and the moon was a shy crescent. The tree was just a tree, and he was itchy and hungry. Good signs of a healing body.

I have no future, he thought, just an endlessly repeating past.

'How much more is there?' Lorel scratched absently at his bandages. 'Give out the keys and you'll find the doors thrown open.'

Those tracts of his memory left unrestricted opened up: a procession of faces drifting in from the dusty, neglected rooms in the mansion of his past. He saw them clearly, all the people he had met, had moved, had ... changed. Regardless of love or hate, fear and awe, understanding alighted on each face. Whatever he had done, whatever he had given, whatever he had denied, it was their unreserved acceptance that hunted him through eternity. And it horrified him. As Lorel parsed through these parts of his life, he hated all his good intentions, despised the havoc they'd caused.

'They will have to make their own choices now,' Lorel whispered, knowing just how difficult that would be: he had written himself into the fabric of their society, unbalancing

every equation, leaving perilous remainders. Somehow he had to remove his active influence from the pattern of their lives.

‘I didn’t think I’d find you here, Lorel,’ said Marlee, sitting beside him to scoop a tiny flower from the water. Her clothes were stained from surgery and blood clung to her fingers.

‘Where else?’ Lorel shifted, trying to get a better look at her face. They were adrift in time and together again. He blinked Oreel away.

‘Don’t you soldiers live on the practice yard?’ she asked. People called out from the trees and Marlee waved in response.

‘That’s where a soldier begins to earn a living, yes.’

‘Earn a living ...’ she echoed quietly. ‘Aren’t you sick of fighting? The killing?’ Marlee looked down at the flower crumpled in her hands, then scattered the crumpled petals.

‘A soldier kills because that is what his training dictates.’ Lorel heard how hollow the words were, spoken to shield guilt and used by the weak to live beyond consequence.

‘That’s not nearly enough,’ she said. ‘Why do *you* do it?’

‘Because it is my duty.’

‘Spare me that imperial rhetoric,’ she shouted into the silence of furtive listeners. Wind slid into the garden, salty and fresh. ‘I’ve seen too many corpses ... and you don’t believe it, anyway.’

I need it though, at times, he thought, so I can forget Lellorian and call myself Lorel.

‘I fight so others will not have to.’

‘No,’ she said, barely a whisper. ‘You give too much.’

Lorel extended his mind. He didn’t like Reading people, but he had to know. He brushed her surface thoughts, catching tiny emotional markers, barely enough to separate the subtle data. He met no resistance, nothing to suggest she had been trained by the Tower’s subtle, world-blind, mind-benders.

Lorel studied her warily. 'I fight because there is nothing more I can do.'

'There's nothing to your life but death?' Water splashed across Lorel's face as she slapped his reflection. 'That's the meaning of your life?'

'I have no meaning!' He rocked to his feet; suddenly she was too close, he was too open. Pain ripped across his chest. 'I fight because it's the only choice I've never had to make!'

'You're wrong.' Marlee whispered, standing before Lorel, blurring into something he thought he wanted more than anything else. Her hands were cool on his cheek.

Without looking he pulled them away, but could not let them go. He winced. 'You don't understand what it means to truly fight.'

'I ...'

'The instinct for life, if left unchecked, can reap destruction as well as any heart's desire to end it all,' said Lorel, holding back tears as he paraphrased the beliefs of his people. 'Life and death must find balance.'

'What about love?'

'I cannot afford to love or be loved,' said Lorel, glimpsing the madness that waited behind that tempting door.

'I don't believe you!'

He sighed. 'Immaterial.'

'There's more in you than that, otherwise why be here? You've given so much and asked for nothing. Choose something for yourself.'

Lorel tried to fool himself into thinking her words were for the soldier's uniform he wore. Some were forced into it, a jacket bursting at the seams, while others put it on and let it dissolve into their flesh. He'd tried for the latter, but his true nature was beginning to slip through.

When he opened his eyes, she was gone, and golden light spilled around the mighty oak to settle over the garden. Lorel's bandages were soaked dark with blood old and new. The wound had opened. He sat and let his head fall back, welcoming the passing warmth into his pores. He sung quietly and the bandages flashed white. A burning sensation, a dull pop, and blood was gone. Uncoiling the bandage's scratchy cocoon, he recalled a conversation overheard years before.

Returned victorious from the Outlance Dispute, two spearman had stood the second watch and shared a laugh. During the final battle, one had been gravely wounded and, fearing for his friend's life, the other had carried him to a Carer. After an entire night's ministrations, the feverish spearman was snatched from death's door and reunited with his, now joyous, unit. Lorel had thought it a fitting story and had turned to leave. However, their laughter was not of joy.

His friend had asked, 'Why d'you blush at the Carer when she calls?'

'She's in me head, man! The spearman replied. 'Seeing the swelling in me trousers before they'd had the inkling to swell.' Their laughter had echoed in the darkness.

She was in me head ... Lorel thought.

His recent experience in the Carer's Hall revealed something deeper in the soldiers' exchange, something intrinsic to a Carer's healing-bind. He couldn't be certain, but it seemed that when a Carer made contact with a patient, took control of their flesh via nerve simpatico, a conduit was created. Something other than healing passed between the skin and, not unlike a Reader, a Carer could lift your thoughts. He glanced at his chest; the wound had healed without the scar—some songs never leave you. Lorel's heartbeat timed itself with heavy booms, beating a panicked rhythm to pounding thoughts.

She knows. She knows. She knows.

Taleel watched the unfolding darkness resolve into hulking nightmares: a host of grotesque suggestions composed of febrile smoke. Muscles bulged and hair lengthened. Red eyes burned like banked coals and long blades gleamed from iron armour that, like a beetle's carapace, protruded from their bodies as if welded to flesh. They reeked of sick-bed sweat.

'Swordkeeper!' Lorel shouted. 'You must buy us time.'

'What?' Taleel whirled but Lorel was already elsewhere, eyes clenched shut, hands pressed together and trembling violently as if he were struggling to pry them apart. Training took control, overriding doubt, re-asserting purpose: never pray on the battlefield—use your hands to carry forth glory for the Empire. Forgetting Lorel, Taleel drew his sword, calmed by the familiar squeal of steel and leather.

'Father,' he whispered. 'I've kept my sword sharp.'

'Sometimes a lick of polish is needed so honest steel can shine,' his father said, smoothing a crease in Taleel's tunic. They had woken before dawn, shared a hurried, cold breakfast, and blundered sleepily into empty streets. They marched unobtrusively by shuttered windows, darkened, but warm with tempting smell of sweet egg-bread. Taleel's feet lagged—breakfast hadn't reached his growling stomach yet. Dressed in his finest clothes, Taleel followed doggedly as his father stomped ahead, carrying something in tightly wrapped oilcloth against his chest. The clothes itched.

'I know, I know.' His father grabbed his hand and pulled him along with a smile.

'We all have to give up some things.'

'Why?'

His father seemed to be asking himself the same question and his answer was slow. ‘Only by giving something up can anything be gained.’

It was not long before they had passed out of the familiarity of their neighbourhood in the Trade Quarter, through the waking bazaars squashed into Crescent Market, to walk the squares and colonnades of the Merchant’s Constellation. Beyond that stretched the Imperial Enclave whose white marble and red-brick buildings stood beside towering statues and gurgling fountains.

Two sentries stopped them before a basalt gate ribbed with silver. His father told them that his son was to be inducted into the Blade Hall, producing a scroll signed by the Blademaster himself. They bowed solemnly and opened the gate. Taleel grinned. His father grimaced queasily.

Sprawled over an entire city block, the Blade Hall bubbled with cupolas tiled blue and grey, every surface stamped with the mountain-and-sword motif of the Imperial Seat. A mighty oak grew from some unseen room within, spiking the sky, blocking the sun. It was an enclosed world dedicated to training the officers of the Imperial Legions and the Legion’s Swordkeepers. Hundreds of circular steps fronted the Hall’s gigantic, arched doors which, carved with intricate reliefs, chronicled the building’s glorious history. An honour guard of steel colossi—the Swordkeepers of old—watched the steps, their faces grim, each brandishing an enormous sword razor honed.

‘Why is there a tree growing out of it?’ Taleel had already mounted the first step, drawn by the Empire’s heroes.

‘The tree?’ His father squatted in the road and unrolled the oilcloth. ‘They say a wanderer without a home carried the old clans to the Mirrormount and he cast a seed into its waters. And that seed became a golden oak and he said its roots would bind the clans as one in peace.’

‘Father?’ Taleel had never heard the story.

‘Never mind, son, some stories don’t deserve the telling.’ His father put aside the oilcloth and in his hands was a straight, single-edged sword. Acid etching scrolled about the narrow blade: a twisting map of the Outlance Satrapy in attenuated topography. ‘I made this for you, Taleel. A true blade, for a true heart.’

‘Me?’

His father nodded gravely. ‘Promise me: you will work good, and only good, with this steel. My steel, now yours.’

Sliding the sword from his father’s calloused hands, Taleel nodded unsurely; the weight felt strange, the balance alien, and the sword seemed to move by itself.

‘Your steel, now mine. I promise,’ Taleel said, marching up the steps, shoulders set, sword pointed before him.

‘Taleel!’

He spun about, effortlessly catching the small grey stone, and laughed. It was a whetstone. His father waved. ‘Make sure you keep it sharp!’

Taleel fought nausea. Beyond identification, the monsters were a mess of fangs and tusks and horns, mismatched limbs, spitting bile with feral snarls; they were everything and nothing, cobbled together from nightmare. He swept past two of the creatures, slashing through flesh and bone, dancing in smoke that spewed from their gaping wounds. Acid coated his sword, their blood etching the steel like woodworm.

He moved like no other soldier alive. He was a Swordkeeper, beyond the human norm—forged, trained, remade, sharpened. Nearly unconscious with the release of pure, instinctual reaction Taleel was frenzy contained by straining muscles. The sword moved and

he went with it, blind and deaf to everything but the fight; seeing only foe, hearing only the slam of his heart.

Blocking a vicious swipe, his feet scraped over the ground a full yard. With an uncaring abandon, the creatures pressed in, were chopped down, trampled their dead, and attacked like madmen. Leaden arms, gasping chest, he fought sheer exhaustion, boiling lead pumping through his veins. Blood splattered his face, slicked his hands. He was being pushed back. Step by step by step, the gap between Taleel and Lorel was closing.

Denying every angle, the creatures closed and Taleel knew he was fighting a losing struggle. His sword continued to zip in sweeping arcs, spinning through his hands with dizzying speed, slashing flesh, chopping bones. Animal screams, like half-formed words, tore from inhuman throats. Drawing a ragged breath, he stalled, leaped back, and the creatures hesitated, giving him a tiny opening. It was all the opportunity a Swordkeeper needed.

Blurring the line between grace and speed, he charged into the enemy, throwing his body into a fluid, screwing spin. Cleaver-like claws and snapping jaws flicked around his face, between his legs, past his chest. Taleel was a storm that could not be stopped, could not be slowed. Howling in rage, three of the creatures stumbled, their balance upset by his implacable onslaught. He dropped to his knees and opened their bellies, the rancid, pickled smell barely registering as five more sprang forward to take their place. Ululating cries broke against his ears in hammering waves. His nose bled. Lungs choked. Blackness eddied. Numbness stole his legs. Death beckoned. But using the final dregs of his failing strength, Taleel leant heavily on the dictates of his oaths.

I am the sword of the Empire.

I am the will of the people.

I am the blade of the many.

I am the Legion of one.

Red eyes and black mouths blotted out the sky, stained the sun. Blood seeped from jagged cuts along his arms and legs. Taleel fell, yelling incoherently at Lorel

The world shattered ...

... flashes whitegreenblue etiolated into limpid lead. Stillness for moments. Then, a rush of white noise, deafening in earth dissolve. A million fragments tumbling in an infinite vortex. Taleel's skin frayed and parted as his flesh unwound into ruptured threads ...

... pieces resolved and congregated out of the vortex, spinning like some monolithic spool that fed the strands of Taleel into the broken pieces of the earth. Bound, unbound, rebound. He was just a single part, a tiny strand in a universal weave of disproportionate analogues that, spinning like a bobbin, was being re-written and re-used ...

... into a listing globe, revolving on an invisible axis, tilted, patterned with unnumbered points of light demarcating continent and city. Shadows and stillness amidst constant, immutable velocity. Rushing lights, falling stars, and clouding mist roared in and past his ears then ... blackness. A blanket hot and close. Eons flew and black dissolved to white. Then ... flickering grey was steeped in colour, focussed, refocused, resolving into a portrait of the real world. Taleel breathed in the smell of damp and wood-smoke and something far, far worse.

'You can open your eyes, Swordkeeper.' The voice was Lorel's—distant and flat.

Why isn't he screaming? thought Taleel. It was like nothing out of the ordinary had happened, as if the world hadn't ended and been put back together.

Lorel helped Taleel to his feet. 'I apologize for the tardiness of our relocation, but close proximity to ... what you call the Void, places extreme strain on the scaffolding that stabilises the jump. Intricacies of the combative elements, aberrant intrusions ...'

Taleel didn't hear the rest, his thoughts fixated on the madness that had consumed the Tower and spewed out in those ... things.

Jump? he thought, shivering in the cold, shivering because some of that power had worked on him, around him. 'Where is ... here?' He opened his eyes and vomited.

Lorel sniffed. 'Restspire.'

Marlee sat by the pool surrounded by whispering children. Laced between the trees, woven through the flowerbeds, glass-panelled lamps split tiny flames into glowing patterns—a tiny cosmos twinkling amidst rustling leaves and curling roots. Cinnamon wafted off the canals with a hint of sweet pastries cooked by the evening's water-hawkers. Boats slipped through the night; the soft splash of oar and barge-pole accompanying the crackle of torches that fired the glassy waterways with quicksilver ripples. Steersmen voiced sing-song cries, answering one another in a language all their own. Zither spoke jauntily with wood pipes. Revellers laughed and danced, out celebrating the Festival of Lights.

Gardens and squares were decked with torches and gaslights and candles that mirrored the glimmering constellations. At the end of the night, candles would be left smoking and the fairy lights broken, their glass ground into the cobbles or swept dutifully into the canals and forgotten. Every year the detritus of wax and paper lanterns was swept into the canals and Lorel could only wonder at how many years had accreted on the bottom.

Sighing wistfully, Lorel returned to watching Marlee's class from under the hoary, old willow; soon the evening lesson would end and the garden claimed by crowds of tired pilgrims. She was demonstrating how to bandage a broken arm. Face beaming, a young girl held her hypothetical injury bravely while it was carefully wrapped in strips of white linen.

Then the class paired off and the children tried their hardest to embalm one another: faces were covered, feet tied and hands bound.

Fresh flowers of laughter bloomed. More bandage than patient, one boy had chosen speed over accuracy. His patient was gone, replaced with a mummified beast shuffling about blindly. Waving its arms, the little monster stumbled into a cluster of elusive prey, growling viciously, thrashed its head from side to side. It teetered towards the reflecting pool and the children gasped. But, before it could leap the water, Marlee scooped it up and, unmasking its face, returned a grinning boy back to his classmates. Lorel chuckled and two dozen faces turned to regard the willow.

‘The tree is laughing at Matteo!’

‘Matteo made Mr. Willow come alive!’

‘If I was a tree I’d be laughing too!’

‘Who’s there? Marlee, there’s someone by the tree.’

‘Willowman! Willowman!’

‘Where, Tasmilli? I can’t see?’

‘Perhaps our visitor would like to introduce himself?’ Marlee drifted away from the pool, hands on her hips in mock sternness. ‘Or we’ll have to report that a tree has woken up with the voice of a hero.’

The children cicada whispered—*He...ro. He...ro.*

Emerging from his shadows, Lorel bowed extravagantly. ‘Pardon me, gentle Carer, my laughter was meant not for children, but all the world’s blind, little monsters.’

‘Monsters ...’ Marlee repeated suspiciously, gazing at her half-embalmed class.

‘And I’m no hero.’

A chorus of questions spilled out of the children in jumbled clumps.

‘Haveyoufoughtinawarandweretheremonsters?’

‘Doyouhaveasworddoyouhaveanyscars?’

‘Whereareyoufromaretherelaughingtreesthere?’

Marlee shook her head and Lorel laughed. ‘So many questions,’ he said. ‘And I fear my answer would be far too long this close to bed. Perhaps a story? Teacher permitting?’

‘Please, Marlee. Please, please, please. Marleeeee.’

‘Alright,’ she relented to hooting applause. ‘Alright, but you’ll have to work doubly hard tomorrow.’

‘Yes, Marlee. We will, Marlee. Thank you, Marlee!’

After waiting for silence, Lorel began his story.

‘Send your minds back, back, back to a time before your fathers, before all your grandmothers. A time full of before. Before iron. Before ships. Before the planting of trees and the ...? Yes, the buzzing of bees. Even before our Empire.

‘Keep going back and you will find a land in a time before stars. It was there that a tree began to grow under the light of sun and moon. And eating much from such rich food, the tree grew bigger and bigger and bigger. Days would stretch its trunk and pull out new branches; nights would dye its leaves and make its bark glow. Months passed, years went, and the tree reached out, sending long roots into the earth, turning the path of rivers, pushing up mountains, and transforming seas to salt. But it was not enough. The tree yearned to touch the lights that gave it life.

‘The tree strained against the world’s heavy soil. It wanted to soar. It needed to shine. But its thirst was deep and it loved the embrace of cool earth. Silly, you say, Matteo? Perhaps. But a tree is not a boy ... or a girl, Tasmilli. A tree is a tree, and a tree thinks its own thoughts. Twig and trunk, it dreamed of unfathomable heights, while its roots sought ever for the deepest, unknown waters. One half above, one half below, inseparable and separate.

‘Years and years and years. But what are years to a tree?’

‘After the earth had spun itself a face, taking great blocks of time and carving them into hills and ravines, the tree had nearly touched the sun. With a final spurt, it caused a single leaf to sprout on the tip of a twig on the topmost branch and, brushing the sun’s fiery skin, the tree was masked in flame. Heat upon heat upon heat upon heat, fire flowed down the tree like water. Leaves turned to cinders, branches hissed and burst, but the great trunk, armoured with thick bark, was slow to burn.

‘It bleached white, glowed crimson, fired orange-blue, then wept black. And having consumed the whole of the tree, the flames turned and ate themselves. Smaller and smaller they became, flaring hotter and hotter, brighter and white-brighter, until nothing remained but a tiny ball of purest light. Exploding in a flash of silver, that light threw the black bones of the blackened tree into the far reaches of empty space.

‘Yet, where the sun was rage, the moon was kind and understood something of being alone in the dark. So the moon walked the night, past the sleeping sun, and gathered up the broken pieces of the great tree. Holding those pieces close, the moon caused charred leaves to brush against its face and leave tears of soot. In turn, the pieces of the tree were soothed in moonlight. Then, with a great breath, the moon set those moonlit pieces as lamps in the darkness. So it was that the stars were born.

‘During this time, the tree’s deepest roots had not been idle. Having destroyed branch and trunk, the fire’s heat had travelled underground and beneath the breathless earth the sun’s ire was finally quenched. Yet, its memory remained and the roots yearned to see the light that had illuminated their life for the briefest moment. The roots rose and breaking through stone and dirt, breathed air, and greened the world with a million new trees.

‘Children, Tasmilli? Yes, they were the great tree’s children, knowing not to reach too high, knowing not to want what cannot be claimed. With balance they grew, knowing the

warmth of the sun and the moon caress. They were content, above and below, living in two worlds, growing to so great a number that they mirrored all the heaven's stars.'

He fell silent and stared at the bright lights fixed in the children's eyes.

Lorel shook off the memory. The ghost smiled slightly, dropped his pen, and the past sank back, submerged in time, swallowed in a hadal zone of painful recollection. It followed Lorel like a shadow, surround by spectral books and phantom buildings—an apparition intruding, pushing, prodding, as if Lorel's life was an object to be studied, picked through ... altered. He blinked and it vanished.

Smoke wormed in thick ropes over patches of grass burned to the colour of bone. The Swordkeeper was losing the battle with his stomach, but Lorel couldn't fault him. Charred bodies smouldered in heaped pyres, rendered fat pooling under disjointed limbs bent past human limit. Ash fell.

In the swirling grey of the Sight, Lorel found no trace of the Darkkin, but obscure shimmers winked and rippled—puckered scars that drew reality into themselves like scrunched-up parchment.

What is that? he thought, sending his mind out in a tight spiral. Sifting back through the normal spectrums, Lorel examined the earth and discovered nothing but the footprints of men, women, and children. But there was something off about them, a certain passive element in stark contradiction to the massacre's barbaric violence.

'Restspire?' The Swordkeeper wiped a hand across his mouth, swallowing hard. 'What happened?'

‘No suspicions, Swordkeeper?’ Lorel focussed on the footprints, estimating gait, imagining the scene, but they were too far apart, too irregular for a proper read.

‘Better coming from you’—Taleel spat—‘considering where we are and how we got here.’

‘Very well.’ Lorel nodded absently, stepping carefully around piles of bones on ruddy coals. The puzzle of the footprints would have to wait and their translocation had leeches far more energy than he’d hoped. ‘The Darkkin, they are ... twisted constructs set free by the Tower’s breaking. They are rage and annihilation anthropomorphised. And the method of our arrival? A World-jump.’

The Swordkeeper blinked. ‘World-jump?’

‘The conscious representation of the material and psychical planes projected onto the unconscious manifestation of what you might call a shared dream space, used to dictate and direct a linear movement between two discrete, identifiable places or consciousnesses.’

‘I’ll take your word for it.’

‘Will you?’ Lorel asked, noting how the Swordkeeper tensed. ‘Does your choice dictate such action?’

‘My choice?’ said the Swordkeeper, hesitating fractionally. ‘Until I make my choice, I’ll follow your lead in this fool-headed quest. But make no mistake, Voidstalker, I’ll kill you if I have to. I won’t let my land fall to darkness.’

That’s the one thing you can’t change, Swordkeeper, thought Lorel, studying what remained of Restspire. *Not now ... no matter your choice.*

Crumbling buildings were fire-blasted husks, burned to their frames like charred cadavers. Everything was streaked with soot and the town’s stonework, what little was left, was blistered, ruptured, chunks blasted away leaving glossy wounds. Glass had melted from window frames like wax. The streets were empty and silent. The town had simply stopped.

‘I guess that will have to do.’ Lorel scanned the distant buildings. ‘We must be swift.’

We come to it now, he thought bitterly. His mental probe quivered infinitesimally—a familiar pattern. *Marlee ... I am sure of it ... and someone, something else.*

Giggling zipped in, close for a second then gone, running through the alleyways, sounding, silent—a thing of half-heard snippets and tricky games. Lorel’s hands itched for his sword. Moving smoothly behind, the Swordkeeper was almost impossible to figure, his thoughts opaque and sharp—a blade splitting all of Lorel’s probes.

Head to heart, the man is a sword, he thought.

Like the Darkkin, the Swordkeeper was a symptom of the Empire’s systemic failure, its inherent violence. When the Tower had broken and the paper-thin walls holding the feuding lords at bay fallen to ruin, natural tendencies had asserted themselves in their most destructive aspects. Civilisation had collapsed. The high lords had struck out greedily, while minor nobility was a group now synonymous with in-fighting and assassination; factions splintered, alliances dissolved; and the shattered remnants of the Tower had obliterated any notion of trust, loyalty, or hope. Everything wanted to tear itself apart and Lorel was approaching a pivotal moment where choice and action were rapidly coming to a head. And all he could see, all he could think about, was her face.

This is what I have done, thought Lorel. *This is the reality I created when I left Abode.*

The giggling ripped in louder, the cackling of a madman around every corner. ‘Hold firm to your training, Swordkeeper,’ Lorel said softly. ‘Pay it no heed.’

‘You hear it too?’

‘I hear it.’ Lorel flicked his head towards a scorched tree, its burning branches spread wide and writhing. The dying wood squealed. In dusk’s dying light, the shadows should have skewed east, not falling into the street, pulling away, reaching out, grasping desperately for Lorel and the Swordkeeper—they were alive. ‘Look to the shadows.’

They stopped before the scorched façade of a brooding building, its roughly hewn door splintered and strewn about the entrance, painted with dust and blood. It was a gaping, Leviathan's mouth opening into the furthest, crushing depths. Taleel whispered something, but Lorel didn't catch it as he was swallowed by aphotic darkness.

Rain had poured into the city for two days, slapping against stone, skin, and waterways in gauzy sheets. Water walked the streets, flooding the canals, drowning alleyways, and parkland in steadily rising pools. Lorel listened to the pattering tattoo as he dressed, cool air inveigling its way into his room through half-open shutters. The Carer's garden encroached with fragrant suggestions of orange blossom and lavender. He had been recalled by the Tower. The fools were worried.

During his recovery, Lorel had been subjected to a constant stream of Imperial notaries, scribblers and bookkeepers, repeatedly asking for recollection and detail, clarification, amplification. For them, the transformation of his Voidstalker brethren was an unwanted complication, an *unfortunate incident*. In the end, Lorel's words meant next to nothing to them. Unofficially, he'd been heard—officially, his words were wrong, required revision, needed forgetting. Details were expunged, replaced by the Tower's official lies. He'd quickly dismissed the scribes and their *official* intelligence, shooing away their obsequious, mosquito manners.

Then, on the heels of these mewling toadies, the Tower had sent a dusty Translator who nodded through thinly veiled implications of censure and the resolute consequences. The man was a pompous moron, a smirking slug. He ignored Lorel's account, preferring to continuously transmute a stone cube into a wooden sphere, then back again. When Lorel had

finished, the man demurred that *his story would* remain consistent with the *official* report or ‘the Voidstalker would come to understand the true meaning of castigation’. In other words, what Lorel had seen in the Void (the Tower’s infantile appreciation of the Law and the Dream) had never happened.

The impossible won’t be denied, he thought, cinching his belt. *And once the box is open you cannot decide what comes out.*

The Tower’s truth—its stock of the possible—was myopically prosaic. *Clearly*, they claimed, the other Voidstalkers had suffered an ‘as-yet-to-be-identified emotional duress’; this duress was to be understood as a symptom of extreme stress; the *obvious* result of this stress was, lamentably, a complete mental dissolution not dissimilar to a psychotic break. These were the ‘learned findings of council’, leaving no room for ‘their servant’s maudlin and, disrespectfully unhelpful speculations.’ Furthermore, ‘as he served at the Tower’s discretion, oaths should be remembered, duty adhered to, and any thoughts of speaking out quashed’. Whatever fabrications the Tower used to console its hidebound pride, Lorel feared that something *was* out there, something *had* used the connections of the Law, something *did invade* the minds and bodies of those two Voidstalkers.

Marlee entered, her face flushed, breath shallow. Gone was the Carer’s attire, replaced by hugging trousers, heavy boots, a serviceable tunic, and a padded, leather jerkin.

‘What’re you doing with that?’ said Lorel, buttoning his shirt, uncomfortably aware of her closeness. He nodded to the dagger on her hip. Marlee never, not ever, carried weapons.

Another transformation? he thought.

‘Leaving without a word?’ she said.

‘You know my words.’

‘I’m sorry for what happened.’ She bit her lip and reached out to touch him, hesitated, rocked back. ‘I didn’t mean it.’

This close, he could almost feel the fuzzy warmth of her in his head. Desert rocks heated in the sun. 'Leave it, Marlee.'

'I can't.' She stood in his way.

Why does she have to look like Oreel?

'It's too dangerous,' said Lorel, glancing at the dagger, turning away. 'There's no telling what you might become.'

'And if I don't go? What would I be then?'

Lorel shook his head; she was caught in it now, a part of his pattern and, just like his father, his people, the Empire, the Tower, Tarmiz, and Oreel, she would fall. 'Didn't you hear my story? The parable is universally applicable.'

'I know.'

'And still you persist in this?' Lorel whirled to face her. Moonlight dusted the room in silver and blue. She was crying. Lorel felt wrung out, defeated. 'What do you want from me?'

'I want you to live.'

'That's all I do.'

'No,' she whispered. The pain in her voice flattened Lorel. Oreel had said the same thing. Oreel had felt the same way. Oreel had died. 'You move from moment to moment, year to year. The man who exists forever, but never lives a day for himself.'

'Unfair.'

'What does fair have to do with it? Forgive yourself.'

'I was able to see the future ... once.' Lorel leant on the window. In the darkness the garden was suggestion and hints, defined by uncertain shapes from memory. 'But I can't remember what was revealed—the vision broke me.'

'What?'

‘Insanity, I believe, has its benefits,’ said Lorel distantly, trying to remember a story populated by silhouettes. ‘I looked at a future and the result ... well, such madness has a price ... and a protection. There was a ... shape to events and I lost myself, what I had been. In return, this ... Lorel was made with no memory of prophecy. He is more *human* that way.’

‘What does one thing have to do with the other?’

‘Living is dangerous and the stakes too high.’

‘I’ve joined the Third Legion,’ she said. ‘Part of the triage unit.’

‘I know.’ Lorel bowed his head. He’d seen the Falcon crest embossed on her dagger’s pommel. ‘But what life can you hope to have with me?’

Marlee stepped close behind him. ‘The same one you live.’

‘And it has stripped away the best parts of me.’ The room dissolved and the past unwound. Trees shot up around him, auburn autumn on their branches. His mother stood behind, watching Lorel disappear in the darkness of the mountains. ‘Perhaps, there is nothing better. Perhaps the power to shape the world is too great for any person to wield. My people ...’

‘I know.’

‘Then you know the truth of what I am, what I have done, what I am doing,’ Lorel shouted. The walls were shaking as the Law bled into the room on his self-loathing—radiating, pulsing. He looked down at the window sill—two hand-prints were burned into the wood. ‘There is no life without death, there is always balance. You know about ...’

‘I know.’

‘Why are you trying to change me?’

‘I love you.’

Lorel’s resistance shattered: it was so much easier to deny feelings when they were left unspoken. He scratched at the bandages, but they were long removed. Her eyes held all

the stars he had ever seen, all the falling leaves of *Haro 'Zaman*, all the stories left in his world. Lorel was back in that cave, witnessing the power of primal existence, reliving the moment he had truly left the *Tal'Vari*.

But his path had led to darkness and death and pain. And here she was, another Oreel, offering all there was to offer. That same offer had led the Nomads north, had given birth to an Empire, and killed so many with many more to follow. A millennia ago, Lorel believed he could make a better world and, in his hubris, doomed the north. He was a war criminal with no one to condemn him because no human memory could extend back far enough. And now, here was someone who had peered into his heart and knew him—completely, impossibly knew him. Lorel both feared and cherished what that meant. In a time when everything was hurtling towards death, Marlee was his link to life and it was far more than he deserved.

The building refracted as if Lorel was looking at it through a glass of water. Laughter wheezed, echoing in the darkness, stirring up the smell of damp and long abandoned cold. Mouldering parchments penned in hieroglyphs were scattered and torn, pictograms scrawled in a tiny hand that crammed the papers black. Beads of ink floated in the air, lifted away from the ancient documents, liquefied in saliva drips that clung to Lorel in splotchy tattoos. Several candles bubbled light in dim, dirty circles. Their wicks burned like tarnished steel. Lorel could smell smoke—smoke that came from no candle—and realised his mistake too late. The trap slammed down.

A dislocated gestalt! he thought.

Theoretically, integrating the psychical creations of the Law with material reality to produce a real/unreal manifold was possible, but the computational intricacies, the underlying

quadratics and fractals, required to stabilise the imaginative overlay onto physical parameters was staggeringly complex.

They'd been transported into a tunnel of dense smoke. His footsteps sent languid ripples over the floorboards, rousing spectral tendrils that stuck with powdery webs. Moments slowed. Lorel's mind worked seconds ahead of his body, the impulses fired between nerve and muscle suppressed. Bugs crawled up his spine, over his skin. The Swordkeeper's sword was drawn, seeking something, anything, to strike; the man's eyes were panic-wide whites and saucer pupils. Lorel blinked into the Sight and staggered as kaleidoscopic punctures imprinted his vision with hypnotic amalgams of mutable colours. Unable to focus, he sensed the trap's chromatophoric cascade dilute his connection to the Law. Form and space warped. Vertigo concertinaed and it was all he could do to grip onto consciousness.

He drew his sword and pushed its point into his thigh. Agony surged, but pain was an anchor to reality, clearing the fog about his brain enough to pry a gap in the swirling colours. Lorel squinted and stared at soothing materiality. The Swordkeeper was kneeling beside him, shivering, face strained blue with shock. Lorel mumbled a simple tune into his leg, words slurred, metre indistinct. He felt the skin re-knit, but the healing was sloppy—it would leave a scar.

It will have to do, he thought, swallowing a rush of dizziness.

'What was that?' The Swordkeeper gulped ragged breaths. Shadows moved in and out around them.

'Hold firm, Swordkeeper,' Lorel snapped and the tone of command had an immediate physical effect: the man's breathing slowed and his eyes focussed on Lorel's face. 'We are caught, but not helpless.'

Lorel feared that pure psychic breakdown lurked just below the Swordkeeper's thin veneer of training—learned discipline, ritual, and superstructural morality could shield the basic, human instinct towards terrified collapse so far. And it was only the near indelible sense of duty to the Empire that stalled the Swordkeeper's short descent into a gibbering madman. Lorel applauded the Falcon's perfect sense of irony in unleashing this uncompromising weapon: a weapon fashioned in the shape of Bastion Empire's assumed sense of rightness. Laughter like a rising peal of discordant bells.

High and light ... silver streams ... silver bells.

'I'm all turned around in here,' said the Swordkeeper dreamily. 'Laughter in my head. Just ...'

'Swordkeeper!' Lorel grabbed the wandering man's shoulders, hating himself for what he was about to do. 'I pledge my sword ...'

'... in defence of my brothers.'

'I find my heart ...'

'... in accord with my conscience.'

'I keep my mind ...'

'... in keeping to my duty.'

'I place my life ...'

'... in the hands of the Empire.'

'May your sword reflect the Dawn.'

The Swordkeeper sighed. 'May the Light shield and keep you.'

The Oath had spilled effortlessly from Lorel's lips, his subtle nudging of the Swordkeeper's emotional triggers cementing its affirmative schema over the man's mental fragmentation—the patch looked like an aggressive cancer squatting over the man's brain. He watched warily, as it solidified, became part of the Swordkeeper's cognitive architecture,

grafting onto rigid patterns of trauma. Lorel wondered what it would be like to perceive the word as this man did ... to see everything in terms of potential threat, weakness, and use.

He strode on. Blood trailed off his leg like drool, peeling off towards the silvery candles like scarlet thread. Pausing, he looked into nothingness and felt it staring back. Ahead, Lorel saw the Swordkeeper peering into his own abyss. The trap was a simple loop.

Lorel cleared his throat. 'Behind you, Swordkeeper.'

The Swordkeeper spun, hesitantly lowering his blade. 'How do I know it's you?'

'What choice do you have?' Lorel shrugged. 'Walking is as good as dying.' The laughter buzzed over his teeth and the hall's entrance had vanished, replaced by a strobing pattern of silver spheres on sable. 'And our forever may only be a second ... an instant.'

The Swordkeeper paled. 'What?'

'This projection invests anyone that stumbles past its boundaries,' said Lorel. 'However, unlike most illusory traps that disperse upon the discovery, this one constricts, penetrating the subconscious, freezing the mind into unbreakable acceptance.'

'Then how do we escape?'

There's only one chance, Lorel thought, and it's the most dangerous thing possible.

'Listen.' Lorel knelt, ignoring the smoke creeping up his chest, unsheathed his sword, and placed it across his knees. Leaves glittered. He glanced at the Swordkeeper and saw the man's mouth form a single, silent word: Wanderer.

Now you see me for what I am, Swordkeeper.

'A projection this complex cannot be made then left alone,' Lorel continued, ignoring the man's sudden awe—he needed him on task. 'It must be constantly maintained.'

The Swordkeeper's eyes went dead. 'A Reader.'

Lorel nodded. 'I should be able to trace the illusion and confront them at the source.' He closed his eyes. 'See you on the road less travelled.'

‘What was that?’

But Lorel was already gone.

... disembodied in blackness built in layers. Perception without sense is absence. Vibrations. Harp chords ... music ... Lorel drifted ... floating free until his mind filled the illusion, discovered the coding. Sheet music crammed with harmonies, rising and falling, quiet and subtle. Each separate line of music translating mental function into material analogues: wood, heat, light, and smoke. Staccato blips sat above the mellifluously slurring smoke; high-pitched bursts with echoing brass, loud then gone, loud then gone. Lorel assumed they were the arrhythmic repetitions necessary to approximate flickering torches. Under this, a thrumming bass—constant, deep, ominous—whose minor tones wound out incessantly: the darkness.

Lorel reeled in his mental senses. The trap was disarmingly simple, yet inherently complex: a triptych of darkness, smoke, and lights. He considered each part, factoring their distinct resonant signatures into a series of interlocking equations.

The dark was base and anchor: a visual stimulus meant to confound and halt. The smoke was the jaws and trigger-touching flesh it closed illusion in an infinite loop. Relying on a respiratory spur, the loop tightened like a noose when the smoke entered the respiratory system—every passing second cut off escape. And the lights formed the teeth: visual stimuli working as mimetic bait. Walking towards the light would slowly destroy the ensnared mind with the promise of release, of hope. It was subtle, secure, and deadly.

Perfect ... wait! The torches were silver not orange. In an illusion like this correct illumination/pigmentation is a must. Lorel speared his inner sight into the lights, tracing them back through the staccato pulses, filtering out the black bass and the smoky song.

Pulse. Pulse. Pulse.

Lorel dilated his temporal experience to a trickling flow.

Pulse.

Pulse ...

What is that?

Pulse pulse Pulse..... pulse.

Feedback echo! Lorel thought and, aware that his timing needed to be flawless, waited in silent, screeching moments ...

There—regular, strong. Found you.

Extruding a minute wisp from his mind's probe, Lorel fashioned his perceptual faculties into a 'hook' then jumped: illusion, echo, hook, enfold primary-point area, contract mental image of material site (allowing for Swordkeeper), follow, unhook, synchronise to secondary-point area, encrypt physical mass to mental, push, decrypt mental concept into physical mass, expand (allowing for Swordkeeper) and ... Lorel opened his eyes. He was back in the building's entrance hall. The Swordkeeper was struggling for breath, his eyes swollen and unfocussed, lips white, hands shaking.

'My apologies,' said Lorel. The Swordkeeper started. 'Translocation is never easy, especially the first time. You have to compress the consciousness, before merging the mental state with bodily affinity, puncture the ...'

'Don't.' One, slow blink. 'Just don't.'

'Gentlemen.' A young boy, covered in soot, stood before them. Wrapped in singed rags, his milky white eyes ran with heavy tears that oozed down his face like mercury. Angry burns curled along his arms in glossy vines. Lorel stood, pulling the Swordkeeper up with him. The child beckoned. 'We have been expecting you.'

Grave dignity hovered about the child, an adult awareness which suggested his skipping was not childish, but calculated. It was as if he understood that, as a child, he must make concessions to *act* like one. Leading them surely through a maze of groaning corridors, the boy navigated the Swordkeeper's questions with cryptic answers, giggling happily with the game he was playing. Lorel was certain that the child was blind. But he plodded along without hesitation, stepping over gaping holes in the floor, and ducking fractured beams spilled from the ceiling. Something guided his steps. Lorel sensed two other people in the building, getting closer; one was very faint, withdrawn and irregular, the other, strong but transient, as if hundreds of people had pressed together. More troubling though was the fact that, according to his mental searches, the child was dead.

Soot layered the floor like moss and ash-boned skeletons were toppled cairns to final, agonising moments. Dusk bled through the tattered roof. Reaching out, Lorel's hand sunk into a wall with a chalky puff. Stagnant air, thick with vaporised skin, licked his face with static charge. Everything had been ionised and left in silence. The building was a tomb.

The boy stopped in front of a heavy door, its tight-knit grain painted with handprints of melted skin. Two skeletons slouched against the wall, watching the boy with empty, smoking sockets. Lorel frowned. Their ribs had been shattered, crushed by giant hands. He'd seen injuries before—it happened when Readers invaded the mind and forced your muscles to squeeze like a vice. The boy waited, his shoulders jerking, lips mouthing frenetically around silent words.

Turning at the neck, he nodded jerkily. 'We await, gentlemen.'

'Thank you, son,' said the Swordkeeper, patting the boy's shoulder, somehow unaware that he was comforting a corpse. Grinning laconically the child opened the door and waved them into a chamber bright with candles. Light dripped from the walls, onto towering stacks of books and parchment. Shadows draped across the floor like moth-eaten carpets. A

small fireplace crackled and hissed behind curtains of wax hanging stiff from the mantle. The ghost wavered in the flames, concerned, the young man's eyes fixed on a strange device pointed at his head. It was unbearably hot.

A woman sat beside the fire, a leather-bound manuscript open across her knees. Leaning beside her was a sword that drank the light, flexed the shadows. Huddled at her feet was Marlee. Lorel pulled his sword with a snarl.

'Patience, Leaf of the Forest, walker of forgotten days. Forgo the sword, relent, release.' The woman closed the manuscript. 'Be welcomed at our hearth, Taleel Swordkeeper, the Blade, the Righteous, the Just to be.'

Lorel recoiled as the words slapped his face—a riotous multitude of voices droning from a single mouth. Silver eyes drilled from her slack, pallid face, glittering cold while she licked dark, wine-red lips.

Skipping cheerily into the room, the boy found a perch on a small stack of scrolls. The door creaked closed.

Both dead, Lorel thought. And worse.

'We've been waiting so long and with such anticipation.' She smiled lasciviously and her robe slipped open, revealing lifeless skin, stretched and slack as if her bones had tried to escape. Inching closer to the fireplace, Lorel realised she'd been burning books. The ghost was crying in the fire-place. Suddenly it plunged into darkness. 'We have watched you, studied you, waiting, waiting, waiting. And here you are, The Leaf on the Drifting Wind. That is how your people say it?'

'My name is Lorel.'

'Of course, but names are such fluid things.' The small boy chortled and nodded appreciatively. The Reader grinned. 'They tend to change, to shift, to grow—as despicable as

that sounds—over time. But we remember. We see. We saw. We have been watching and entropy is patient.’

‘What’ve you done with Marlee?’ said Lorel. Marlee’s hair was matted with dried blood and her lips were raw and split.

‘Done with her?’ She tapped her teeth. ‘Nothing ... even though she was obstinately hostile to our entreaties.’ She shook her head and thick, dark blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. ‘Of course, we have done many things *to* her. Appearances of evil must be maintained—we seem to have greater effect that way. Attract a certain sort as it were. Although, these days, that means next to nothing.’ She kicked Marlee in the face. ‘If you refer to her catatonic repose ... well, she was crying and whining, so we muzzled her.’

‘We?’ The Swordkeeper said, shifting a few steps to Lorel’s right, spacing the room equally between them.

‘Yes.’ A thousand on a thousand voices stormed the room, a swirling barrage of noise blasting loose paper into shreds. The candles burned blue for an instant, before guttering out. Oily smoke curled in designs that scratched gutters into the ceiling. ‘Like you and the Leaf. One and the same, collection and repetition.’

Lorel shook his head, trying to clear the insistent call of the Law. It was so close, too easy to take up and shatter the world. Blood sprinted through his veins, the strained pounding of his heart screaming like a collapsing tree.

He shook his head. ‘Who are you?’

‘We are the forever forsaken. We are those who have been betrayed and betrayed again. We are the trapped that will be free.’ The woman howled gleefully. The boy silently mouthed her words. ‘We gnaw the roots of world. We wait in the nothingness, linger in every heart. We are the truth.’

‘Impossible.’ Lorel stared into the woman’s silver eyes, watched his reflection being sucked into her pupils. Everything about her spoke of a hollowing out, an emptiness, a hunger. Ancient tales breached—Kraken stories that spoke from beyond the beginning of time. One name. ‘What are you?’

In one, twitching instant, the woman hurled the book onto the coals, tore off her robe, and wrenched the sword up from the chair. Steel glinted under the skin of her fingers and a ragged scar, not two weeks closed, leered septicly from throat to pelvis. ‘Cease addressing this fleshy bag. It is nothing but a conduit for all your inadequate, incomplete chirpings.’

‘Lorel.’ The Swordkeeper inched towards the child. ‘What’s she talking about?’

Lorel grimaced. His lungs were burning, hands shaking with the certainty that that sword should’ve been far too heavy for the woman to lift. ‘*She* is not talking at all, Swordkeeper.’

‘Then who?’

Lorel let out a shaky breath. ‘Something through the sword.’

‘Correct, Lost One. Exile. Destroyer. All alone. Forgotten. Hated.’ Saliva streamed down her chin as the words punched out of her throat. Teeth clattered to the floor. ‘Before *your* time we have *longed* for release—the worm in the apple. Sleeping patiently in the hearts of man we have waited, inhabiting that place where desire is carelessly left to die. All these millennia ... just for the single chance to claim one of you!’

Lorel recoiled into a high guard and the Swordkeeper stepped in front of the child, shielding him, even though there was no child anymore, and what was left was very, very dangerous. ‘You obliterated Restspire.’

She sneered. ‘This depraved collection of shacks never required our help in succumbing to ruin and despair. This place had fallen, just as *your* empire is falling, destined for annihilation from the beginning. You know this.’

‘Perhaps.’ Lorel kept his eyes on her sword, snaking between him and the Swordkeeper, moving before she did. ‘Perhaps, we will always rise and fall. Perhaps there is nothing more to living than dying. But any suffering is better than the end you offer!’

‘We offer release from the painful cycle.’ She pointed at the stacks of books and spat; their spines were labelled with the same alien language Lorel had noticed on the parchments by the building’s threshold. She was erasing history and revelling in its ashes.

‘You offer nothing.’ Lorel bent at the knees, pulling his legs tight underneath him. ‘And I will never give in to that.’

‘Maybe,’ she nodded. ‘Maybe not.’

He didn’t see the dagger when the woman sent it flying behind her, but, paralysed in horror, he watched it thud into Marlee’s chest. Blood spewed from her mouth.

Launching forward, he turned like a screw. The woman brought her sword up and around in a sweeping arc, deflecting his strike harmlessly. Lurching to the side, Lorel arrested his momentum, jumped into the air, reversed his grip, and brought his blade plummeting towards her head. She rolled aside and flicked at Lorel’s heart as his blade bit deeply into the floor. Using his sword as pivot, Lorel spun behind her attack, catching her shoulder with a hurriedly aimed kick that connected with a sickening, bony crunch. Uncaring, she ground the shattered bones back into place—the sword, whatever was acting through the sword, felt no pain.

Their two blades licked back and forth, twinned in blurring exchanges, impacts detonating invisibly with brittle claps that shook the room. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Swordkeeper locked in his own struggle—sword poised against the boy’s throat, but held immobile, transfixed by the sightless gaze.

Lorel slashed and cut, left, right, high and low, matching dizzying combinations with disjointed rhythms. Each attack was met and turned, blocked, parried, and returned with the

numbing force of a sledgehammer. Fatigue concreted his muscles and he realised this fight could not be won. Worse—Marlee was fading quickly.

To save her, I'll have to lose, thought Lorel, circling towards the Swordkeeper, calming his breathing, clearing his mind for translocation. *Timing needs to be perfect.*

The Reader's eyes narrowed. The sword twitched and bucked, snapping the tendons in her wrists, tugging her off-balance. It was all the opening Lorel needed. Throwing his sword to his left hand, he grabbed the Swordkeeper, shoved him towards Marlee, spun away from the child's outstretched hands, felt fire in his back, and leapt.

Timing ...

He calculated the jump.

... has ...

Placed his sword against his chest.

... to ...

Pushed the blade back and up, under the woman's jaw and into her head.

... be ...

Lorel, Marlee, and the Swordkeeper disappeared into the Jump.

... perfect.

Taleel stared at the sparse woodland rolling around from the foot of the Bastion Mountains as the sun dropped behind snow-capped peaks. The air was freezing. A corridor of smoke ribboned in the north, red and black in the dying light. He felt light-headed and slow. He couldn't shake the images.

Blink. That child holding the torch, setting fire to his parent's house.

Blink. The Reader walking into town with a tortured prisoner.

Blink. Men and women turning on each other, clawing and biting, beating heads into the earth—rape, suicide.

Blink. The Empire ravaged.

Blink. Lorel pulling him down as the Reader drove her sword into his back.

Blink. The boy grinning, room spinning.

Blink. Blink. Blink. Blink.

It was no use. Every time Taleel closed his eyes, the images appeared, unwanted and unrelenting. He'd seen what Lorel ... the Wanderer ... had done to his world, for the world, with the world. Scanning their surroundings, he felt dulled and useless. They'd been ripped somewhere to the south, into the rocky steppes high in the Southspire—the utmost end of the Empire.

This is where it started. Taleel thought, baulking at the truth, refusing to accept what he'd been forced to witness. *Where he came from. Where it ends.*

This Lorel, this legend, this ghost had lived centuries, had given birth to and doomed an Empire. Taleel felt ... different, but couldn't pin it down. The man had worked into his head, stirred things up, rearranged and forged new connections, new ideas. He remembered his father.

Where it begins, he thought, breathing deeply.

Glancing down, he watched Lorel and the girl—Marlee—trembling with shallow, uneven breaths. Covered in blood and pierced through the chest, they were bound together in the ebbing of their lives. Just beyond them, the Reader's head was propped against a rock, staring at the sky, Lorel's leaf-blade still quivering through its distended jaws. Taleel shivered with adrenaline withdrawal. His body was made of rice-paper and his head felt like a lead sinker. He dropped to his knees and rolled Lorel off the girl. The man was bleeding

heavily, skin clammy, flickering eyes hidden under jaundiced lids. Taleel had seen enough of war to recognise what came next. A matter of minutes, maybe less, and the girl wasn't far behind.

Lorel opened his eyes. No stars and the night smelled of frost. His mind was foggy, pickled, stumbling through a swamp of disjointed lives that washed about in a jumbled procession—faces never seen, places never visited.

Residue from that Sword, Lorel thought. Some of the lives it's consumed.

Moments before the translocation, he had felt that sword drive hungrily into his back. Metal meeting flesh, Lorel had seen its designs: it wanted, beyond all other wants, the power of his voice. It needed, uncontrollably desired, the *Tal'Vari's* songs. And it had been scared of those ancient texts, terrified of the knowledge they contained. The devastation of Restspire was only collateral to the collection and burning of that forgotten lore. Many months had gone into the effort. It ...

Marlee!

Lorel sat up, the pain nearly splitting his chest in two. Blood pumped his legs, soaked into the dirt. Marlee was awake beside him, once golden hair was bleached white and crusted with gore.

Lorel choked back tears. 'I told you ...'

Marlee laughed weakly, pink bubbles flecking the corners of blue lips. 'My choice.'

'I can save you.'

She shook her head 'You'll die.'

'My first good deed.'

‘You’re wrong,’ she coughed. ‘There’s been nothing *but* good in you from the start.’ The Swordkeeper stirred behind them. Lorel heard him draw his sword. ‘Don’t sacrifice yourself for me. They need you now.’

‘They’ve never needed me.’

‘You’ve seen the future.’

‘And I can’t remember it!’ Lorel cried. ‘What does that tell you?’

She smiled, small and sad. ‘You refuse the future because the past is safer.’

‘It doesn’t matter now.’ He cupped his hands over the wound in her chest. ‘My future is you.’

Lorel readied to transfer whatever was left of himself into Marlee. It would be enough, just, for the most important act of his wretched life. Then, the Swordkeeper’s hands clamped around his chest, pinning his arms. Lorel screamed, thrashing wildly, but the Swordkeeper held on tightly.

‘So you make your choice, Swordkeeper,’ Lorel spat, his blood trickling through the Swordkeeper’s hands, dripping onto Marlee’s face. ‘Not enough that I die, but her as well? Cause me pain before the end? I should have expected nothing less from an imperial sword.’

‘Enough.’ Taleel rocked back, pulling Lorel and Marlee apart. ‘I’ve seen what you’ve done and I’d kill you for it. But I know your legend too. You were in the desert, you planted the seed. You were *always* there. Everywhere we look it’s your face we see, and the one thing holding our past together.’

‘What?’

‘I thought my choice was to either kill you or let you live, but I was wrong. It is a choice between our future and your past. I will see my people survive. We can be better—you’ve given us the tools for that—but only if we have the time, only if the Wanderer keeps wandering. We need you to leave us be.’

‘Then let me save her.’

‘No. You carry our history in your bones. You’re ... a living library and we can’t let that simply be destroyed. We need what you know, to know ourselves, but you can’t force that on us.’

Lorel’s head slumped to his chest. ‘Everything is doomed to fail, fated to fall.’

‘Maybe.’ The Swordkeeper said. ‘But it’s the only chance we have. That’s why the Wanderer has to go on. We need you to remember what we forgot, so we can come to it, uncover, and relearn to be human again. We need you to fight when we fail, to live as we die. We need the legend.’ He sighed. ‘Marlee.’

Lorel trembled as she rose shakily and clasped his hands with her own. Warmth poured from her fingertips, into his hands, his arms, his legs, into his chest, his heart. She grew cold and he was helpless to stop it.

Another sacrifice for the Wanderer, thought Lorel—the moment remembered by its absence in his memory, its outline in his past. *No wonder it drove me mad.*

‘I give you my life, to go with my heart,’ she whispered.

Lorel cried. ‘Have you ever thought that you give too much of yourself?’

‘I give what I can.’ She squeezed his hands in a final embrace. ‘I give you all my futures.’

With a smile Marlee died.

Lorel stood over her cairn of blue-flecked stones, aware in some small part, somewhere, that hours had come and gone since he had washed the blood from her hair and buried Marlee. His fingernails were broken: black scales on numb, ghoulish hands. He had no memory of digging the grave or placing her body in the earth, but these things had happened and there was blood up to his wrists. The Swordkeeper watched, breathing stark clouds into the air.

Thunderheads rolled off the mountain spurs, charging the air with crashing claps that ricocheted in the heights like booming laughter. He would be her cenotaph, a roaming epitaph forever recalling her death. Lorel felt her face carving into his forehead, its outline starting a web of crystalline fissures that cracked his human shell. Underneath the surface, spilling through the breaches, was the raging heart of the boy who had left his home and seen all his friends taken by time, turn to dust.

Lorel opened himself to song, letting it build like a lava flow in his throat. Slowly, the mournful sounds tumbled from his lips, stringing white cirrus in the dark, each note a funeral dirge. His voice hardened, ringing clean with iron and ice, tempered by anger and loss. Pacing the grave, the song expanded, filling the air with curtains of shimmering heat. Sap boiled. Trees exploded. Sparks crawled through his hair, discharging vertical lightning that punctured the clouds churning over the Southspire Bastion. Rain slammed down, flashed to steam that eddied around Lorel in a scolding shell.

Voices railed in the torrent—alien echoes pulled from beyond the mountain wall that trailed the wind like howling wolves. Lorel's steps were tremors each the earth and each new phrase ignited the air with flaming cascades that vitrified raindrops into glassy shards. Rocks hurled into the tearing air, the mounting pressure crushing them to dust. The Swordkeeper covered his ears as brute power slammed from Lorel in cavitating waves. He dropped to the ground, blood flowing from his ears.

Music strained against the atoms binding materiality together. Nothing remained solid, nothing was forever, but hate love, sorrow, joy, denial, rage, and pity. He launched his emotions in all directions, cutting loose their grinding registers from his battered mind, throwing them into the universe, to ricochet from star to burning star.

With its final notes, Lorel's requiem coalesced. Sound folded back onto sound and all semblance of music stripped down to the crescendo of a winding claxon. Feedback moaned

louder and higher while a picture of the world was rendered to dust in Lorel's head. The invisible shell around him was a sphere of churning glass and stone. Lighting speared and the sphere imploded. Its membrane ignited with incandescent flames, compacting air grinding it into a shining globe of pure light the size of a marble wailing against the atmosphere.

In a gesture of acceptance and supplication, Lorel threw his arms wide and screamed. Sound was sucked up and thrown away, leaving the world in a vacuum. The downpour stopped and the mountains detonated, choking the heavens with powdered rock and ice that settled over the steppes like brown fog.

For a moment he was in another world. Lorel looked around. Darkness wrapped around him—a vast, gaping absence pressing down, crashing around, held at bay by a soft, cool light. Colossal shelves withdrew into the gloom; thousands and thousands of books stacked in the shadows, waiting. He reached out to touch them but his hand passed through cracked leather and musty paper. Walking down the stacks, he followed the light, chasing it around corners, tracking blind through dusty rows that hadn't felt a foot in years.

I'm a spectre, Lorel thought. Lost in these halls of time.

Then, pulled by faint scratching echoed, Lorel found the ghost. He was working at a desk, half-buried under a mountain of ancient scrolls and unbound manuscripts. His strange, lantern glowed gently beneath the archive's heavy emptiness. Lorel stood somewhere in the middle, caught in a space not light or dark, haunting a penumbra between two realities. He knew that, in truth, he was standing before the mountains. He knew that his throat was raw and his lungs were wheezing with dust. He knew that Marlee was dead and that this was a dream.

But dreams can be real too.

Lorel stepped around the desk and, standing over the young man's shoulder, watched the scrawl of ink across the page. The words were impossible, forming without hesitation,

without error, flowing from the pen as if the young man was writing from some sight within. Lorel gaped while his life was described, transcribed, inscribed.

Impossible! he thought.

He extended his hand and felt himself, for a brief, fleeting moment, solid, there, present. Static jolted between them—a tiny shock connecting dream and reality. The young man paused, twitched, then finished the sentence. Lorel read: In a gesture of acceptance and supplication, Lorel threw his arms wide and screamed. The downpour stopped as the mountains detonated, drowning the heavens with powdered rock and ice that settled over the steppes like brown fog. Sound was sucked up and thrown away, leaving the world in a vacuum.

Apparently satisfied, the young man dropped his pen, scattered some sand, blotted the page, blew, and ...

... when the dust cleared, Lorel stood in the centre of a mile-wide breach in the mountain wall. An ancient forest shone green, its emerald leaves and golden streams opened to the north. Lorel listened, straining ear and mind, hearing nothing.

Where are they? he thought. *Where are they?*

The Swordkeeper rose slowly and Lorel turned to face him. The man flinched, and in his eyes, Lorel saw himself; not the man he had been, nothing of the Voidstalker, nothing of Lorel. That mask had been stripped away with the mountains, leaving only the brittle bones of legend. Once more, he was Lellorian—the Wanderer.

‘Time that you were gone, Swordkeeper,’ said Lorel. ‘Your Empire has run its course.’

‘It was the only choice. I ...’

‘I died with her.’ Lorel bent down, picked up his sword, wiped it clean, and slid it smoothly into its scabbard. ‘I hope, for their sake and yours, that you made the right decision.’

‘Time will tell,’ said the Swordkeeper.

A star appeared and Lorel was witness to new light. ‘Life and death,’ he whispered. ‘I can’t forgive you, but I guess you’ll never need that.’

The Swordkeeper turned with a scrape of pebbles. Back to back they faced different paths—old and new.

A fitting way to start an avalanche, thought Lorel.

‘My duty dictated that you are ...were ... the greatest threat to humanity.’ The man was struggling over his new ideas. ‘But our greatest hope too, so I made a field decision.’

‘And?’

‘Against all my training, I decided that I didn’t want to kill anymore.’ Taleel chuckled softly. ‘My father told me to do good with my blade. At the time, I thought it was a promise easily kept. Now ... I think it’s always easier to fight, but seldom good.’

‘Marlee ...’

‘She died giving life, where you would’ve died giving only death. This way, my people will survive.’

‘Your faith is a dream, Swordkeeper,’ said Lorel. ‘It exists only in the mind.’

‘Then it lives.’

Lorel nodded wearily. ‘And I lose everything.’

‘I think you made that choice years ago. I won’t lie. I don’t understand what drove you then, what made you leave your home. But I think I understand the choice itself.’

‘Do you?’

‘To search for something better, brighter ... to break the old and force new growth.’
The Swordkeeper paused. Lorel could almost hear him thinking. ‘This Empire is burning. But it will live on. People like me—Marlee, the Falcon, my father—are the roots that survive the immolation and seek the light.’

Lorel heard the Swordkeeper disappear, crunching into the darkness, returning to the Falcon. It was another heavy memory for him to bear. The Swordkeeper’s home was gone, forever changed by the corruption flooding from the Law, out of the Tower, into the north. He would guide the remnants south, through the mountains, hoping to build a new world in an old land.

Perhaps he was right, maybe they could be saved. Lorel didn’t care, couldn’t bring himself to care. The Swordkeeper had seen to that. Lorel had been cut out of their lives, forced away, left to drift so they could make all their own choices free of his good intentions. They would look for him and he would run from them, hoping that seeking might make them stronger, better.

Time to start running, he thought, and with a great, shaking sigh, Lorel passed the threshold of the mountains and returned home.

EXEGESIS

Chapter 1: Characterising the Progressive Function of Marxist Aesthetics

What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible ...

—Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*

Is anything impossible? Certainly many things are implausible, improbable, but impossibility appears absurd because there is nothing that is inconceivable. Of course, this thought is not original: the impossible has been and is fundamentally a discursive tool. By its very nature, the impossible discloses what culture, civilisation, society, and/or ideology deems possible. Again, this thought is not new. However, the impossible and fantasy share an interesting, dynamic relationship—a pendulum swinging between the real and unreal. It is this relationship, this categorical, special, social interplay, which opens the mode to Marxist thought.

In *Marxist Aesthetics*, Pauline Johnson discusses various, aesthetic paradigms that attempt to ‘give an enlightening capacity to art’ (1984, p.1). That is, an artwork should expose how capitalist reality’s ‘daily life’ is perceived *and* have an emancipatory effect on individual consciousness. Importantly, this two-fold function delineates two criteria with which to judge the efficacy of a progressive aesthetic: demystification and re-creation.

As a consequence, this chapter outlines the major aesthetic theories that underpin, inform, and define this research project. Using Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which occupies a space between realism, gothic, adventure tale, and fantasy, this chapter traces the basic, aesthetic concepts of Lukács, Marcuse, and Althusser, exploring and defining the

parameters for a progressive, fantasy literature.¹ More than obliquely offering different perspectives, these three thinkers represent distinct, Marxist approaches to the question of art's uses, abuses, and an authentic art's purpose. Moreover, their seemingly discreet theories meet, clash, and converse within this project's overarching presence: Fredric Jameson's utopian aesthetic (fundamentally expressed through the extrapolated extra-textual realities of dystopian science fiction).

Jameson's utopian aesthetic is first concerned with illuminating ideology through literary representation—via the text, capitalist subjectivity is portrayed, is 'frozen' and its gaps or lacks made manifest. In other words, literature does not simply illustrate the subject's everyday existence as corrupt, nor does it portray a stark, social alternative—the artwork enters into a dialogue with the subject's everyday thinking (in the fetishised systemisation of daily life), demonstrating that thinking to be false (or incomplete). As such, ideology (or subjectivity) is a representation that mediates a relationship between the individual and material reality. It influences perception: the perception of reality and the role, shape, potential, and limitation of the individual *within* that reality. It follows, then, that a discourse concerned with exposing how this process is constructed, inscribed, and disseminated can be subversive if not progressive. By making visible ideological architecture, the social totalities it constructs, and the actualities it denies or effaces, Jameson follows Althusser in supposing that literature can possess a critical function.

His utopian aesthetic is predicated on 'making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment' (Jameson 2005, p. xiii). This is the Lukácsian crux of the Marxist aesthetic: to represent reality as it truly is, shocking the reader through *recognition*. And it is only after recognition that the complete image of 'daily life' can be opened to progressive change. However, this representation is enlisted without its totalising intent—it is only

¹Conrad's post-colonial narrative is a text with three discursive faces: reflective, fantastic, and deconstructive. In effect, it is a fitting touchstone for the project's creative and critical topography.

constructed to be eroded, exploded, destroyed. For Jameson, the utopian ‘remedy must first be a fundamentally negative one, and stand as a clarion call to remove and extirpate’ (2005, p.12) repressive, ideological formations. In other words, this ‘remedy’ is a precipitate of Althusserian demystification.

However, this is only a part (albeit an important part) of the progressive character of a utopian aesthetic. While it is vital that dominant ideologies are revealed in utopian literature, this deconstructive bent is not progressive per se: it demystifies with the intent to remove, *without* seeking to interpolate an alternate subjectivity.

Jameson’s rhetoric is active and invested with deconstructive purpose: the utopian remedy is a ‘clarion call’, sounded to ‘remove’, to ‘extirpate’. It implies a position *beyond* analytical negativity. It hints at a *future* space, an alterity where social activism can take/has taken place. But is deconstruction an end or a means? Rupturing the (supposedly) organic totality may not suffice; dystopian representation centred on Althusser’s arguably anti-humanist pessimism is, perhaps, somewhat sterile. Indeed, Johnson argues that the success of literature’s emancipatory effect relies on a correlation between artistic expression and the reader’s dissatisfaction (1984, p.5). This supposition skirts an interesting problem: can individual satisfaction be created with complete, social dissolution?

Plausibly, the reader’s dissatisfaction with his/her perceived reality is sated by that reality’s ruin. But what comes next? What remains? It could be argued that satisfaction cannot appear without change, without the production of an alternative, an alterity. If this is so, then the truly utopian, truly progressive text might funnel its discursive energy into transformative visions that modify and/or correct fundamentally oppressive social systems (Jameson 2005, p.xv). As Johnson suggests, this literature ‘presents not merely an alternative standpoint but specifically acts to affect a change in the recipient’s consciousness’ (1984, p.1).

While this transformative characteristic is desirable, we have yet to discover how a utopian text's ruptures, deconstructions, and reflections are achieved. Generally speaking, Jameson's utopian aesthetic can be mapped as a combination of three thinkers: Althusser, Lukács and Marcuse. Like the rings of a tree, the evolution of Marxist aesthetics is traced through three, major strains: the cognitive (Lukács), the affective (Marcuse), and the structural/formal (Althusser predominantly assessed via Rosemary Jackson and her focus on modernist fantastic literature). By paring back these rings, by feeling dissimilarly similar shapes, Jameson's utopian aesthetic can be charted, and a progressive subjectivity foreshadowed.

Reflections of Reality: Lukács and the Realist Aesthetic

This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words. There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 2000, pp.83-84)

Perhaps there is no better passage encapsulating Joseph Conrad's colonial interrogation in *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, it acts as a touchstone for the narrative as a whole: a qualification of nobility and altruism with stark (yet near-hidden) brutality. Stripped to intent, the passage underscores the dialectical nature of an imperialist subjectivity—the preaching and appearance of universal, democratic freedom founded on a ruthless, inhuman, historical truth: colonial dominion through savage exploitation. Rendered with such blunt proximity, the colonial ideology of an expansionist Europe becomes not only an example of civilisation's

implicit barbarism, but a highlighting of the stakes when ‘the basic categories of man’s immediate attitude to the world’(Lukács 1976, p.89) are transforming. Exploitation is the key ... the world, nature, humanity are objects to be used and discarded.

However, Johnson intimates that the problem in Lukács’ aesthetics is how a ‘defetishised consciousness can be produced out of the dynamics of an alienated, fetishistic present’ (1984, p.9)? Can a progressive subjectivity be created when reality is a veneer obscuring the true nature of the individual’s existence?

Marlow’s Congo adventure (a symbolic immersion and, therefore, understanding of imperialist subjectivity) delineates the power of this veneer working on the individual’s consciousness. The reflection becomes reality; or attending ‘to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades’ (Conrad 2000, p.60). It is covered up, forgotten, replaced when we, like Marlow, are forced to deal with the many perils of reified (in this case, a colonial bureaucracy) life.

When Marlow qualifies that the ‘inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily’ (2000, p.60), he is fully aware that this uncovering (recovery may be a better term) is a dangerous proposition. And yet it must be done. Johnson contends:

Lukács core thesis is that only a totalising perspective which draws essence and appearance into a unity is able to recognise the falsity of the representation of reality which appears at the surface of society. (1984, p.26)

By mediating ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’—truth and illusion—the text can identify the distortive (if not inherently detrimental) nature of Western society. Here, Lukács argues that the fate of the individual correlates with that of society, where the ‘transformation of a human function [labour] into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation’ (1976, p.92).

The totalising perspective suggests greater scope to the text than straightforward reflections of reality. Nor, as Johnson suggests, is art a mere ‘contrast to a false perspective of everyday thinking’ (1984, p.26). For Lukács, the realist project opens a broader concern, namely: ‘how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society’ (1976, p.84)? Consequently, there appears a desire to map reality and map it completely: the totalising image. Such an image is designed to shock the reader through recognition and, via this shock, produce a desire to alter (for the better) the reader’s consciousness. Of course, the assumption Lukács makes is that realism is the most appropriate literary mode to generate this transformative perspective. Realist literature constructs the totalising of reality and holds it up against the fragmentary perception of everyday life. Effectively, this interaction is a mapping of subjective reality *and* objective reality’s unveiling. The illusion is forced to rub against the truth and the resulting friction creates the space for an alternate subjective scaffold.

This is an aesthetic paradigm that foresees such an alteration through that interaction of categories (essence and appearance) usually kept separate. Essence manifests as labour, as human action interacting in and through networks of social relations. In the realist text, this integrated, totality is independent of its characters—it is a social reality to which they have been blinded. Conversely, appearance is rendered within the consciousness of the characters. This is the illusion, the surface, the false consciousness; this is capitalist ideology crystallised into so many reified fragments that seem natural and inevitable (destiny, universal freedom, equality, etc.). Paradoxically, it is a veneer sunk into a deep recess of human experience and existence. Realism, Lukács would argue, creates a situation where the reader can cut through appearance to discover the essence.

Using dehumanisation as a central refrain, *Heart of Darkness* alludes to the commodification of man and the changing of man to suit ideological imperatives. Marlow,

socially, physically, psychologically situated in colonial Africa, becomes a cipher for his civilisation. He says:

Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. (Conrad 2000, p.84)

The steersman has no intrinsic value other than that of a tool: he directs the boat along the river, making Marlow's task easier like a gravedigger's shovel. Fredrick Karl suggests that this transformation, indicative of the text's 'profusion of metallic and mechanical images indicates that resistant objects have superseded softness, flexibility, humanity itself; that, clearly, one must become object, tough and durable, in order to survive' (1968, p.33). One must become *and* transform others into object. The appalling transformation of humanity is stark. Like an instrument, the 'savage' commodity is easily replaced. That his gruesome death is met only with regret 'passing strange' is emblematic of Marlow's frustration—he needs to find a replacement. There is no *human* relationship.

Furthermore, the shooting of African natives, in general, is 'a jolly lark' (Conrad 2000, p.109). Here, the dark spirit of the colonial project is rendered in the polite language of English superiority: it is 'passing strange' and a 'jolly lark' because the veneer obfuscating inhuman, colonial practice translates the African 'Other' into something less than human. However, Marlow's thoughts on this transformation are far from clear. Indeed, his perspective is nothing less than the coloniser's, fundamentally focussed in the same direction as Kurtz's. Karl argues:

Marlow rarely questions whether particular work is necessary; for example he never asks whether white men should be in the Congo—for whatever reason.

Rather, he assumes they should be—since they are—but they must come as friends, as helpers, and bring enlightenment. Even while they rape, they must be benevolent. (1968, p.32)

This mindset, perhaps, echoes Conrad's somewhat humanist sentiments. The problem is not the colonial mission, just the 'evil' men that take some part in it. Arguably, Marlow's perspective is narrow; he is caught in the capitalist system, (initially) perceiving its structures and effects through naïve filters: 'English manners', the 'just cause', the 'right way'. However, this 'right way' is an illusion, a denial; nowhere in the Congo is the 'right way' witnessed. The veneer of European civility evaporates in the oppressive, steamy jungle. There are no manners, no just causes, only the nightmarish reality of colonial exploitation. The river winds through an inhospitable landscape where humanity is expendable object, natives are made slaves, and the lofty ideals of 'just' and 'right' are confronted by the predatory nature of the European traders.

The Congo's trading stations (where 'civilised' men deal with one another) are places of constant competition where individuals 'intrigued and slandered and hated each other' (Conrad 2000, p.46) just for the *chance* of profit: all subjects become objects in the business of acquiring capital and everything. As Lukács supposes: everything is 'distorted by its commodity character' (1976, p.93).

This desire for profit, this irrational need, is paired with the suggestion of social disintegration. When Marlow first sees Kurtz—a figure all 'Europe contributed to the making' of (Conrad 2000, p.83) and stands as the trader/ivory-hunter/managerial ideal—the man himself is a shockingly inverted figure.

His covering had fallen off, and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet. I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. (Conrad 2000, p.97)

While it is known that Kurtz was sick, his physical absence, for much of the text, positions his character as an aspirational, capitalist goal. However, the historical realities of colonial living (disease, malnutrition, etc.) are disturbingly rendered: Kurtz is little more than a cadaver infected with the power of a malicious god. Worshiped by the natives, envied by the traders, he is a genius, an avatar of the civilising theory that claims benevolence while exterminating. His appearance (the genius, the great, the altruistic), constructed in his textual absence, only holds water until the true nature of his existence (the baleful, the insane, the sick) is revealed.

While the realist text (capturing an image of reality *as it truly is*) works on the reader at an individual level, its overarching, revolutionary aim is the recovery of a *species consciousness*. Johnson affirms:

Realist literature creates a whole world in which the attributes and behaviours of the particular individual character appear as a specific integration of the characteristics of the general social environment depicted in the work. (1984, p.40)

The individual inscribed by their society and this nexus (society in subject) functions *progressively* in two ways. If an individual character can be portrayed as an ‘integration’ of a ‘general social environment’ the result is intrinsically self-reflexive. Kurtz’ character is constructed by the world around him. Consequently, his character reveals more about his world, than it does about the man. Such visibility is important for the text’s emancipatory project: ideological structures work best when they are *unseen and unknown*.

To an extent, Kurtz is a victim of the system that produced him. He is oppressed and monstrously transformed by his civilisation’s desire for profit, for power, for domination, at all costs. ‘He brings European power [...]; his weapons encompass 2,000 years of Western civilisation. And the consequence: corruption of self and death to “inferiors” on a

monumental scale' (Karl 1968, p.35). And while the Congo's despoliation is almost naturalised in its ever-present darkness, its underlying violence, the mental and physical destruction of Kurtz is stark, immediate, and shocking. As such, the plight of the individual (as a character written by his/her fetishised reality) can be read as the state of *every* individual.

Marlow's account is predicated upon this understanding. The events he describes are in the narrative's past and he has come out the other side—a survivor. The issue that Conrad circles, a problem that Lukács investigates, is: 'how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society' (1976, p.84)?

Interestingly, the most vivid and poignant thoughts on this ideological penetration are voiced in *Heart of Darkness* via contrast. From the steamer—a vessel penetrating Africa—Marlow observes:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly [...] They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. (Conrad 2000, pp.62-63)

This passage alludes to another drastic transformation. Pushing further into Africa, the earth is free(er) from exploitation and its people vital. For Marlow (representing Western

civilisation), this existence is barely recognisable. However, there is a faint impression of connection, of kinship. The African world is ugly because its freedom (the freedom of the savage) appears regressive—a near unintelligible reality removed from the capitalist system. That there remains a ‘dim suspicion’ in Marlow, underscores that a reality of capitalist systems is the transformation of the natural into the unnatural, the vital into the gruesome. This ‘ugly’ Africa bears more relation to his own subjective experience than the material actuality—his eyes see in terms of an ingrained, lived ideological lens.

Like Marlow’s journey, Lukács describes capitalism as continuous, economic reproduction, whose ‘structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man’ (Lukács 1976, p.93). Unsurprisingly, Conrad’s image of London, and the empire it represents, is described as *two completely different entities in the space of two pages*.

Marlow says: ‘What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! ... The dreams of men, the seeds of commonwealths, the germs of empires’ (Conrad 2000, p.17), then describes the city as a ‘monstrous town ... marked ominously on the sky’ and ‘one of the dark places of the earth’ (Conrad 2000, p.18). Just as Kurtz is wrapped in the glowing robes of the colonial civiliser, then stripped to a sickly figure surrounded by ivory and decapitations, London is burnished as the beacon of light in the dark world, only to be seen as another dark construction. Another example of this doubling is attached to Marlow’s encounter with the fiancée and the ivory keys of the piano. Culturally enlightened, Europe desires, if not requires, the artefacts of culture. The piano, a height of cultural creation, cannot exist without African ivory ... it is a commodity of dominance. Similarly, the fiancée is symbolic of acquiring wealth. She, like the ivory, is something to be coveted, procured, moulded into an ideal, and displayed. Everything is made object in a constellation of objects.

This is the methodology of Lukács. Johnson posits that by cognitively mapping social totality, realism ‘allows the recipient to recognise his/her own species character’ (1984, p.75). Necessarily, recognition is dependent upon shock and geared towards catharsis. Conrad’s image of the colonial project is blatantly critical. One need only recall Kurtz’s dying exclamation—‘The horror! The horror!’ (Conrad 2000, p.112)—to understand how Conrad’s text is sympathetic to critical readings. But how effective is the criticism?

Arguably, realism attempts to awake a species consciousness by creating a complete reflection whose effectiveness ‘is facilitated by its ability to cause the suspension of the fragmentary, heterogeneous attitude of everyday life’ (Johnson 1984, p.42). This strategy is a double-edged sword. Suspension registers as a temporary device; something is suspended, then it continues. Accepting that the realist text becomes a totalising *lens*, it transforms a heterogeneous, fragmentary perspective into a homogeneous whole. The individual connects with the group through the text’s ability to expose the falsity of fetishised consciousness. That Lukács finds no solid account as to how this function is able to effect practical, *progressive* change is telling. After his revelatory ordeal in the Congo, Marlow remarks that Kurtz’ final words were of victory:

It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last. (Conrad 2000, p.114)

And yet, nothing comes of this victory. Kurtz recognised the terror of his colonial reality but could not escape it. Similarly, Marlow’s return to England is tinged with despondency mingled with disdain. It seems there is no alternative; or the only alternative is an impossible, lost age of the Earth. That Marlow remains ‘loyal’ to Kurtz emphasises this fact and draws into relief the narrative’s subtle treatment of his character and Conrad’s historical position.

A capitalist empire is shown in the raiment of darkness, bloodlust, profiteering, and inhumanity, but this disturbing reflection is impotent. Kurtz is an eternal consumer, Marlow paralysed in his reality, and the unnamed narrator resigned. While it is apparent (somewhat) that Marlow's experience, via his recognition of his culture's entrenched, economic exploitation, can bring about (for the reader) what Lukács might call a 'cathartic crisis' there is no hint as to how this attitude translates into action. Again, we must acknowledge the historicity of *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad is a bourgeois author, writing from within the British Empire, writing (presumably) with little to no revolutionary intent. Indeed, Conrad's literary interests are, arguably, centred on the moral questions and psychological crises generated by the colonial world, without a mind to actually changing that world. This is the (possible) limitation inherent to realist representation.

What distinguishes other, radical modes from realism is a distinct break from mimetic representation—they are unrealistic, surrealistic, or phantasmagorias that rupture the everyday. Realism, attempting to illustrate the essence of reality, may be too close to the appearance of fetishised actuality. This containment creates an interesting dialectical problem: 'everyday life is characterised by a [...] tendency towards species consciousness and its blockage by a fetishistic conception of reality' (Johnson 1984, p.41). While the totalising strategy of realism fosters the recovery of a species consciousness, its representational means (being too reflective) may, in fact, obfuscate and diffuse the mode's emancipatory function. Johnson specifies:

The effectiveness of the aesthetic experience in generating an ethical change in the reader will depend on the intensity of his/her dissatisfactions with the fetishistic character of everyday thinking. (1984, p.44)

Not only does the reader need to recognise the validity of the totalising representation, but their dissatisfaction with 'everyday thinking' must be intense enough to provoke a desire to

break from fetishised consciousness. If daily life is reflected too precisely how is the reader to distinguish text from artifice? Interestingly, this seems to reverberate with similar sentiments Lukács expressed regarding modernism: a distinction of depth over surface.

The debate is still relevant. If, as Lukács supposes, the authentic Marxist literature (realism) grasps the objective truth of reality through totality, then the modernist aesthetic (seemingly antithetical to realist representation) is slaved to appearance—it is confined ‘to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface’ (Lukács 1938, p.33). Arguably, the reader’s inability to connect to either realist (reality as an objective constellation of social relations) or modernist (reality as subjective experience) projection hinges on both modes’ projection of reality. Irrespective of either form’s efficacy, if the exploration of a desirable alterity does not radically diverge from everyday reality, how can progressive change be imagined with any degree of clarity?

Certainly, Johnson’s reading of Lukács navigates important aesthetic ground. Conceptualising literature as a cognitive map that reflects Western civilisation’s socio-historical structures and characteristics offers a powerful discursive tool for progressive interrogation. However, the practical merit of this aesthetic approach appears to fail at an affective level.

Literature as Daydream: Marcuse and the Imagination

With a similar, progressive aim, Herbert Marcuse circles how affirmative culture functions in capitalist civilisation. Once again, the driving force is the need to dispel falsity, to recover authenticity. Johnson states:

He [Marcuse] specifically attempts to discover the ways in which an authentic response to a progressive need for the realisation of human creative potential

can subvert and replace the falsification of human wants which occurs in capitalist society. (1984, p.97)

As such, ‘what is of authentic import to man, the highest truths, the highest goods, and the highest joys, is separated in significance from the necessary by an abyss’ (Marcuse 1972, pp.90-91). We might even call this ‘abyss’ affirmative culture. Marcuse contends:

Its [affirmative culture] decisive characteristic is the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realizable by every individual for himself ‘from within,’ without any transformation of the state of fact. (1972, p.95)

This internalisation is a crux of the problem—it translates the necessity of external, material concern into something that resembles an individual, spiritual project. Once again, this raises problems of essence and appearance, but in a slightly different context.

Centred historically, affirmative culture arrived with the ascension of the ‘bourgeois epoch’. Having assumed a seat of power (a seat pulled from under the aristocracy), this new hegemonic power required labour. Therefore, the ideals of liberty, of equality, ideals used to bring the proletariat onside, had to be culturally ‘set’. The universality of those ideals were inverted, were turned inside out. Freed from feudal intervention, the individual was free to pursue vocations with an understanding that there was now greater scope for necessities and satisfaction. In effect, they were free to supply themselves with commodities (objects of satisfaction) in an expanding, capitalist market. Equality is gained via the freedom to purchase. Marcuse calls this the ‘new happiness’ (1972, p.97). However, ‘the universality of this happiness is immediately cancelled, since the abstract equality of men realises itself in

capitalist production as concrete inequality' (Marcuse 1972, p.97). Hence: the directive to internalise the 'highest truths' and 'highest goods'.

This brief summary orbits the bourgeoisie's construction of an artistic realm designed to conceal. This realm (now formalised as culture) instils a harmonious image of unity and freedom, of liberty and equality, that masks the supposedly 'pacified' 'antagonistic relations of existence' (Marcuse 1972, p.96). Effectively, by making individual satisfaction an internal pursuit, affirmative culture obscures the oppression and repression of material/social reality.

Marcuse laments:

There is a kernel of truth in the proposition that what happens to the body cannot affect the soul. But in the established order this truth has taken on a terrible form. The freedom of the soul was used to excuse the poverty, martyrdom, and bondage of the body. (1972, p.109)

One cannot help but acknowledge Marcuse's warning as a figurative call to arms. Arguably, art has been subsumed by capitalist mass culture; indeed, Johnson intimates that the 'display techniques of mass culture means that art becomes absorbed into "administered comforts and stimuli"' (1984, p.107). Even if the underlying concern is valid, this generalisation may be a little short-sighted. Seemingly, it fails to allow an artistic re-appropriation (for deconstruction and/or subversion) of representational methods used by corporate publishers and the state. The issues—the issue that runs through all Marxist aesthetics—is: 'can culture be political, which is to say critical and even subversive, or is it necessarily reappropriated and coopted by the social system of which it is a part?' (Jameson 2005, p.xv).

Where Lukács sees realism as a means to produce a cathartic crisis in the reader, Marcuse understands the success of capitalist culture in suppressing or glossing over that desire. Western civilisation advocates that material needs are being met (or they are irrelevant

to happiness anyway); liberty and equality are actualised constants; and the need for revolutionary change not required.

Marcuse argues that ‘culture affirms and conceals the new conditions of social life’ (1972, p.96). Necessarily, it may be the task of a progressive literature to reveal these unnatural, alienating conditions while announcing a counter-hegemonic alternative. Very simply, a progressive literature could be aimed at a recovery: recovering ‘authentic human needs that have been obscured by [...] inauthentic ones’ (Johnson 1984, p.98).

The distinction is crucial. Inauthentic corresponds with manufactured—they produce and reproduce systems of commoditisation, reification, and consumption. On the other hand, authentic needs suggest the desire for life without repression, full self-expression, the gratification of material requirements, and working conditions free from alienation.

Artistically subjecting the inauthentic needs to scrutiny echoes Lukács, echoes the integration of truth with illusion. However, Marcuse operates within a different frame: the artwork contains both progressive and conservative facets. Where the progressive elements *preserve* the desire for a better social experience, conservative factors project the illusion that capitalism grants satisfaction in the present. Marcuse’s answer to this apparent ambivalence is the power of the *imagination* to expose, subvert, and re-create the perceptual apparatus that defines reality. Generally, this imaginative mechanism is geared towards re-tooling the individual’s perception of reality, of labour. It envisions a sensual affirmation, an aesthetic realm freed from fetishisation and alienation: work is to become play.

Heart of Darkness seems explicitly concerned with highlighting the true character of consumer capitalism. Expounding on the ivory trade, Marlow is bluntly critical: ‘The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those that have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much’ (Conrad 2000, p.20). Conrad pins Marlow’s treatise to an economic root,

indicative of the *physical* destruction within colonial subjectivity. He writes: ‘To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe’ (2000, p.55).

Naked, ruthless, violent profiteering is discussed with a rapacious and disquietingly cold language. Marlow’s voice is (understandably) a British patois carrying stereotypical distance—his thought is ‘not a pretty thing’; the idea (raping the earth, the violence of theft, and ethnic profiling) is more of an uncomfortable inconvenience than a disgruntled outcry.

The underlying tenor of this description is two-toned: internal and external, self-referential and socio-political. While the exploitative, dehumanising, colonial agenda is clear, more troubling is Marlow’s internalisation of that subjectivity. He recognises the capitalist strategy, yet feels that it is inescapable. Consequently, the narrative focusses on the individual’s mind and what happens to it under such ideology. As the trading-station’s doctor remarks: ‘the changes take place inside, you know’ (Conrad 2000, p.27).

In *Negations*, Marcuse supposes that affirmative culture has ‘concealed the physical and psychological vitiation of the individual’ (1972, p.98). Johnson contends that he champions a synthesis of Marx and Freud ‘to identify the means by which the desire for the free play of human creative abilities can be released’ (1984, p.105).

The previous analysis of Lukács developed an understanding of a Marxist aesthetics that was fundamentally contemplative. Through the interaction of essence and appearance, the (realist) artwork mapped a totality to create recognition and shock: the essence of reality is labour. Lukács suggests that the shocking recognition is normative—the totalising reflection uncovers the essence of capitalist reality, producing class consciousness in the reader. However, what this analysis lacked was a clear delineation of how desire functions in this framework. He assumes that all individuals have a longing, a need for totality, but remains circumspect on the ‘why’.

For Marcuse, desire is a social occurrence. Desire arises when needs are not being met because their gratification conflicts with a ‘number of societal and cultural influences [that] are taken in by the superego until it coagulates into the powerful representative of established morality’ (Marcuse 1974, p.32). Desire is socialised (repressed) for societal stability, for security. This is a core concept: the subjugation of humanity to a set of social relations based on performance, on exploitation, on commoditisation, on capitalist rationality. In such a space, contemplation falls short of the mark.

By examining capitalism’s psychical damage in the individual (dehumanisation, repression, alienation), with its social consequence (colonialism, imperialism, mechanisation), Marcuse argues that the artwork should assert an *imaginative* response. Marcuse shifts the discourse towards *free play*: reimagining the individual’s relationship to reality via beauty, via art. In doing so ‘it [art] invokes a tabooed logic—the logic of gratification as against that of repression’ (Marcuse 1974, p.185). The two positions are at odds. Therefore, the rediscovery and assertion of authentic desires means the modification or suspension of the capitalist reality principle. It requires a total reimagining of social reality. Marcuse posits (like Lukács) that this reimagining occurs through shock—a shock delivered by an artwork’s beauty. Beauty forms the totality: a ‘pure form’. And the valorising of beauty is effective. In itself, the creation of the beautiful is an anticipatory feat. The artwork is a product of human labour, a ‘work (or rather the play) of *imagination*’ (Marcuse 1974, p.177). Work has become play, and the antipathy between reason and pleasure is resolved. Of course, Marcuse would argue that this formation is illusory. Indeed, in the capitalist society such an ‘aesthetic realm’ is cut-off from actuality: its actualisation would be irrevocably understood as regression. As such, the artwork (for Marcuse) is a thing with two faces: critical negativity and a compensatory salve (this dialectic will be further explored in due course).

Conceivably, *Heart of Darkness*, with its apparitions and personifications, is an expression of the individual's alienation from and discontent with material reality. The focus shifts from class to the individual: an affective daydream offering the potential for a change. It departs from a fetishistic, alienated attitude to the everyday, towards an enriched, aesthetic consciousness. It moves away from rationality, delving into the psyche of the colonial mission, the colonial past, and the coloniser. It moves towards emotionality. The text is given creative reign and allowed to explore the 'unreal', 'impossible' and 'fantastic'. In this space, anything is possible.

In many ways, we can access Marlow's journey as a nightmare, an 'experience that sends him back a different man, now aware of depths in himself he cannot hide (Karl 1968, p.29). Under this psychological lens, his world is lent a strange, dark, symbolic aspect. Everywhere, the Congo, the river, the jungle, the Africans are infused with violent, at times sexual, energy. The repressed is expressed and conceived not as things that the world creates, but as the definable 'substance of the world' (Karl 1968, p.28) and so, a 'law-abiding, morally sensitive man enters an avaricious, predatory, almost psychopathic world' (Karl 1968, p.32). Thus, Marlow's journey on the river is a journey into himself, a journey into his civilisation's subjectivity. This tripling captures the power of the nightmare. It makes the natural unnatural; it disturbs the normal.

However, conceptualising literature as daydream (or nightmare) is as intriguing as it is problematic. In terms of scope, it is without limit. It is theoretically unfettered and potentially powerful when discussing questions of perception, reality, and society.

Marcuse believes that the imagination buys such creative freedom 'at the price of becoming powerless, inconsequential, unrealistic' (1974, p.141). Ultimately divorced from the reality principle, this third mental apparatus (the imagination) does not correspond to reality: it is phantasy. If the reality principle draws off or redirects the libidinal energies of the

pleasure impulse, repressing the desire for immediate gratification in favour of material, physical and social security (i.e. civilisation), the daydream is impotent because it has no perceivable *practical* use. This is a mindset that Marcuse seeks to rectify. He states:

Phantasy plays a most decisive function in the total mental structure: it links the deepest layers of the unconscious with the highest products of the consciousness (art), the dream with the reality [...] (1974, p.140)

Forwarded in psychoanalytically invested terminology, Marcuse addresses the nexus of social influence on the individual, re-framing the aesthetic debate along a narrower psychical axis: the individual artwork expresses the desire for communal catharsis. Acting like a conduit, phantasy links dream with reality, enabling Marcuse to store great progressive energy in artistic representation.

Effectively, a relationship not bound by repressive measures is fostered between the deepest, fundamental desires and representative techniques. The artwork (daydream) becomes the purest method of exposing the unconscious desires of the pleasure principle repressed throughout history. Whereas Marcuse might argue that the conservative quality of mass culture sublimates these desires into socially productive ‘work’. If this is so, then the authentic artwork is a conductor to recall ‘the lost capacities and abilities of the true human creative potential’ (Johnson 1984, p.99). In other words, the daydream, the text, *constructs an alternate reality in terms the reader can understand*.

Several episodes in *Heart of Darkness* hint at comprehensible alterity. The first such occurrence navigates the idea of labour separate from alienation. Conrad writes:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality [...] They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a

wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along the coast. (2000, p.30)

The scene is inscribed with energy: a love of work and an affinity with the natural world. Interestingly, their meeting is a ‘contact with reality’, implying that Marlow’s journey is like to a dream—a skein stretched over reality.

The native sailors appear distorted or outside humanity (Western humanity), and so their actions are not recognised as belonging to Marlow’s conception of nature or work. Similarly, the young German in Kurtz’s camp seems to sit outside the social norm because he appears somewhat liberated. He is ‘absolutely pure’, ‘uncalculating’, and filled with the ‘unpractical spirit of adventure’ (Conrad 2000, p.91). Like a harlequin, his character is tied to masking: as if his subjectivity is unnatural. Marlow supposes the youth unhinged because he does not fit the capitalist mould—he possess a distinct sense of fun, is carefree, and he seems to go where he wills. That the youth’s mind is enlarged (Conrad 2000, p.90), demonstrates that Kurtz is a locus for similar alterity—that he can stimulate dramatic change.

However, such change, such alterity, must be tethered to content, to reality. The expression of the unconsciousness *must* be framed in understandable terms—the imagination is ‘capped’ to produce a comprehensible intervention (art). While the cost seems dear, it allows that juxtaposition of dream and reality, buying the potential for subversion through exposure, comparison, and transformation. Most radically, Marcuse affirms that this expression envisions ‘the reconciliation of the individual with the whole, of desire with realization, of happiness with reason’ (1974, p.143). He clarifies:

While this harmony has been removed into utopia by the established reality principle, phantasy insists that it must and can become real, that behind the illusion lies knowledge. (1974, p.143)

Phantasy, then, is far from meaningless—it is through this faculty that literature’s affective daydreaming is potentially progressive. Like Lukács, Marcuse attributes un-covering to literature, but differs its purpose: no longer an illuminating reflection, it examines the potentialities of a social existence free of surplus repression. Importantly, this term (surplus repression) alludes to that repression generated within advanced capitalism *beyond* the requirements needed to produce and maintain civilisation. Due to material scarcity *some* repression is needed to stymie the anarchic, immediate struggle for gratification in favour of secure, eventual, partial gratification. However, as civilisation has progressed, technological advancements have countered scarcity (somewhat), allowing a loosening of individual constraints (work time, physical labour, etc). However, repression has not lessened. It has increased, maybe mutated, and largely been accepted, creating a surfeit of manufactured needs and desires. As such, progressive literature is not only concerned with uncovering, but *recovering*.

Ultimately, it is recovery that dominates Marcuse’s aesthetics. Something has been lost in modern civilisation and his ‘aesthetic perspective’ (Marcuse’s counter-capitalist consciousness) is the vehicle of its re-discovery. This impulse is utopian in nature, not utopia per se. Indeed, ‘utopia’ as a realisable site has been suborned by the reality principle—a way to marginalise and suppress those notions deemed impossible, untenable, redundant and unproductive to productivity. Nevertheless, alterity rendered by phantasy, operates to instil recognition of a reality divorced from the capitalist, labour relationships. Most intriguingly, Marcuse contends that such a situation would be found at ‘opposite poles of the vicissitudes of the instincts: one would be located at the primitive beginnings of history, the other at its most mature stage’ (1974, p.151).

This two-fold nature of this ‘hypothetical state’ is informed by Marcuse’s psychoanalytic treatment of Marxist aesthetics: the ‘primitive’ is memory, ‘mature’ the goal.

What has been repeatedly repressed can now be expressed. Literature allows representations distinct from lived reality—it turns to possibilities, potentialities.

Understandably, suggesting that civilisation return to its beginnings is regressively fraught. However, looking towards civilisation's 'most mature stage' is, as Marcuse notes, to imagine 'still unrealized but realizable possibilities' (1974, p.148). This adjusts utopia, positioning it as a psychological state radically distinct from the Western, historical norm. It is the recovery of a consciousness without surplus repression. It is that primitive freedom potentially realisable in the unrealised future. It is unity of retrospection and expectation. It is the revolutionary 'refusal to forget what *can be*' (Marcuse 1974, p.149).

However, alternate subjectivities are invariably countered in one of two ways: by alluding to their fundamental un-reality, their 'pestiferous absurdity' (Conrad 2000, p.58), *or* assuming that casting off the capitalist mindset is to regress. When Marlow nears Kurtz and sees a series of impaled heads around the man's hut, this is the impression. Kurtz, having acquired deification by the nearby natives, is placed in the 'heart of darkness', the barbaric, unmapped, untapped, centre of the Congo.

The reaction to his alterity is dismissal—'They [the heads] only showed that Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him' (Conrad 2000, p.95). Kurtz has 'gone native' and his new relationship to reality (terrifying though it may be) is understood as a disgusting gratification of base lusts—a regressive deformity of character.

This can be read in two ways: the translation of non-capitalist subjectivity into dangerous rebellion *or* Conrad's own struggle with the idea of something beyond the reality in which he (as a historically situated subject) is surrounded. While the former, as manifested *within* the text, 'has a dangerous ring in an order that for the majority means need, privation, and toil' (Marcuse 1972, p.100), the latter is harder to reconcile.

For Marcuse, affirmative culture possesses an ideological program geared towards maintaining the status quo. Even if Kurtz is portrayed as ‘embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe’ (Conrad 2000, p.118), it is a universe without apparent opposition. Indeed, if the capitalist system perpetrates colonial evil, the alternatives—ghoulish Kurtz or regressive savage—appear as the unthinkable ‘awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions’ (2000, p.107). Again, this view conforms to Marlow’s general outlook; he ‘acquiesces to the world’s work as basically just and fundamentally good, even necessary, provided it is done by enlightened men’ (Karl 1968, p.32). The world doesn’t need changing ... only the unjust do. How, then, does *Heart of Darkness* fit with affirmative culture? Perhaps, it is ambiguous, more akin to struggle than lecture.

The central obstruction is still the apparent unreality of this hypothetical state. Marcuse acknowledges that the aesthetic realm ‘has retained its freedom from the reality principle at the price of being ineffective in the reality’ (1974, p.172). This is an acknowledgment echoed by Jameson (regarding utopia) where ‘the more surely a given Utopia asserts its radical difference from what currently is, to that very degree it becomes, not merely unrealizable but, what is worse, unimaginable’ (2005, p.xv).

The marginalisation of the affective daydream is a direct countermeasure to the baleful power of representing utopian potentialities. Here, Marcuse suggests that the ‘relegation of real possibilities to the no-man’s land of utopia is itself an essential element of the ideology of the performance principle’ (1974, p.150). Relegation apes repression. The real possibility of actualising authentic desire is anathema to the capitalist schema and must be dismissed or, at the very least, discredited.

Considering Marcuse’s own views on the nature of modern culture, we could ask if a progressive aesthetic can exist without being bound, structured, or appropriated. Indeed, the

nature of modern publishing's insistent categorisation of literature into specific genres can, in many ways, function as anaesthesia—utopia, as a genre, becomes a dumping ground for the unrealisable and impossible. This parcelling practice is one side of the artistic coin: where the artwork desires a progressive break, the mass culture produces, at best, an image of the status quo, at worst, an attack on creativity. But how can this struggle be overcome?

Johnson alludes to a normative character in Marcuse's criticism, where the portrayal of the 'better' reality can abolish Western civilisation's claim that all desires, all freedoms, are being met. The trigger for this abolition dwells in the artwork's ability to 'activate the recipient's dormant sense of the vital need for change' (Johnson 1984, p.110). But why is this sense dormant and how is it activated? Marcuse's answer is mediation:

[...] the term [aesthetic] aims at a realm which preserves the truth of the senses and reconciles, in the reality of freedom, the 'lower' and the 'higher' faculties of man, sensuousness and intellect, pleasure and reason. (1974, pp.172-173)

Imagining a reality without surplus repression through aesthetic mediation is an interesting direction—the radicalism of Marcuse's progressive character is not aggressive, but therapeutic. The aesthetic realm becomes a space where the imagination is allowed expression, forging dynamic connections between the unconscious and conscious. Such connections can easily mould into transgressive attacks, shocking visions of oppression and violence, drawing disturbing parallels with daily life. Marcuse encourages an aesthetic that, coupled with Freudian psychoanalysis, seeks to *heal* the individual. He states:

The philosophical effort to mediate [...] between sensuousness and reason thus appears as the attempt to reconcile the two spheres of the human

existence which were torn asunder by a repressive reality principle. (1974, p.179)

Oppressive civilisation is harmful. Regardless of any material, social, and technological advances, the ascendancy of the reality principle has achieved violence. The individual has been objectified, commoditised, alienated from his/her work and his/her fellow humans. Rather than *attacking* the root of this wrong, Marcuse wants to revise the relationship. Pleasure and reason's opposition is inverted—opposition becomes integration.

Where Lukács could never quite find a way to close the gap between theory and practice, Marcuse, using the imagination, attempts to conflate pleasure and reason; his imaginative aesthetic not only imagines but, by imagining, seeks to change the reader's subjectivity. Marcuse makes it clear that such art contests the hegemony of reason by invoking 'the logic of gratification as against that of repression' (1974, p.185).

This introduces the final stage of Marcuse's progressive literature: the instigation of gratification framed by the idea of 'play'. Ultimately, Marcuse sees the cumulative result of a Marxist aesthetic as transformation—removing alienation and repression from production, transforming work into play. This is the reality of the *mature* civilisation; this is what art can imagine. Play, then, is a by-word for liberation.

By freeing the imagination, the authentic artwork mediates the pleasure principle's desire for gratification with the repressive characteristics of the reality principle. This results in a fundamental shift in the capitalist telos: work becomes play and pleasure is no longer estranged from reason. The alienated individual can be liberated from fetishistic reality by the utopian imagining of an existence without surplus repression. Naturally, this is subversive but, aiming at the abolition of affirmative mass-culture, the authentic artwork's progressive response is didactic rather than polemical. The indictment of capitalism is a *product* of the

aesthetic dimension's reconciliation of the sundered spheres of human existence, *not the goal*.

Marcuse concludes:

The play impulse is the vehicle of this liberation. The impulse does not aim at playing "with" something; rather it is the play of life itself, beyond want and external compulsion—the manifestation of an existence without fear and anxiety, and thus the manifestation of freedom itself. (1974, p.187)

Demystifying Hegemony: Jackson and the Fantastic

Altering our perspective to the explicitly ideological, one of the ways to discuss the 'purpose' of a progressive literature is to understand what that literature is butting against or breaking through. Concluding *Marxist Aesthetics*, Johnson investigates an Althusserian theory of ideology, reiterating that 'ideological conceptions have the general function of adapting people to their real conditions of existence' (1984, p.117).

Here, ideology flips negative to positive. It has no epistemological burden other than becoming 'so many "world outlooks"' (Althusser 2008, p.36). It is not so much a 'false consciousness' but a necessary tool for the individual to relate to the real conditions of his/her existence. Althusser suggests:

However, while admitting that they do not correspond to reality, i.e. they constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality, and that they need only be 'interpreted' to discover the reality of the world behind this imaginary representation of that world [...] (2008, p.36)

Interpreting ideology illuminates the ways the world/reality is perceived. Logically, ideologies can have positive or negative effects on the individual. Indeed, Althusser suggests that the Repressive State Apparatus (unified governing bodies of the state):

[...] secures by repression (from the most brutal physical force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship) the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses [education, religion, communication, etc.]. (2008, p.24)

This is an example of negative impact. Under the aegis of the RSA (Repressive State Apparatus), ideological structures *supposedly separate* from the State, take on and reproduce the subjectivity of the dominant class. Opposed to this, Althusser develops a Socialist Humanism that is entirely positive, where the ‘relation between men and their conditions of existence is lived to the profit of all men’ (2006, p.236).

In this way, ideology—subjectivities relating the individual to reality—is not inherently repressive, but an inexorable part of existence. Indeed, Althusser pushes the point further, arguing it is ‘as if human societies could not survive within these *specific formations*, these systems of representations (at various levels), their ideologies’ (2006, p.232). This leads his school of thought to very different understandings of progressive literature: demystification via interpretation and deconstruction.

While it may seem strange (if not at odds) to cap a discussion of Lukács and Marcuse with Althusser, their positions are linked by a mutual dissatisfaction with the status quo. In many ways, this sentiment can take opposing paradigms (as Jameson seems want to do) and push them into dialogue. Friction is encouraged as a spark can lead to fire. Consequently, it is not the aim of this chapter (or the project entire) to conflate these three positions, but to use *sympathetic parts of them*, to construct a dialogic which explores fantasy as a distinct, potentially progressive aesthetic. Be that as it may, before something can be changed it must be understood.

Althusser posits that ideological superstructures (law, religion, education, etc) function by repetition (Johnson 1984, p.121)—ideology is produced and reproduced. This

reproductive quality presents a difficult obstacle. Emancipating the recipient's consciousness is a complex task because ideology is not experienced as a filter, but as a *constant lived state*. Althusser's aesthetic response is to view the text like a frozen moment that, via rigorous, *almost scientific* interpretation becomes an object—a photograph.

It [art] gets its enlightening capacity not from its construction of a 'whole world' but, rather, through the internal gaps or absences within the work. The incompleteness of portrayal of the lived in the work of art allows us to 'see' the ideological instance as an effect on an external determinant. (1984, p.125)

This bears the faintest stamp of Lukács (albeit as an inversion of totality): it is through the 'gaps' in the text's structural framework that subjectivity is exposed, witnessed, and the function of ideological superstructures made manifest. However, these gaps draw more attention, becoming darker, stranger sites of representation.

Heart of Darkness demonstrates how the 'system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of man or a social group' (Althusser 2008, p.33) creates social areas effaced and unseen. It illustrates how imperial ideology, exhorting a magnanimous, benevolent, bourgeois humanist subjectivity, attempts to erase the plight of the Africans it enslaves. This is not a positive position. Via a general examination of the French Revolution, Althusser suggests that the bourgeois enlisted the proletariat to overthrow the aristocracy. They accomplished this by appealing to fundamentally *humanist* promises of liberty, freedom, and equality—the very things that were to be denied when they claimed ascendancy. Marlow remarks that a party of native miners appear not as figures but silhouettes:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. (Conrad 2000, pp.34-35)

The organic totality of the capitalist-imperial ideology is disrupted by the representation of its gaps in reality: colonialism, while proclaiming liberation, actually generates oppression, enslavement, and murder. Here is a world where ‘those who can, plunder those who cannot’ (Karl 1968, p.32). Through disruption, the illusion shatters and the real relations between individuals, between individual and the world, are made clear. In this way, the function of this subversive literature is making visible the invisible, dredging up the unconscious with conscious representation. Johnson states:

[...] an Althusserian aesthetic can attempt to specify the terms under which the distinctiveness of the work of art in relation to ideology enables it to enter into an active, demystifying relation with the falsity of immediate consciousness.
(Johnson 1984, p.127)

Rosemary Jackson argues that the fantastic is actively, explicitly subversive. It shocks, ruptures the familiar, demystifying ideological structures and conceptions that dominate everyday thinking. This position has an Althusserian root. However the introduction of the fantastic carries echoes of Marcuse’s imaginative faculty. The difference is in application.

Where Marcuse transforms the relationship between the individual and reality through affective daydreaming, Jackson suggests that the fantastic imagination acts as a distorting lens whose vision ruptures the conceptual whole manufactured by ideological superstructures, opening up ‘a space without/outside cultural order’ (1981, p.43).

This opening of space outside the cultural order is the general difference in her structuralist approach. Where Lukács and Marcuse encompass representations of reality (either reflective or alternate), Jackson seems concerned with prying apart the gaps, exposing unseen places, fracturing the totalising image and permeating it with its inverse. This is an Althusserian heritage (with a Freudian edge) bleeding through.

While Jackson would agree with Marcuse that contemporary civilisation is a social system founded on repression, she (arguably) differs in her conceptual understanding of desire. The fantastic representation of desire manifests (in her narrow fantastic canon) as ‘transgressive impulses towards incest, necrophilia, androgyny, cannibalism, recidivism, narcissism and “abnormal” psychological states’ (Jackson 1981, p.49): as a-social or anti-social. This is the reason Jackson ascribes a disturbing utility to its enunciation. They are perversions whose appearance in the fantastic text makes visible *and* tangible those things society must repress to exist. Desire is, therefore, a ‘violent transgression of all human limitations and social taboos prohibiting the realisation of desire’ (Jackson 1981, p.57). This is, of course, a serious rupture of Marcuse’s position (and the ultimate theoretical lean of this project) which would probably suggest that such transgressions are desires distorted by the individual’s socialisation into hegemonic domination. As previously discussed, Marcuse argues that (authentic) desire drives the need to reconcile reason and pleasure, to transform work into play. It is this desire, for him, that is repressed. Valorising destruction, dissolution, and erosion, presumably ends in fragments at best and nothingness at worst.

And while deconstruction plays a pivotal role when taking up reality to *imagine* radical, progressive totality, it must be seriously questioned as an end in itself. Jackson favours this shattering of totality, this abstract negation through dismantling. This is her hypothesised path that leads beyond the capitalist system. The progressive potential of such a strategy is debateable: nothing new is conceived after deconstruction. Fundamentally, this project aligns with a determinate negation that clears a space for utopian alterity. The negation of the capitalist totality exists, but it is driven by agents with a specific program of social re-construction, a program determined by a set of necessary conditions (as yet unfulfilled) for a progressive, social existence. However, Jackson’s dissolution has an important role in this program.

Jackson's approach consists of two interlocking parts: formal characteristics and structural dissolution. The two concerns dovetail, informing a subversive practice which highlights predominant ideological forces working within the individual *and* unravels the structural foundations that give these forces energy.

The subversive nature of the modern fantastic begins with vision and visibility.² Jackson suggests that the fantastic is teeming with 'mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits, eyes—which see things myopically, or distortedly, as out of focus—to effect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar' (1981, p.43). If ideology is produced to reconcile the individual to his/her material conditions, the transformation of the 'familiar into the unfamiliar' threatens to expose the structures of everyday thinking and shatter the image of social totality they seek to (re)produce.

This is contrary to the progressive characteristics Lukács espoused in realism. For Jackson, realism has become a representational medium for the ideological state apparatus—an educational dogma that declares: 'this is how things are!' Inconsistencies in realist representation do not exist,—what you see is what you get. There are no ghosts, no spectres, other than in demented imaginations of the deranged. This is, of course, a repeated criticism of the fantastic, a literary mode in the 'embrace of madness, irrationality, or narcissism [...] opposed to the human and more civilised practices of "realistic" literature' (Jackson 1981, p.172). Arguably, this is a conservative response to a literary mode that seems inherently opposed to the status quo. Innately able to distort and fracture the normal, the fantastic attempts 'to "turn over" "normal" perceptions and undermine "realistic" ways of seeing' (Jackson 1981, p.49).

Seeing is important. Inhabited by spectral images, shadows, doppelgangers, labyrinths, and impossibilities, the fantastic revolves around seeing those things which, in the

² This is exemplified, for Jackson, by Mervyn Peake and Franz Kafka, and should not be confused with sf or fantasy. Jackson investigates the fantastic as a specific trait in modernism.

everyday consciousness, remain *unseen*. Jackson stresses: ‘In a culture which equates the ‘real’ with the ‘visible’ and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the un-real is that which is in-visible’ (1981, p.45). If ideology is lived, is unconscious, then it is unseen and out of mind. Perhaps, the ideological conception of reality functions best when it is invisible, when it is not scrutinised.

The portrayal of the strange, the twisted, the invisible in fantastic literature forces the unseen to the surface and ‘all that is hidden, secreted, obscured [...] functions to dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight’ (Jackson 1981, p.65). This discourse of exposure uncovers what is covered. It takes things normalised in daily life and reforms them as nightmarish, distortions of the real: familiar becomes unfamiliar.

The fantastic reveals ideology as being part of the invisible—it is only visible as absences in the textual projection. Highlighting the constructed nature of ideological frameworks, the fantastic asserts that ideology *needs* hiding, is hidden, because to see, to comprehend its strangeness leads to questions, criticisms, transgressions.

For Jackson, the fantastic’s interrogation of the visible/real couplet is nothing haphazard—it is a concerted, conscious practice inherent to the mode. By expressing the unseen and unknown, by creating strange and disconcerting spaces beyond or outside the normal cultural order, the fantastic is expressly self-reflexive.

Conrad depicts the Congo’s river and jungle as a primitively fantastic landscape, confounding the mind until ‘you thought yourself bewitched and cut off from everything you ever had known—somewhere—far away—in another existence’ (2000, p.59), where the past manifests like a strange dream ‘remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence’ (2000, pp.59-60).

This dream-like quality combined with the notion of a forgotten past powerfully cuts to the core of fantastic representation—revealing an existence beyond (or behind) hegemonic

ideology. This disturbs, hence the feeling of being cut off and lost—the alterity, seemingly free from colonial intervention, appears as an uncomfortable, ‘unrestful dream’. It appears unreal and beyond the scope of possible experience.

When Jackson considers the fantastic she turns to the dislocated images of Kafka and the twisted Gothic of Peake. What these narratives share is an exaggeration of the constructed text and textual construction: their worlds are experienced as *written*, as fabrications. Jackson contends:

By foregrounding its own signifying practice, the fantastic begins to betray its version of the ‘real’ as a relative one, which can only deform and transform experience, so the ‘real’ is exposed as a category, as something articulated by and constructed through the literary or artistic text. (1981, p.84)

This is the ability of the fantastic: transforming the objective whole into a subjective fragment. When realism creates a totalising reflection to emancipate the fetishised consciousness, Jackson suggests it is complicit in an elision that screens hegemonic ideology. On the other hand, the fantastic translates reality as a textually constructed edifice. A text that distorts any normal image of reality becomes subversive, revealing hidden or invisible spaces to everyday consciousness, attempting to enlighten the reader by enunciating their ‘relation to cultural law and to [...] the truths of the establishment’ (Jackson 1981, p.55).

And yet, there is an inherent problem: only the already emancipated consciousness can comprehend the fantastic’s ideological discourse. This seems a paradigmatic hangover from Althusser. Jackson assumes that only the emancipated consciousness is able to interpret ideology as it is represented in literature. In other words, only an emancipated consciousness will be *properly* disturbed by uncanny, unreal, impossible representations.

That space behind or beyond ruling ideology should be suitably disturbing because the gaps, given uncanny, extraordinary form, rupture social totality. This mutation of ordinary

to extraordinary, familiar to unfamiliar, is designed to breach the normal and, by breaching, shock the reader. This shock is the first step when changing the relationship between the reader and everyday reality.

A rift exists between the artwork and the reader. Althusser (and Jackson) make the artwork a scientific instrument. Freezing ideology to comprehend its gaps is a strategy based on an objective view. It is only through this gaze that the fantastic's subversion of ideology (its doubles, ghosts, perversions, etc.) can be appropriately witnessed. On the other hand, the reader is embedded in ideology, in the capitalist subjectivity. He/she does not come to the artwork as 'seeing', but blind—there is no objective consciousness. This folds back into Jackson's discursive project. An emancipated consciousness may be impossible but, by making visible the effaced, the fantastic makes those areas of reality vulnerable. Via ideological silhouettes, the real can be understood as construction, then questioned and deconstructed. Emancipation isn't the issue, the goal is dissolution.

However, experienced on their own, Jackson believes that these ruptures (ghosts, mirror-worlds, etc.) are sapped of all subversive power, that 'when fantasy has been allowed to surface within a culture, it has been in a manner close to Freud's notion of art as compensation' (1981, pp.174-75). The transgression, in this case, is not progressive but performative—a means by which reality's lacks can be acted out in a quarantined environment, then quickly forgotten. In other words, the thematic fantastic (fairy, uncanny, and marvellous tale) act as self-contained actions, appropriated by mass culture to *sustain* the dominant order. Jackson's answer to this cultural anesthetisation is structural interrogation.

By tracing cultural absences the fantastic can be read 'as an art of estrangement, resiting closure, and opening structures which categorize experience in the name of "human reality"' (Jackson 1981, p.175). As such, its discourse is tailored towards dissolution, towards demystifying closed, ideological systems, disrupting the totalising reflection of the realism.

Indeed, the fantastic seems to reside in that space behind the mirror, a zone for those things the reflection obscures. Where the realist mirror seeks to create a complete picture of reality, Jackson believes that the ‘shady worlds of the fantastic construct nothing. They are empty, emptying, dissolving’ (1981, p.45).

We can categorise this dissatisfied, transgressive aesthetic as the attempt of a revolutionary Marxism to illustrate the emptiness of capitalist consciousness. As such, the fantastic can be considered as a progressive ideological vehicle. In opposition to the repressive, capitalist system that makes the individual an object, the authentic Marxist aesthetic should undercut the normal, highlighting the subjective nature of perceived reality. In this light, the fantastic is primarily a deconstructive medium creating nothing, dissolving everything.

Marlow considers the difficulty of expressing his time in the Congo, repeatedly referring to it as a dream impossible to relate—nothing can ‘convey the dream sensation’ (Conrad 2000, p.50). He says:

I’ve been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases pronounced—but what’s the good? They were common everyday words,—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. [...] They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. (Conrad 2000, p.107)

The very story is in question, because there is a disconnection when trying to categorise the inexplicable, near infinite concepts of dream and nightmare in the finite words of the everyday. Marlow’s story lies beyond his subjectivity and cannot be properly expressed by its language—it is the expression of a ‘discontinuous, inexplicable, existentially absurd experience’ (Karl 1968, p.28). What the reader sees is Marlow’s supposedly self-aware consciousness struggling to process what he has witnessed. This is another symptom of his

paralysis—he has seen the gaps created by imperialist ideology, but is unable to fully communicate his discoveries. His story illuminates, it deconstructs European colonialism, without being able to properly disseminate his discoveries *or* form a new subjectivity. He is forever part of the prevailing social system, ever conscious and revolted by its ideological formations.

Jackson is predisposed to find in this deconstructive literature a nemesis for the culture of modern civilisation. However, where Marcuse sought to transform the rules, Jackson feels the rules are too ingrained (ideology is lived from birth) and need to be erased. She argues:

Far from construing this attempt at erosion as a mere embrace of barbarism or of chaos, it is possible to discern it as a desire for something excluded from cultural order—more specifically, for all that is in opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in Western society over the last two centuries. (Jackson 1981, p.176)

This is the point where the fantastic is at its most subversive and, paradoxically, embroiled with its greatest obstacle. Jackson's fantastic is set up in *opposition* to the Western cultural order. It is not *for* anything, but against *everything*; it is deconstructive not productive.

Most readily, this opposition can be traced through the modern fantastic's treatment of character. Be it so visibly rendered in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or the subtle doppelgangers, twins, and partial selves of Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy, the fantastic continually violates the most cherished of all human unities: character (Jackson 1981, p.82).

The narrative logic of the *Gormenghast* trilogy is stagnant. The story continually folds back on itself, is buried under excessive sensory detail, and moves from dark corridors to desolate landscapes seemingly without purpose. Everything is constructed—all is semblance,

illusion. Nothing is real. For all its imagery, the narrative is void, emptied out only to be filled with phantasms, ghosts, and broken things.

Similarly, Kafka's *The Trial* allegorises the falsity and irrationality of modern consciousness. It builds a maze of bureaucratic impossibilities, twisted architecture, and disjointed communication. Society does not make sense and cannot make sense because its governing principles are hidden in unseen, unreachable rooms, inaccessible to the individual.

These two exemplars, favoured by Jackson, are writers that endeavour to undo 'those unifying structures and significations upon which social order depends, fantasy functions to subvert and undermine cultural stability' (Jackson 1981, p.70). They are not reflections, but textual fabrications with a multiplicity of unstable characters and circular narratives. This form of the fantastic offers no particular alternative (no better worlds) but inversions of reality.

Of course, it has to be said that Jackson's reading of the fantastic (through Todorov) is narrow. Indeed, fantasy (the fantasy explored throughout this project) is summarily dismissed. This particular cocktail of the mimetic and the marvellous (fairy stories, romance, magic, etc.), for all its incumbent unreality and strangeness, becomes little more than an 'art form performing vicarious gratification' (Jackson 1981, p.2). Arguably, it is this mode's desire to relocate 'the reader or viewer into an absolutely different, alternative world' (Jackson 1981, p.42) that compels this dismissal, that appears contrary to Jackson's want to dissolve the here, the now. This erosion (she would argue) is in opposition to fantasy's totalised, 'duplicated cosmos'(Jackson 1981, p.42), and the projections of madness and phantasmagoria are the disturbing images that illuminate reality as category, making visible the invisible, expressing the unexpressed, destabilising the seemingly seamless whole.

Similar inversions occur throughout *Heart of Darkness* in its representation of doppelgangers, disjointed time, madness, and ghosts. Most disturbing is Marlow's encounter with Kurtz at the edge of the jungle.

There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on ground or floated in the air. (Conrad 2000, p.107)

This encounter is a microcosm of the ideological rupture implicit in *Heart of Darkness*: the disturbing, dislocating recognition of the horrifically repressive nature of capitalist society.

Kurtz, the grotesque embodiment of death, is Marlow's distorted double. Arguably, he is the colonial ideology personified—conscious of its forms, aware of its functions, eyeing all its gaps. Marlow comes face-to-face with this subjectivity (his own) and finds that his reality (a reality that *seemed* solid) disappears.

Just as Kurtz understood the seductive, violent aspects of colonialism and went beyond them, Marlow's recognition of this fact forces him to question his own relationship to the world. Marlow (and those who read his tale) is exposed to 'the horror', that 'vibrating note of revolt' (Conrad 2000, p.113) railing against the everyday.

Conclusively, Jackson positions the fantastic as the 'dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient' (1981, p.180), where the 'fantasy hollows out the "real", revealing its absence, its "great Other", its unspoken and its unseen' (1981, p.180). Nevertheless, as a *progressive* literature, Jackson's aesthetic falls short. Where Marcuse and Lukács directed their progressive views towards emancipating the fetishised conscious (by picturing a defetishised reality), Jackson's deconstructive bent seemingly offers nothing but dissolution. She posits:

A fantastic text tells of an indomitable desire, a longing for that which does not yet exist, or which has not been allowed to exist, the unheard of, the unseen, the imaginary [...] (1981, p.91)

That the fantastic ‘tells of’, but does not reconcile, mediate, transpose, or produce is indicative of deconstruction’s limitations. Making the familiar unfamiliar, by revealing the absences within ‘everyday life’, the fantastic is perfectly suited to break with the totality of the Western capitalist conscious—it is suited to *reveal*.

Jackson’s summation—that the fantastic ‘transforms the “real” through this kind of re-discovery ... [uncovering] all that needs to remain hidden if the world is to be comfortably “known”’ (1981, p.65)—is succinct. And yet, however necessary the impulse, when producing of a progressive response it feels insufficient. In many ways, Jackson’s fantastic appears anti-ideological; it disrupts, dissolves, but offers no new connections. It undermines without alternative blueprints designed to reconcile the individual with the privations of material existence. What recourse is left? What direction is left for the ‘disturbed’ consciousness but to be content with its discontent, impotent to effect any practical change?

Jameson’s Utopian Aesthetic

After examining Lukács, Marcuse, and Althusser (via Jackson), we return to Fredric Jameson. It should be clear now that Jameson’s utopian aesthetic is something of a synthesis of these three approaches. He states:

The fundamental dynamic of any Utopian politics [...] will therefore always lie in the dialectic of Identity and Difference, to the degree to which such a politics aims at imagining, and sometimes even at realizing, a system radically different from this one. (Jameson 2005, p.xii)

Within this dialectic is a need to comprehend the totality, to cognitively map reality. Only by understanding Western capitalism completely can any serious thought be given to its alternatives. However, before a radical alterity can be imagined the totality needs demystifying—its ideological superstructures deconstructed, its reproductive methods unmasked. In *Valences of the Dialectic*, Jameson meditates on the contemporary, consumer state, concluding:

[...] consumerism which, having become an end in itself, is transforming the daily life of the advanced countries in such a way as to suggest that the Utopianism of multiple desires and consumption is here already and needs no further supplement. (2009, p.413)

This psychological imprinting, insidious as it sounds, only strengthens the need, a radical need, for a new subjectivity that demystifies *and* replaces fetishised consciousness. Of course, utopias are deeply ideological. They are constructed. They are used. And the question must always be asked: whose utopia is this and how does it function? Understood objectively, this is why utopia and utopian politics is powerful, is important—it transforms ‘ideology into an instrument of deliberate action on history’ (Althusser 2006, p.232). But what exactly is Jameson’s utopian literature?

Like Darko Suvin, Jameson uses sf as a vessel for his progressive intent. Their approaches correlate insofar as they agree that the genre is fundamentally *cognitive*—sf actively maps the author’s extratextual reality. Like Lukács’ understanding of realism, sf is a mirror. Suvin argues that ‘the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one [...] the mirror is a crucible’ (1980, p.5). However, the reflection is not purely mimetic: it is extrapolative.

To a point, Suvin is correct. However, the belief in sf’s transformative power may be misplaced. Extrapolation (mechanised realities, shadowy organisations, intergalactic warfare,

etc.) is not transformative in the sense that it does not produce new subjectivities—it extends the old. The issue is that sf seldom creates that ‘better world’: it reflects the current world into possible futures: the alterity is not structural or ethical, but temporal. Jameson states:

For the apparent realism, or representationality, of SF has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us “images” of the future [...] but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present* [...] (2005, p.286)

The exaggerated extrapolation of hegemonic ideology serves to not imagine new, utopian realities, but refract, reflect, and deconstruct the present. It illuminates the ‘now’ for what it is: the possible, frighteningly probable direction civilisation is walking. This is an important, critical aesthetic program, but one that has been largely denied to fantasy which (as will be discussed) possesses its own affective, progressive potential.

If Jameson’s ideal utopian literature focusses not on the future but the present, that is, in itself, a hint that hegemonic ideology is integrated into the individual and society. That sf does not portray the future, but displaces the now, sketches an interesting problem. Conscious, perhaps, of its discursive limitations, sf is a vigorously self-referential literature—it brings the reader to his/her imaginative limitations (limitations imposed by the dominant ideology). Jameson argues:

[...] its deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished, the atrophy of our time of what Marcuse has called the *utopian imagination*, the imagination of otherness and radical difference: to succeed by failure, and to serve as unwitting and even

unwilling vehicles for meditation, which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits. (2005, pp.288-289)

If this is so, if utopia is method rather than space, its discourse modulates into a rallying cry. Extrapolating ruling ideologies of the present, sf futures are seldom bright. They represent not utopia, but *dystopia*. Therefore, it is not so much a warning but an acknowledgement that change must occur—a militant subjectivity opposed to hegemonic control, a ‘reawakening of the imagination of possible and alternate futures, a reawakening of that historicity which our system—offering itself as the very end of history—necessarily represses and paralyzes’ (Jameson 2009, p.434).

By making civilisation’s predations, its dehumanisation, its gaps visible, sf is a locus for dissatisfaction. Social reality must change because we are already under the control of shadowy forces, in constant states of war, approaching fully mechanised, exploitative existence, and alienated from the world and each other. Acknowledging this is the first step toward recovery. Utopian content, insofar as it counters hegemonic ideology, is ideological—a critical, radical, rebellious, progressive ideology.

Chapter 2: Rereading Jameson

Elaborate strategies of indirection are therefore necessary if we are to somehow break through our monadic insulation and to “experience”, for the first and real time, this “present”, which is after all all we have.

—Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*

Having mapped this project’s primary aesthetic principles—introducing mirror, daydream, and rupture—the discussion ended with a cursory introduction to the utopian politics and literature of Fredric Jameson. Now this discourse must be unpacked and, perhaps, modified.

Firstly, this chapter will explore Jameson’s theoretical assumptions apropos the function he ascribes to the utopian impulse in literature. Importantly, this will broach Jameson’s fundamental, utopic paradigm examined in *Archaeologies of the Future*, while opening up a categorical/political debate raised between sf and fantasy. Championed by Darko Suvin (and reaffirmed by Jameson), this debate focuses on their privileging of Lukácsian cognition in regards to a progressive literature’s movement towards ideological exhaustion (dystopian futurity).

Consequently, this chapter attempts to *bridge* this supposed divide between sf and fantasy, applying Jameson’s utopian theory to China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*. Interestingly, Miéville sites his creative practice in its own category: Weird Fiction. As such, using his work as a stepping stone from sf to fantasy is apt, appearing like a crossbreed of two, fantastic categories.

Jameson, Utopia, and the ‘The Great Schism’

Jameson argues that, largely due to its dystopian content, (much) sf can be read as resoundingly critical. *Archaeologies of the Future*, owing much to Darko Suvin’s seminal

Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, is, if nothing else, a call to treat sf with a great deal of serious, critical thought. Suvin asserts:

In the twentieth century SF has moved into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought, becoming a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives. (1980, p.12)

Before addressing the subtle divisions between Jameson and Suvin, we must acknowledge that the latter drives the former: sf is a powerful tool commenting on the present. This ‘call to understanding’—a shared conceptual base—is Lukácsian: a desire to map reality as it is (and its plausible endgame) under modern capitalism. Consequently, asserting that sf aims at future possibilities is (for Jameson) something of a misnomer. The variable landscapes of the future are used ‘to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*’ (Jameson 2005, p.286). Sf is the dislocating reflection of the now. But where does the utopian alterity enter this dialogue?

Interestingly, the dystopian rears as the paradigmatic mode of Jameson’s sf canon (dominated by Philip K. Dick, but also includes writers such as Le Guin, Heinlein, Pohl, Lem, Robinson, and the Strugatsky brothers). Here, the utopian desire is deployed in Lukács’ realist method. And, however incongruous this pairing, the dystopian discourse is marked by its real, cognitive approach. Pete Uwe Hohendahl’s ‘The Theory of the Novel and the Concept of Realism in Lukács and Adorno’ encapsulates this idea succinctly:

In Lukács’ epistemology of the 1930’s [sic] and 1940’s [sic] the term “realism” refers to two separate aspects of cognition: Either it refers to the ability of the subject to develop an adequate cognition of the outside reality, or

it refers to specific forms of representation of this reality in a literary work.
(2011, p.90)

This shifts focus from the realist method to the efficacy of a given representation's ability to cognitively map reality. For instance: with Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* there looms a post-war world in a state of perpetual entropy. Pervasive and disturbing, mechanisation dominates human relations and an emergent drug culture regulates how individuals cope with reality.

This translocation of Dick's post-war America to Deckard's disturbing odyssey is no surprise, but its correlative degree—that future's ties to that extratextual now—is arresting. Indeed, the case can be made that there is no imagined future, but a transplanted, extrapolated present. All the images, devices, and *deus ex machinae*—the nova—'lead to the conclusion that significant SF is in fact a specifically roundabout way of commenting on the author's collective context' (Suvin 1980, p.84).

Like Lukács' preference for realism, Jameson suggests that each sf text contains a 'superimposition of a particular worldview on the aesthetic material' (Hohendahl 2011, p.81). In other words, any future extrapolation is dependent upon the extra-textual world and the author's relationship to it. Promoting the 'activist role of the writer' (Hohendahl 2011, p.91) Jameson would maintain that the realistic treatment of sf futurities is required to capture the essence of the author's social existence. The dystopian paraphernalia of the mode (implausible to impossible as they may be) amplifies this repressive, oppressive, destruction, alienating essence, mapping the failings of contemporary reality.

For Suvin, this reflective aspect is transformative. For better or worse, sf (and, I argue, fantasy) can be used to push *any* political agenda. While this suggests that both forms can be easily 'high-jacked', the potential to push texts towards 'a dynamic transformation

rather than toward a static mirroring of the author's environment' (Suvin 1980, p.10) is worth the risk.

Jameson's interpretation of this function demarcates the utopian goal from the utopian method. Where that quintessential 'better world'—that Babylon of harmony and freedom—is the stereotypical utopia as goal, Jameson perceives peril. Utopia becomes a pathological, wish-fulfilment of the dreamers never to wake. Conversely, the utopian method 'electrocutes the Utopian dreamer' (Jameson 2005, p.76). It is not the imagining of perfection, but the mapping of a broken now, englobing capitalist actuality, fostering dissatisfaction. It is the potential cure founded on discomfort. Jameson states:

Utopia, I argue, is not a representation but an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the line beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our own society and world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe). (2009, p.413)

This disclosure of imaginative limits suggests Jameson's Marcusean heritage. We encounter such limits in two ways. One, because the capitalist subjectivity cannot accept progressive social, change; Marcuse argues that 'such a world cannot be changed piecemeal, but only through its destruction [...] through a leap into a totally other world' (1972, p.99). Two, utopian representations are corralled as 'flights of fancy' and idealistic wish-fulfilment without critical rigour. In other words, Marcuse and Jameson share a similar contradiction: while utopia can be a positive, creative launch into alterity, utopian representation can be (has been) appropriated into affirmative culture. This is, perhaps, a function of using utopia as a goal not a method. Philosophising on this or that *perfect* society is too easily dismissed when it seeming dismisses what was and what is. As such, the utopian actuality is thought impossible *and* its artistic portrayal made critically impotent.

Therefore, utopian representation must work on subjectivity, map the totality of the present, reveal a societal direction towards catastrophe, and generate dissatisfaction with the status quo. Essentially, progressive alterity is geared to change the motivational basis of individual/social consciousness. In turn, this change is given certain direction by a set of visionary representations (utopian content). Importantly, the exploration of other worlds, other realities is not a production of sheer idealisation (the production of a perfect world divorced from reality) or escapism, but a targeted interrogation and transformation of ideological categories (the impossible, the real, the known, etc.). As such, utopian actuality is replaced by a transformative discourse aimed at altering subjectivity. Appropriation by affirmative culture is diffused by the refusal to escape reality, by the desire to change it from within.

Consequently, the historical materialist is not strictly interested in other worlds. If we are unable to imagine future possibilities, what does sf actually pursue? Tracing present to future, sf explores, then attempts to exhaust the ideological space of the text. That is, its futurity takes up the social, technological, and, political structures influenced by hegemonic ideology, exhausting them to the limit of imagination.

This journey to the ‘limits of our own imagination’ anticipates progressive potential because it illuminates socio-historical lacks, ideological gaps. The inability to imagine alternatives is a warning disrupting hegemonic consumerism that asserts the ‘Utopianism of multiple desires and consumption is here already and needs no further supplement’ (Jameson 2009, p.413). Accordingly, Jameson’s utopian method is the re-invigoration of Lukács’ dictum: ‘the historical knowledge of the proletariat begins with the knowledge of the present, with the self-knowledge of its own social situation’ (1976, p.159). It is only through a complete map of reality that this class consciousness develops—the launching pad, a point of departure.

If the utopian *method* exhausts present ideological space, then its ultimate goal (making explicit our inability to imagine a future beyond current horizons) is to ‘acquire some positive or negative leverage on the present’ (Milner 2009, p.221). Its subjectivity is anti-hegemonic—the portrayal of ideological forces that collapse on themselves. This is the locus of Milner’s leverage. However, it can only be acquired through dissatisfaction and frustration.

This counter-hegemonic subjectivity is expressly negative, critical in the face of apathy, opposed to seductive consumerism. Jameson wants sf to impose a new subjectivity, understanding that an effective ‘way to control the minds of people is to control their perceptions. If you can get them to see the world as you do, they will think as you do’ (Dick 1996, p.265).

Frustration and dissatisfaction are born from the (re)cognition that reality is mediated by ideological forces that repress, coerce, oppress, and exploit the individual, society, and nature. Utopian (dystopian) representation is a meditation on the present, rather than ‘actual’ futures, and its focus is mimetic illumination. This Lukácsian, revolutionary objective, is predicated on a form of self-consciousness—the genesis of class consciousness. Lukács writes:

[...] it means the *abolition of the isolated individual* [...] it means that the abstract, universal form of the societal principle as it is manifested can be increasingly concretised and overcome. (1976, p.171)

While sf’s ability to attain this result through cognitive means remains to be debated, this social recognition the utopian aesthetic promotes is of major importance. Be that as it may, his looming assumption—that (good) sf is the *correct* aesthetic response—must be addressed. While the debates are well known, much rehearsed, and largely categorical, the supposed *conflict* between sf and fantasy is a spectre that continues to haunt both of these literatures.

Near becoming ‘a default cultural vernacular’ (Miéville 2002, p.40), fantasy cannot be overlooked. The popularity of Harry Potter, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Game of Thrones* indicates that genre fantasy is a pervasive phenomenon, demanding evaluation of its mass appeal and political implications. Fantasy’s increasing presence in the marketplace, combined with the potential for progressive representation, indicates the mode’s aesthetic power—its aesthetic responsibility.

Where Jameson (and Suvin) argues that (dystopian) sf represents socio-historical totality, fantasy, with its ubiquitous secondary worlds, magic, and archaic temporal settings, appears as regressive denial or an escapist dodge. Jameson assures:

If SF is the exploration of all the constraints thrown up by history itself—the web of counterfinalities and anti-dialectics [...]—then fantasy is the other side of the coin and a celebration of human creative power and freedom which becomes idealistic only by virtue of the omission of precisely those material and historical constraints. (2005, p.66)

Jameson’s reliance on Lukács’ seems clear. SF’s warning function, inspiring self-consciousness, imagining dislocated, extrapolative futures is supposedly to be anchored in the present, in reality. On the other hand, fantasy is not. ‘Freed’ from ‘material and historical constraints’, fantasy is heralded as a literature that moves to ‘abandon immanent (social) reality’ (Lukács 1976, p.162). It becomes just another ‘surface’ to be recognised and overcome, seen through, shattered: it is false consciousness masking the true, repressive nature of reality. In other words, the fabricated, secondary worlds of fantasy do not reflect, comment on or criticise reality, they escape it.

This is the basic divide championed by Suvin, specifying that fantasy’s imagination is used not to understand reality ‘but as an end sufficient unto itself [...] cut off from the real contingencies’ (1980, p.8). The accusation is strident, clearly stating that the cognitive is all

important when discussing progressive literature. As such, the actual issue has nothing to do with the mode, but how its genre has historically, traditionally, been written and received.

The question remains: can fantasy be cognitive?

Reflections of Reality: *Perdido Street Station* and Political Allegory

How could we not see this approaching? What trick of topography is this, that lets the sprawling monster hide behind corners to leap out at the traveller?

It is too late to flee.

—China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*

For Miéville, fantasy *begins* with reality—a subjective reality predicated upon capitalism’s commoditisation and reification where real life ‘*is a fantasy*’ (2002, p.42). It is a fantasy lived every day, under the surface, behind the walls ... it is a social constructed in which the individual is *immersed*. And in this respect, ‘real life’ and fantasy fiction are strangely compatible. Indeed, just as we are immersed in reality, fantasy can immerse its readers within the strange, weird, and impossible. Miéville argues:

Fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality—constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, *true*—mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity. (2002, p.42)

While it is debatable that fantasy as inverted reality is able to portray anything more than the absurdity of what is, there are two cogent threads to be teased out of this idea: coherency and mimesis.

Mimicry (to a point) frames the fantasy’s critical significance. Intrinsically tied to world-creation, fantasy inevitably (to varying degrees) demonstrates how our perception of reality is constructed and related to through subjectivity. In this case, mimesis relates to the

degree fantasy's representation echoes, parallels, and reflects reality or is treated realistically. In this manner, fantasy 'reveals what is frequently hidden: that all literature builds worlds, but some genres are more honest about it than others' (Mendlesohn 2008, p.59). In many ways fantasy must work harder than other literary modes to be believed, to have its myriad unrealities accepted. This leads us to the idea of coherency.

Farah Mendlesohn suggests that the 'immersive fantasy must take no quarter: it must assume that the reader is as much a part of the world as those being read about' (2008, p.59). Readers are readily able to ride with fantasy's conceit (that the impossible is possible) *if* that conceit is treated with the utmost care within the text ... if the text's characters move within a landscape whose governing principles (whatever material, magical, metaphysical guises they assume) function with an internal realism. Miéville's allusion to totality resonates—a great swathe of fantasy builds complete worlds with a textual lie made textually true.

This fantasy makes reality a category, makes it debateable, changeable ... it makes the methods of its representation explicit. Mendelsohn acknowledged this, supposing that 'the rationalised fantasy becomes a mode of understanding, shaping the position of the reader vis-à-vis the text' (Mendlesohn 2008, p.63). Consequently, fantasy does not escape reality but exposes, subverts, and creates its various frames. But escapism is not the problem, not really, not anymore. The issue is method.

If fantasy is purely, even predominantly, mimetic it faces great obstacles in expressing progressive content. Mimesis (mapping) is not enough when *creating* an opposing subjectivity—it is static. It shows what is, not what can or should be there. Be that as it may, Miéville (as a theorist) makes the argument (critically and creatively) that fantasy can be a cognitive literature.

Perdido Street Station can be tentatively read as the insertion of Lukács into fantasy: a disturbing, totalised reflection of the capitalist society. Tentatively because the text is so grim

in its near-Dickensian attention to grimy, gritty urban existence that New Crobuzon seems inscribed with satirical intent which reaches into almost every facet of the text (the Cactacae, the Handlers, the Khepri, the Remade, the labyrinthine bureaucracy, the moth's narcotics, etc.). It is an effective rhetoric that transposes ideological concepts into living, breathing 'things in themselves' *while* poking fun at the absurdity of these concepts via the transposition.

Unfolding in a fully realised secondary world, the narrative is highly symbolic. While not an explicit allegory, the text is permeated by several, repeating 'themes' that are explicit, political symbols. Arguably, Miéville's aim is the construction of a dark reality, a distilled expression of false consciousness manifested materially, bodily. Reflecting the commodity fetishism, vampiric capitalism, authoritarian legality, and social alienation of Western civilisation, the city of New Crobuzon appears dank, oppressive, and monstrous.

As the narrative progresses it becomes apparent that the story develops the undertone of a warning. The theoretical veins are clear—the reader is directed into a very specific, conceptual space. What is evident in this methodological focus is that *Perdido Street Station*, regardless of its other achievements, highlights fantasy's ability to represent ideological content in visible, evocative, critical ways. Couched differently: the city New Crobuzon and its motley denizens are depicted in such a way that they appear singular, complete: a symbolic transposition of the capitalist metropolis.

New Crobuzon is 'this great wen, this dusty city dreamed up in bone and brick, a conspiracy of industry and violence, steeped in history and battened-down power' (2011, p.5). Darkness, erosion, effluence, and grime are continuously conveying a disquieting mood that pervades the text. This mood speaks very strongly of an underlying discontent, an implicit decay; New Crobuzon is virtually anthropomorphised, making it strange, alien, and hostile.

Language dictates emotional reception, guiding the reader through twisting alleys and filthy ghettos, the city's toxic river, crumbling masonry, rampant crime, suborned justice, and brutally ruthless authority. Using this unambiguous, conceptual vocabulary the author's extratextual reality is reflected in the fantasy world. The city is made the most visceral of monsters, nothing less than an edifice malignant and dangerous.

In 'The Conspiracy of Architecture,' Miéville discusses how capitalism has produced an 'aesthetic response to the peculiar alienated relation between humanity and architecture' (1998, p.2). Notably, this response has been emphasised in Gothic horror tales of architecture with apparent life and, if not consciousness, then some affecting presence. Miéville's own work resonates with the concept, albeit with an exaggerated sensibility:

Five enormous brick mouths gaped to swallow each of the city's tramlines.

The tracks unrolled on the arches like huge tongues. Shops and torture chambers and workshops and offices and empty spaces all stuffed the fat belly of the building [...] (2011, p.79)

The description of the titular station is indicative of Miéville's portrayal of the city as a whole. There is something gluttonous, ravenous, animal, and foreboding about its buildings. Devouring, disgorging, Miéville juxtaposes monstrous and metropolitan, creating an image opposing the ideological illusions that obfuscate this reality in mass cultural forms. The city is not security—it alienates and is alienated from its populace. It is oppressive and disgusting, likened to a rapacious beast, filled with beings that do not and cannot understand one another. It is a viciously grim, aggressively violent portrait of capitalist society 'distorted by its commodity character' (Lukács 1976, p.93). Using this reflective practice, extratextual reality is fantastically distorted for startling response: modern capitalism becomes an all-encompassing monster filled with monstrous things.

Creatures like the Construct Council and the slake-moths (wonderfully realised creatures in their own right) are innately linked to the corruption of humanity, the apathy of society, and the barbarism of civilisation. They are avatars—commentaries on decadence, highlighting and enforcing the city’s aesthetic.

The Construct Council—a sprawling artificial intelligence built from discarded machines—represents rampant, technological consumerism and its relationship to humanity is shockingly, casually violent. It is calculating and parasitic, using a human ‘mouthpiece’ invested by a zombie tradition.

His skull had been sheered cleanly in two just above the eyes. The top was completely gone. There was a little fringe of congealed blood below the cut. From the wet hollow inside the man’s head snaked a twisting cable, two fingers thick. (2011, p.549)

The Council has invaded *and* supplanted the man’s mind, transforming all that was living into mechanical function. Dredging up images of lobotomy and rape, the man is an unthinking object used by the Council to further its own ends.

Worshipped, the Council looms like a deity, its senses, power, and consciousness spread into the city as its ‘cables grow longer and reach further’ (2011, p.761). There is something cancerous here—a systemic growth inveigling into the city like a rhizomatic growth. Irrevocably latched to New Crobuzon, the Council’s willingness to objectify individuals, its callous, cold logic, and its easy violence are synonymous with the city’s criminal element and governing body.

Lukács describes the fundamental capitalist drive as continuous, economic reproduction where ‘the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man’ (1976, p.93). Symbolically, the

Council is the calculating, inhuman face of capitalist ideology, reaching into society and transforming individuals into mindless objects to be used, destroyed, and discarded.

Where the Council is dehumanised computation, the slake-moths are the predatory expression of blind self-interest. Steve Shaviro summarises: the moths are ‘capitalism with an (appropriately) inhuman face. They are literally unthinkable; yet at the same time, they are immanent to the society that they ravage’ (2002, p.288). Conglomerates of insect, human, and cephalopod, the slake-moths, while ‘unthinkable,’ are ever described in grisly detail.

He could not see its shape. Only its dark, glistening skin and hands that clutched like a child’s. Cold shadows. Eyes that were not eyes. Organic folds and jags and twists like rats’ tails that shuddered and twitched as if newly dead. (Miéville 2011, p.308)

They are quintessential Lovecraftian horrors, packed with glimpses of the terrifying aspects of capitalism’s unreal, real nature. Indeed, illustrating the strange, twisted forces of the unseen, is an example of how fantasy can find ‘all that is hidden, secreted, obscured [...] [and] expose areas normally kept out of sight’ (Jackson 1981, p.65). Allowing for the impossible, by exposing the invisible and obscure, fantasy can take repressed material and re-inscribe it as weird, nightmarish, and distorted: it transforms the familiar into the disturbing, the unfamiliar (Jackson 1981, p.65).

Drinking dreams, the ‘slake-moths are alien beings, creatures of sheer excess’ embodying ‘the depredations of an inhuman vampire-capital’ (Shaviro 2002, p.287). Effectively, New Crobuzon suggests that unconscious content is unnecessary—symbolically, its ‘vampire-capital’ feeds on a very important component of humanity, leaving its victims as mindless husks.

While Shaviro’s descriptions are apt they may be one-dimensional. Granted, the slake-moths (and the Construct Council) seem to embody ‘inhuman vampire-capital’, but

they are exaggerated ciphers, focused analogues for New Crobuzon's avarice, fear, and greed. Completely misunderstood by the state, the slake-moths are smuggled into gangland and used to create narcotics from digested dream material (imbibed dreams that are digested and defecated). Inevitably, they break loose in a storm of terror and death. Becoming the narrative's 'evil', it is easy to read these allegorical creations as Miéville's primary, theoretical concern—but they are symptom not cause. It is the transformative power of the city itself that is the primary, disturbing focus.

In many ways, the true indictment writ large through *Perdido Street Station* is the extent to which individual characters are manipulated to resemble twisted microcosms of the city. While monsters and aliens can be read as representations of animalistic greed or mechanistic logic, the text's protagonists, forced into terrible choices, *see themselves becoming monstrous*. To defeat the slake-moths they abduct an old, sick man with the intention of killing him:

He had begun to cry halfway up. Derkhan had watched him and nudged him with the pistol, had felt her emotions from very far away. She kept distant from her own horror. (2011, p.720)

Effectively, Derkhan is alienated from herself—distancing action from emotion—by the city's influence: when everything is measured in object and cost, life must be destroyed for the 'greater good'. A necessary sacrifice, the old man is strapped to a jury-rigged generator, turned into a conduit to attract the moths, and has his brain burnt out. Objectively, this action is monstrous, yet laudable (it saves the greater population). However, the sequence demonstrates that, within the text's capitalist logic, the ends justify the means. That the characters recognise the 'evil' of their actions, yet remain unable to act differently, demonstrates how the city's ideology configures individual relationships to society: lives are expendable.

This transformation is the revelation of the disturbingly inhuman and dehumanising relationship the individual has with the commoditisation of existence. Interestingly, the characters fight the avatars of their own predatory society to *save* New Crobuzon (returning to the status quo). Miéville voices disquieting insight and blatant dissatisfaction, but offers no alternative. A new subjectivity is not achieved.

I turn away from him and step into the vastness of New Crobuzon, this towering edifice of architecture and history, this complexitude of money and slum, this profane steam-powered god. I turn and walk into the city my home, not bird or garuda, not miserable crossbreed. I turn and walk into my home, the city, a man. (2011, p.867)

New Crobuzon alienates its populace and transforms them into reflections of its own dark, rotting, gruesome, distorted, yet shockingly recognisable metropolis. Transposing capitalist reality onto the dark, oppressive streets of New Crobuzon reveals how monstrous the urban everyday has become or is becoming. This visibility is, perhaps, the first step in producing a progressive subjectivity. Recognition sparks shock, then dissatisfaction, and from dissatisfaction stems the desire to change. But in the end, *Perdido Street Station* seems to halt at dissatisfaction. It offers no alternatives, suggests acceptance, not action.³ If it instils a revolutionary subjectivity, it is a blind, lashing out, a desire to tear down, to destroy. A progressive literature should be capable of more.

Alternatives: Beyond the Looking Glass

Mapping, reflecting, and criticising the present is necessary to recognise the repression and dehumanisation of Western capitalism. However, the progressive effectiveness of such a

³However, when Miéville's milieu includes *The Scar* and *Iron Council*, a revolutionary air is palpable. Indeed, this loose trilogy's thematic trajectory may be a powerful, progressive aesthetic.

singular strategy may have serious flaws: the cognitive method deconstructs without reconstructing, highlights dissatisfaction but offers no gratification, and rebels for rebellion's sake.

Kathryn Hume contends that realism 'no longer imparts an adequate sense of meaning to our experience with reality' (1984, p.39)—that the mimetic, realist strategy does not, and cannot, fully engage the reader. Of course, the reaction against realism is a debate this project has already touched (albeit lightly) upon. However, where Jackson's aversion stems from a desire to disrupt, if not destroy, totality, Hume's position seems attuned to a reader response. Perhaps, this response comes to the surface in relation to capitalism's efforts to turn anything and everything into a commodity. Jameson argues:

It is in this context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from the reality principle to which now oppressive realistic representation is a hostage. (1981, p.91)

This is not to suggest that fantasy (somewhat ensconced in a romance heritage) escapes the process of reification, only that its representational methods offer something similar to 'other historical rhythms' (Jameson 1981, p.91). Where romance looks back (or forward) to the historical point that resurrects a 'fallen world', fantasy can look to other worlds entirely. By going past reality, by plunging through and beyond it, fantasy can offer interesting, at times disturbing, perspectives. Indeed, Mark Bould suggests that Marxist theories 'of fantasy and the fantastic offer an opportunity not only to engage with extremely popular areas of cultural production but also to better model the subject for political praxis' (2002, p.53).

Inserting imaginative, Marcusean alternatives alongside the explicit Althusserian understanding of literature as ideology, fantasy can modify the purely cognitive approach. It can include the recognition of gaps with the expression of radical social, material,

technological, historical alterities. However, this returns fantasy to the battle of escapist wish-fulfilment.

Brian Attebery proposes that all fantasy ‘begins with a problem and ends with resolution. Death, despair, horror and betrayal may enter into fantasy, but they must not be the final word’ (1992, p.15). This happily-ever-after telos underscores Suvin’s pejorative reading—fantasy is subordinated to hegemonic ideology. We are faced with affirmative culture. Marcuse elaborates:

To the need of the isolated individual it responds with general humanity, to bodily misery with the beauty of the soul, to external bondage with internal freedom, to brutal egoism with the duty of the realm of virtue. (1972, p.98)

For Jameson, this is the second, major obstacle for fantasy’s progressive potential. If we consider Hume’s general, yet decisive categorisation that fantasy is the ‘deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal’ (1984, p.xii), then wish-fulfilment (in the narrow affirmative sense) has daunting scope.

Even the form’s defenders would quickly acknowledge that to ‘claim that fantasy is in some systematic way resistant to ideology or rebellious against authority is, and anyone who knows the genre can attest, laugh-out-loud funny’ (Miéville 2009, p.242). Historically, the majority of genre fantasy, those sword-and-sorcery, multi-volume, mass-marketed franchise fictions, have been a cipher for Marcuse’s affirmative culture at best and blatantly nationalistic at worst. Therefore, should we, like Suvin, ask: ‘why should Tolkien or the Conan stories or the frenziedly racist Lovecraft not be legitimately usable by neo-fascism’ (2009, p.236)?

It is a valid question that should be repeated by those exploring (and writing) fantasy. Fantasy (and sf) can be used, and used differently in different cultures: literature will always

be contextually framed. In the West, the popular, genre fantasy has been a reflection, if not product of conservative politics.

Here, fantasy unfolds around the exposition of ethical preoccupations: its utopian vision is little more than a series of 'oughts'. Historically, sword-and-sorcery's subtext reads like an ethical catechism separating the good from evil. Obviously, this 'gives the "ought" a purely subjective character' (Lukács 1976, p.161) and the 'oughts' usually belong to a divisive political agenda aimed against the proletariat.

We can argue that, even as fantasy portrays abstract, universal values like liberty, equality, and freedom, they are seldom experienced by characters beyond the protagonists. This is the affirmative program: the displaced portrayal of happiness or gratification, hiding the immediate fact that these things must be denied to ensure the status quo. This brand of wish-fulfilment fantasy is anesthetising. Jameson reasons:

[...] is it not the Utopian order to be read as a Machiavellian structure of practical social organization concealed behind the sham universality of the various Utopian regimes? And have we not come to the innermost secret of Utopian form when it thus dissolves into the private fantasme on the one hand and the practical-political on the other? (Jameson 2005, p.76)

This sounds insidious and yet, considering fantasy's growing audience and cultural influence, such investigation, if not alarm, is warranted. It may be that the 'private fantasme' and 'practical-political' are polarities that are equally dangerous in their extremes. However both are strategies working towards implementing particular subjectivities (even if they are conservative). For this, and this reason alone, they are noteworthy.

In *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Hume examines what Tolkien wrote and what he thought about his fantastic mode. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien realised a vision of a world beyond (or behind) the mechanised, war-torn reality he knew and his stance is: 'I would

rather find this true than what I see everyday' (Hume 1984, p.47). His medieval, honour-bound, deathless Middle-earth is not less utopian, but a specifically nostalgic, golden-age, reactionary utopia. The impulse is not so much a desire to create a 'better' world, but to escape into a pre-industrial landscape. It turns away from the deep-rooted problems of global-conflict modernity in favour of the perceived simplicity of pastoral Hobbiton, colonial Gondor, and immortal Valinor. This impulse is reactionary and problematic. As the progenitor of sword-and-sorcery, Tolkien set the great portion of the mode on a seductive path. Hume says of Tolkien imitators:

Trashy though many adventures are, they encourage belief in the possibility of meaningful action. They deny that the individual is worthless, a negligible statistic. Even at the lowest valuation, this reassurance has psychological value, for people who cannot believe in themselves have trouble engaging themselves with life in any fashion. (Hume 1984, p.68)

The problem in this case is that 'meaningful action' in affirmative fantasy invariably means self-sacrifice, xenophobia, and nationalism. The individual derives worth by pulling his/her weight, sublimating individuality in the name of nebulous 'good'. The status quo is maintained because 'evil' has been vicariously defeated and the need for social change effaced by a reinsertion into a nostalgic idyll. This is a tenet of affirmative literature—it 'lulls and flatters the reader rather than challenging and contradicting them' (Hume 1984, p.84).

Possibly, Suvin and Jameson's dismissal of fantasy is a symptom of a narrow, genre function they ascribe to the mode entire. Jameson describes genre as a 'social contract between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artefact' (1981, p.92). Jameson seems to assume that these contracts cannot be revised, that they are concrete structures. In many ways, they become ideological rules. Furthermore, this understanding seriously limits the scope of any genre; it narrows and

confines. But contracts (historically) exist to be bent if not broken. Genre contracts codify accepted norms and ‘proper use’ assumes the tone of a didactic dominance. That fantasy is given only one use is, perhaps, indicative of their aesthetic programs, rather than a concerted study of the mode. Genres are more readily encapsulated, insulated by categorical divisiveness privileging one discourse over another. Jameson seems too willing to push fantasy as inextricably entrenched in the ‘brand-name system’ (1981, p.93), glossing over his own suggestion (although with willingness to disregard seemingly on a whim has softened somewhat in recent publications) that there will always be outliers, writers struggling *within* and *with* the confines of genre producing ‘authentic artistic expression’ (1981, p.93).

This is an idea that Miéville heartily acknowledges: ‘No matter how commodified and domesticated [...] we need fantasy to think the world, and to change it’ (2002, p.48). That the impossibility of fighting orcs or Dark Lords paints a very simple picture of fantasy is, in itself, deceptively simple. Readers are meant to identify with the heroes and not think twice about their acts of violence because they are *fighting evil in a place that does not exist, will not exist, could not exist*. The emphasis, again, is on a form of escapism, but it is an escape with *direct* purpose—an escape into the impossible.

Paraphrasing José Monleón, Miéville puts forward the idea that fantasy should be ‘understood as a genre of modernity that is formed at the same point that (indeed as part of the process by which) (proto-) sf is formed’ (2008, p.62). Here (as both writer and theoretician), Miéville seats fantasy and sf, not in opposition, but alignment: the initial insertion of the fantastic novum—where the impossible is possible—is the ‘starting point of radical alienation from actuality [...] that both “sf” and “fantasy” share’ (2008, p.64). Whatever connotative qualifications attached to the impossible are irrelevant: the impossible is always culturally illuminating.

Manipulation, propaganda, persuasion, argument—call it what you will, fantasy (and sf), like any literature, is always ‘*something done with language by someone to someone*’ (Miéville 2009, p.235). That fantasy uses the unreal and impossible should not undermine the integrity or urgency of the images it produces. More important is that it treats its impossibilities, strangeness, and dislocation with the utmost seriousness: what the text encounters, intersects, interprets, and desires to alter is reality. It is only by contemplating the impossible that the limits of our imagination can be found and the unreal enter dialogue with the real.

If sf is the paradigmatic expression of Jameson’s utopian method then fantasy (he argues) is closer to the utopian goal: the beautiful world made possible by the triumph of ‘good’ over ‘evil’. There is some doubt about fantasy’s ability to project utopian possibilities when the mode (for the most part) is considered a mass cultural artefact. Miéville discusses this problem in terms of ‘domestication’: producing an economically viable product invariably restricts fantasy’s exploration of the impossible. He argues:

Apart from anything else, it is of course not in fact the case that, for fantasy, the estrangement, radical or otherwise, is unconstrained. In fact, precisely what distinguishes genre fantasy from the more freeform alienation of, say, surrealism and other avant-gardes is that the genre’s integration of that alienation of reality with pulp exigency leads to its control and ‘domestication’ by the logic of *narrative*. (2009, pp.242-243)

This dialectic is the same that preoccupied Lukács: creating a progressive aesthetic in a commercial system. Before discussing a possible how, we must acknowledge the subjective nature of representing the impossible and the inherent ideological ramifications that any such representations may contain.

Terms like ‘progressive’ and ‘utopia’ are fundamental markers of Marxist thought. This is not to suggest that they are exclusively Marxist (there are capitalist, fascist, anarchic utopias), but that the basic idea of ‘bettering’ (that we should progress towards an existence with as little repression as possible) has historically been a socialist-humanist interest. Hume might call this a vision that ‘aims to disturb us by dislodging us from our settled sense of reality, and tries to engage our emotions on behalf of this new version of the real’ (1984, p.56). The point is well made. Not only is this engine drive a (fundamentally) emotional praxis, but the aesthetic goal is not to *leave* the subject unsettled: *it is to create a new version of the real*. By the simple act of creating a disturbing, weird, impossible world, fantasy’s world building conceives the impossible possible, turning the real into subjective construction—a textual construction that can be opened to progressive change.

Inhabiting the impossible, fantasy builds meditative spaces somewhat free from the harsh vicissitudes of existence. Historically, this directs the protagonist towards social alignment rather than social change. This lends credence to Marcuse’s position that affirmative culture is grounded in the ‘contradiction between the insufferable mutability of a bad existence and the need for happiness in order to make such existence bearable’ (1972, pp.118-119). If this is the case, then the representation of beauty, of happiness, in art has, to some degree, been subverted from its philosophical base. This is inescapable.

Walter Benjamin reiterates that the mechanical ‘reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art’ (1970, p.227). When talking about fantasy, about literature, we must remember that they are part of mass production. Indeed, this is a problem all Marxists must navigate, when the ‘system has a power to co-opt and to defuse even the most potentially dangerous forms of political art by transforming them into cultural commodities’ (Jameson 1977, p.208). Certainly, mass-cultural artefacts can be *used* (consciously or not) by

the powers influencing/controlling production. However, mass-production cuts both ways—culture and counter culture can reach larger, wider, diverse audiences. Suvin suggests:

If SF is historically part of a submerged or plebeian ‘lower literature’ expressing the yearnings of previously repressed or at any rate nonhegemonic social groups, it is understandable that its major breakthroughs to the cultural surface should come about in the periods of sudden social convulsion. (1980, p.115)

In many ways, when discussing the *differences* between sf and fantasy, their shared historical context (in terms of popularised modes) is often overlooked. They respond to the same social convulsions and historical forces albeit in dissimilar (though, even this is debateable) registers.

Ultimately, the impossible should not be smothered by the conventions of genre. The very process of thinking impossibility, of offering strange, sometimes disturbing alternatives, invariably opens rather than closes, questions rather than answers. This bears more than a little resemblance to Jameson’s discussion on a realism vs. modernism debate. He argues:

For when modernism and its accompanying techniques of ‘estrangement’ have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the habit of fragmentation itself needs to be ‘estranged’ and corrected by a more totalising way of viewing phenomena. (Jameson 1977, p.211)

Perhaps the dystopian image, the illumination of imaginative limits, has become too entrenched in the social consciousness. What was once disturbing and alarming has lost its potency, reconciled and accepted as ‘the way things are’. Furthermore, while Jameson argues for an aesthetic that totalises contemporary society in an extrapolated futurity, the spectre of

Jackson haunts the crumbling, eroding, alien spaces of the sf mode. Dissolution, fragmentation, and emptying out informs these texts where nothing exists beyond, because destruction is valorised and is the only viable escape.

While cognition is important, its application in *Perdido Street Station* hints that recognition and acknowledgement of reality's problems may be insufficient to instil a radical, desire for change. And if, as Jameson feels, we require more than dissatisfaction to induce a 'Utopian desire which remains unsatisfied and which cannot be felt to have been fulfilled without falling into the world and becoming another degraded act of consumption' (2005, p.84), perhaps fantasy can fill that gap, can be that more.

The hitch in Lukács' Marxist aesthetics is how a defetishised consciousness can arise out of an alienated present. Lukács' answer, like Suvin's, like Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, is that the emancipated consciousness arises through the reflective apparatus of realistic representation. Suvin asks:

Is Fantasy as a tradition and present institution a tool of the reigning ideology of wars for profit, locking out cognition [...] or is it an induction of cognition, however partial and metaphoric? (2000, p.234)

While Miéville answers by producing a satirical, political allegory with normative intentions, perhaps this, perhaps Suvin, is missing the point. Yes, fantasy's cognitive value is important when initiating any progressive potential. However, the presupposition that cognition is the fundamental determinant in a Marxist aesthetic may be incorrect.

For the most part, Miéville's creative practice and theory agree that fantastic art is like a protest against contemporary society, expressing a desire for a 'better' world—'the artwork provides a better and more convincing representation of reality than the perspective he/she has acquired from daily life' (Johnson 1984, pp.1–2). It shows reality, however dark, in totality. That *Perdido Street Station* fails to produce a social *alternative* speaks more to its

methodology than desire. The nature of reflection, however revolutionary in intent, may be static.

As the dislocation and distortion of reality in a fantastic text appears transformative (shape-shifting, aliens, etc.), its mimetic factor is used to comprehend the present. That secondary-world fantasy and sf futurity portray radical extensions, extrapolations, and distortions of any given now, emphasises dissatisfaction with ‘normal’ representations of daily life. And while these modes may experiment with radical difference (social, historical, political, economic, etc), it remains to be seen if its expression englobes the most effective representation of reality.

Fantasy uses space deliberately: creating worlds temporally, historically, materially, metaphysically dissimilar or divorced from extratextual reality. At once, this displacement is the simplest of aesthetic approaches with the most complex ramifications. Of particular importance (at least for this project) are those texts that emphasise the scaffolding of their own construction and are concerned with how stories are told and read. This caste of fantasy screams fabrication. Its reality is textual—a relative experience disturbing categorical distinctions like unreal and impossible, transforming them from solid states to malleable constructions. Moreover, we can describe a theoretical movement from Lukács through Marcuse to Jackson that, while described abstractly in Chapter 1, finds a definite vocabulary in this type of self-reflexive fantasy.

The emphasis has shifted. Representing the unreal draws attention to the real, underscoring Dick’s belief that reality ‘is not something that you perceive, but something you make’ (1996, p.205). Now, fantasy can take on a more dynamic role: the interrogation, transformation, and construction of alternate subjectivities. Again, there is an echo of this sentiment in Jameson’s discussion of Brecht and realism. In this case, Jameson supposed that Brecht’s ‘scientific’ concept—arguably more Marcusean than Althusserian—was linked to

praxis: 'it puts knowing the world back together with changing the world' (1977, p.204).

Reflection turns towards creation.

At the superficial level, the creation of secondary worlds is the peg upon which the escapist hat is hung. The term, as it has been historically used, is pejorative: to escape is to ignore, the impossible is impractical. And yet, through impossibility, fantasy can investigate the limits of language and interrogate categories of the normal. Breaking with the real, the possible, allows fantasy to go *beyond* the Lukácsian looking-glass and tackle subjectivity from a different perspective. This is not a complete separation though, but a refracted line—a distortion that retains extratextual echoes. Jackson calls this the 'paraxial'—that 'spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely "real" (object), nor entirely "unreal" (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two' (1981, p.19).

Sliding through a conduit that begins in reality and terminates in un-reality, fantasy maintains a vital (not static) connection to extratextual context. This connection allows for comment, criticism, inversion and (perhaps) transformation of perception. Suvin may claim that anything and everything in fantasy is possible because it is 'manifestly impossible' (1980, p.8), but what is wrong with that? The dismissal may have more bearing with his analytical preoccupations than a concerted, thorough exploration of the form. On the other hand, Jackson equates this dismissal with 'culture's silencing of unreason' (1981, p.173). As if the unreason of fantasy is something frivolous to be marginalised and ignored.

This stance should give us pause. Considering the nature of fantasy's fixation on the impossible, the strange, then its contemplation of the real/unreal dialectic is potentially progressive because it beats with the desire to *change, reshape, and create*. This desire, however, bears its doubts. Jameson suggests that this escape into the impossible functions as a 'relief from the frenzied anxieties of the actual social world [...] and of the transformations of the social relations we know today into what Brecht memorably called "friendliness"'

(2009, p.415). Suvin would agree, lambasting the mode for its programmatic willingness to ‘cut itself off from the real contingencies’ (1980, p.8). However, both these positions assume that fantasy’s use of the impossible, the unreal, is always non-cognitive and that cognition equals the single, appropriate aesthetic response.

As this chapter has argued, fantasy’s impossibilities and alterity—while inherent to and (arguably) inextricable from the mode—are not predicated on regressive escapes: they are overlays, subversions, intrusions into, and amplifications of context. Chewing on the same frustration with reality encountered by Jameson, fantasy imagines new creatures, new powers, new worlds. This is not a divorce from reality, but an imaginative breach out of the rigors of reality. Maintaining that the silence of unreason safeguards the status quo, fantasy’s implicit assertion—that the unreal is real—undermines the idea of an empirical, objective reality: everything is constructed, anything can be made, unmade, remade.

By butting against the limits of reality, Jackson maintains that fantasy ‘takes the real and creates it’ (1981, p.20). This creative act (at times subversive or transgressive) is a robust enough vehicle to carry an affective charge. While cognitive mapping (the dystopian sf mindset) illustrates repressive, destructive ideology, its emotional range appears limited to frustration, cynicism, sorrow, and anger. What if more positive emotional responses, better suited to counter-hegemonic subjectivity, require more than reflection? What if it needs creation?

Be that as it may, it would be naïve to assume that fantasy is subversive, that it is countercultural because of its thematic and structural tropes—the interplay between subversion and its satiation and/or containment will always exist. Furthermore, the cognitive element (that mirror of frustration) should not be pushed aside, but used as a starting point, a locus announcing the need for utopian alterity. This is the modelling needed to modify Jameson’s utopian aesthetic. But what shape does this modification assume?

Attebery suggests taking up of the past and inscribing old and forgotten voices with a fresh perspective. Considering that the present (and future) are inexorably linked to the past, should we not return there to find the faults of reality? In Attebery's idea is a revolutionary desire to reclaim history and let it speak to us here and now. What might it say? What might it think of historical progress? Perhaps, there has been no progress and what is more frightening than that?

Opposed to Tolkienesque, conservative uses of the past, a progressive fantasy might use the mode's ubiquitous temporal dislocations to expose how history informs present and future. It might rupture its reality to re-imagine a *then* for the benefit of the *now* and the *now yet to pass*.

Attebery talks about a kind of 'resistance' in fantasy that allows it to shrug off attempts at orthodoxy, that it 'denies what everybody knows to be the truth. And, if you're lucky, the untruth shall make you free' (1991, p.25). Juxtaposing unreal and real, fantasy familiarises the former and makes strange the latter. Here, both categories change, offering insight and perspective on what is possible.

Chapter 3: Case Studies

Fantasy thus, too often, remains undeveloped; it is and has been used frivolously, or only half-seriously, or merely for decoration: it remains merely ‘fanciful’.

—J.R.R. Tolkien

Paradoxically, one of the best ways to approach progressive fantasy is to read texts that are extremely difficult to categorise. Not only does this blur any division between sf, fantasy, and other fantastic forms, but it acts as a bridge spanning the gap between modes, easing the exploration of (decidedly) fantasy texts.

As such, this chapter discusses fantasy’s progressive potential with three case studies: Gene Wolfe’s *The Shadow of the Torturer*, Brandon Sanderson’s *The Final Empire*, and Samuel Delany’s *Tales of Nevèrjion*. Moving through fantastic sf, genre fantasy, and historical fantasy, these texts take up various, distinctive garments that define the mode: subjective/constructed reality, plot convention, and the power/limits of language.

With these three texts, this chapter briefly charts that blurred space between genres. And it is in this realm of eroding, solidifying, shifting boundaries, that Jameson’s conceptual antagonism towards fantasy can be addressed. Indeed, his recent work suggests, if not acceptance, then interest in a field that is slowly, but surely, being integrated.

Andrew Milner suggests that ‘the empirical convergence between SF and fantasy does seem to be a “fact” of contemporary cultural life’ (2009, p.220)—portraying disturbing, dislocated, impossible alterity both forms should be treated equally. Whatever semantic qualifications become attached to the impossible are irrelevant—taking up the impossible, no matter the direction, the dislocation, is *always discursive* and that is the crux of fantasy’s Marxist importance.

Problems of I: Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer*

Gene Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer*, perhaps more so than any other fantastic text, is a concerted, conceptual attack on the unity of character and the objectivity of experienced reality. Wolfe's use of a first-person narrator—Severian—is deliberate, not only creating a powerful, guiding voice, but forces the reader into a distinct, singular, unreliable *version* of reality. There is no reality beyond the text, beyond Severian's perception of the text's reality—readers witness only what he has witnessed, knows, or *chooses* to relate.

This is not incidental. Rather, it is part of an overarching framework that Wolfe pushes over several vectors. Indeed, Wolfe's characters often act as repositories of his intentions, suggesting how reality is 'constructed by the human mind, since our ways are governed by the artificial categories into which we place essentially undifferentiated things' (1994, p.11). These self-reflexive reminders—the text should be treated *as text*—pull away from the basic parameters previously described for fantasy (and sf), whose secondary worlds are realistic conceits—they treat the textual representation of their realities seriously, concretely.

Most obviously, Wolfe *addresses* the reader in an appendix, stating that the text is a translation—the text's words are 'twentieth-century equivalents', understood as 'suggestive rather than definitive' and 'not strictly correct' (1994, p.211). This single 'trick' acts to undo 'those unifying structures and significations upon which social order depends' (Jackson 1981, p.70). What is written is not what *was* written—it is copied, deciphered—and fantasy's traditionally realistic, objective representation is made subjective and unreachable.

Wolfe's post-structural predilection is clear. The inability to reach a zero-point of meaning, the inability to access the world of *TSOTT* completely (*as it was intended*) is an allusion to the fantastic's 'attempt to remain "open", dissatisfied, endlessly desiring [...] [and] uncompromising in its interrogation of the "nature" of the "real"' (Jackson 1981, p.9).

What is written is what the author *wants* imparted—it is choice, it is design. Event, action, character, and voice are bursting with purpose; they have a target, intent, a specific way of interfacing reader and the text’s reality. This is ideology, and its nature is adaptive—a method of mediating a harsh, finite reality and the individual want to gratify desire. What *TSOTT* demonstrates is the horrifying result of an ideology that represses, oppresses, and dehumanises individuals while trying to obscure this fact. Therefore, the first, progressive step is to ‘dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight’ (Jackson 1981, p.65). The first step is disclosure.

Ostensibly set on a future Earth, *TSOTT* resonates with the dystopian mindset of cognitive mapping. Severian’s society appears as series of critical reflections on the author’s socio-historical context. Interestingly, this futurity is defined not by technological minutiae, but quasi-mediaeval feudalism. Gazing backward (so to speak), Wolfe wrestles with the idea that civilisation ‘is still determined by its *archaic heritage*’ (Marcuse 1974, p.56), uncovering and exaggerating certain historical tendencies. By way of exposition, Severian discusses the passage of time in specifically violent terms.

No matter where the spade turns the soil, it uncovers broken pavements and corroding metal; and scholars write that the kind of sand that artists call polychrome (because flecks of every colour are mixed with its whiteness) is actually not sand at all, but the glass of the past, now pounded to powder by aeons [...] (Wolfe 1994, p.103)

The passage echoes Benjamin—an undertone of despair striving to make civilisation’s inherent violence visible. If there is ‘no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’ (Benjamin 1970, p.248), fantasy occupies a very interesting, if not challenging, position.

Difficulty arises when post-Tolkien sword-and-sorcery (here we can think of narratives that use Tolkien's bestiary, general quest structures, Christian metaphysics and moral discourse, and pastoral nostalgia) uses medieval concepts and imagery, completely effacing that period's historical plight of the peasant, slavery, poverty, and social inequality. This is the barbarism Benjamin wants acknowledged—the admission that documents of civilisation (including artwork) can not only do violence (historically, ideologically) but *require* violence for their production. The realisation that the soil of Wolfe's world—a most basic, unnoticed base—is the ground up bones of ancient buildings, dictates *TSOTT*'s relationship to the extratextual present, where there are 'layers of history beneath the ground we walk upon' (Wolfe 1994, p.103). Consequently, the text's medieval trappings are far from pithy amusement.

The narrative is anchored to a future, a time where humanity has spread to, then receded from the galaxy. Civilisation is fragmented, violent, militant, suspicious, treacherous, technologically ignorant, and armed with ancient, arcane weaponry. This world (universe) building is a denunciation. Alongside robots, fliers, and interstellar starships transformed into skyscrapers, the destructive and vicious nature of humanity is stark. Everybody that Severian encounters defrauds, deceives, uses, and/or attempts to murder him, and he, at times, is torturer, executioner, actor, soldier, (possibly) rapist, saviour, and tyrant. Arguably, components of *TSOTT* are allusions to the conflict beneath the veneer of civilisation. Marcuse suggests:

Civilization plunges into a destructive dialectic: the perpetual restrictions on Eros ultimately weaken the life instincts and thus strengthen and release the very forces against which they were "called up"—those of destruction. (1974, p.44)

Wolfe imagines a society without gratification, where desires are not met, and human potential is severely limited. Those with power are in-human and the human race little more than a planet of puppets whose strings are pulled by the inscrutably alien ‘cacogens’. The text is encountered as manipulation, a product and producer of a subjectivity that seeks to illuminate and undermine the status quo (indeed, this strategy may work beyond the author’s expectations, casting severe doubt on the effectiveness of Christian self-sacrifice and suffering-before-rapture that Wolfe appears to impart).

There is an early episode where Severian visits the capitol’s gardens to obtain a weaponised flower. This garden is separated into numerous rooms, each containing a certain theme (delectation and jungle are examples), and much is made about how these rooms are built to confound the senses. Severian notes: ‘When I looked down on this building, I saw a faceted dome. Now when I look up, I see only the sky between the leaves and vines’ (Wolfe 1994, p.125).

Once a threshold is crossed the room disappears, becoming what it contains. Within the ‘jungle room’, Severian and his companion discover a hut inhabited by people from Wolfe’s temporality—they are impossibly out of place. Furthermore, the jungle room itself is an impossible anachronism on a future Earth whose dying sun cannot support proper plant life. There is no sense, no textual clue, that what Severian sees are illusions, nor is it obvious that the historically misplaced people are actors or insane. The scene is flux and ambivalence—there exists a surfeit of signifiers without a single signified.

Ultimately, what is real relies on perception filtered by individual subjectivity. Wolfe plays games with this underlying concept, underscoring ‘reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs’ (Jackson 1981, p.21). The reader’s perception is filtered through Severian’s subjectivity—there are gaps, suspicions, paranoia, misunderstandings, and omissions. Reality is textual, reality is relative. On top of this, what is seen by Severian (by

the reader) is seldom (at least immediately) understood. Opaque and incomplete, the text is (predominantly) an account without tangible meaning; long tracts are dedicated to tangential, obscure parables, and winding referents that seemingly refer to nothing.

Using the image of a mirror, blatantly nodding to the reader, Wolfe lectures through a character: ‘For a reflected image to exist without an object to originate it violates the law of our universe, and therefore the object will be brought into existence’ (1994, p.129). How then are we to comprehend signifiers without a signified? Images without objects? How are we to approach a text without meaning?

One solution is to bring meaning to the text via our own idea of Wolfe’s use of genre. Severian is the orphan-become-king and, therefore, appears as the quintessential, fantasy hero. Yet, at every turn, the narrative (and this is made clear by Severian) is constructed from omission, fabrication, dream, and possible madness. The generic frame is held up only to be eroded. And when this deconstruction combines with Wolfe’s clue-ridden style, the overall impression is one of re-training. Initially, the reader fills the text with a *bildungsroman*, because that is the expected trajectory of a narrative with swords and guilds and strange creatures. This is an ideological problem that *TSOTT* quickly undermines.

This brings us to the nexus where we must acknowledge that ideological forces shape our perception of reality—how ideology actively shapes us. Indeed, one of *TSOTT*’s first adages is: ‘We believe that we invent symbols. The truth is that they invent us; we are their creatures, shaped by their hard, defining edges’ (Wolfe 1994, p.14). Any meaning, any supposed truth, is not created by the individual but shaped by the way they relate to reality—superstructures like religion and education inform every decision, every action. What Wolfe achieves in Severian is the creation of his own superstructure: Severian shapes any and all meaning the reader can achieve. And, by doing so, Wolfe *visibly* traces the connection

between ideology and consciousness, illustrating all those spaces hidden from and denied by hegemonic control.

Severian attests that it is only time that turns ‘our lies into truths’ (Wolfe 1994, p.111)—the false consciousness of hegemonic ideology becomes ‘truth’ because time allows its absorption into the unconscious. If ideology mediates the individual with material and social inequalities, it works within, under the surface, casting reflections and shadows over everyday life. Jackson argues:

By drawing attention to the relative nature of these categories the fantastic moves towards a dismantling of the “real”, most particularly of the concept of “character” and its ideological assumptions, mocking and parodying a blind faith in psychological coherence and in the value of sublimation as a “civilizing” activity. (1981, pp.175-176)

Owing to the nature of the first-person narration, the Severian speaking to the reader does so from the conclusion of *The Book of the New Sun*: a polyglot of accreted personalities crammed in a single body. In other words, there is never a unified, unique, stable Severian. However, it is only part of the way into *TSOTT* that the reader begins to suspect that he is not all that he appears.

After taking part in ritual cannibalism, Severian comes to possess the memories of his lover, Thecla. He does not have access to these memories like a cache of experience—the interface is far more complex. Throughout *The Book of the New Sun* Severian realises that some of his memories, his thoughts are not his at all. Appearing seamlessly in his stream of consciousness, responding to stimuli he perceives, some thoughts belong to Thecla. He does not access her memories but is accessed, is possessed by them. There exists no clear boundaries, no ‘rigid demarcations’ (Jackson 1981, p.49) between the two characters.

Jackson maintains that it is ‘the power of the fantastic to interrogate the category of character—that definition of the self as coherent, indivisible and continuous whole which has dominated Western thought for centuries’ (Jackson 1981, pp.82-83). Using a transgressive practice like cannibalism, Wolfe shatters the text’s coherent ‘I’; Severian is and always was a discontinuous, intertwined ‘we’. The multiplicity of memories producing the character known as Severian undermines the concept of character in general. He claims:

I could no longer be sure my own mind was not lying to me; all my falsehoods were recoiling on me, and I who remembered everything could not be certain those memories were more than my own dreams. (Wolfe 1994, p.27)

What *TSOTT* accomplishes is the injection of suspicion into every utterance—the exaggerated portrayal of (self-aware) fantasy’s deconstructive potential. Constructing the unreal in concrete terms is a powerful discursive tool—it pulls and stretches and breaks and remakes. It demonstrates the arbitrary, subjective nature of the real, making the quantitative qualifiable.

Surely, *TSOTT* creates a world that is an impossible extrapolation of the extratextual now. It builds a new reality that questions supposedly solid and unshakable ideologies, hollowing them out, making reality seem strange. Suvin suggests that this ‘oscillation between the author’s “zero world” and the new reality induces the narrative necessity of a means of reality displacement’ (1980, p.71). Displacement must not be confused with escape—fantasy, no matter how entrenched in generic constriction relates to reality.

By introducing the disturbing impossible (in this case a monster capable of mimicking the prey it eats, which, when eaten itself, confers memory to others), Wolfe illustrates how the demarcations of ideological concepts like character, reality, and space can be easily manipulated by text. There is something symbolic working here. When Severian believes himself ‘in some degree insane’ (Wolfe 1994, p.27) the implication is not of individual

pathology but a social one. If he is insane it is because he lives in an insane world with insane rules.

Doubtless, the displacement in *TSOTT* is shocking. Against the backdrop of a compartmentalised, closed system reality, the aggressively open nature of Wolfe's aesthetic discloses the text's discursive position: everything is subjective and susceptible to interrogation, deconstruction, and change. Displacement (found at the heart of every fantasy) creates transformation: the reader's world transformed. And once stepped into, it is difficult to return without bringing something back from this nether world. Indeed, the impossible *sticks to you*. The difference between real and unreal fade in such places, where everything seems fluid, seems in a state of flux.

When Thecla is transported by Father Inire's mirrors she can never be certain she has returned to where she started—'She found herself in another world, and even when she returned [...] she wasn't quite sure she had found her way back to her real point of origin' (Wolfe 1994, p.134). The lesson: the 'real point of origin' we leave when reading fantasy is never as real as we suppose or as we are led to believe. Be that as it may, arguing that Wolfe's text is subversive or transgressive is not the same as saying that it is progressive.

While Wolfe's representative techniques are innovative, the imbedded politics of the text retain something of the popular genre's conservatism. Arguably, *The Book of the New Sun* can be an attempt to re-imagine a Catholic worldview. Consequently, Wolfe's discursive project is difficult to reconcile with its affirmative, Christian philosophy. Defanging its subversive techniques, this metaphysical exhortation renders much of the text's progressive energy void. The world and its civilisation is one of and in decay and yet nothing is imagined, nothing is suggested to remedy the ruin. There exists, in all of Severian's (anti)heroism, a certain passivity or reluctance to act that is replicated in his world. The sun is dying, society is governed by an autocratic, monolithic state, and inequality creates huge economic, cultural,

and legal disparities within the populace. The answer: the New Sun, which can only be described as the ‘second coming’—the miraculous arrival of a better world.

It is as if the text has two minds: one exposing how the inequality is generated and produced, the other accepting that this reality can only be transformed through some transcendent (symbolically represented via alien intervention) reconfiguration of humanity that legitimises all suffering in the face of spiritual emancipation. One can only be reminded, when reading the vignettes of the hospice (*The Citadel of the Autarch*), the mean existence of those in the city (*TSOTT*) and the rural outskirts (*The Sword of the Lictor*), of Marcuse’s reminder: ‘Man does not live by bread alone; this truth is thoroughly falsified by the interpretation that spiritual nourishment is an adequate substitute for too little bread’ (1972, p.109). While Wolfe’s fantasy is produced with extremely subtle and complex linguistic strategies, there is something extremely conservative at work within his text’s metaphysical frame.

Embracing/Inverting Genre: Sanderson’s *The Final Empire*

We live of course in a world not only of commodities but also of representation, and representations—their production, circulation, history, and interpretation—are the very element of culture.

—Edward Said

To this point, there can be little doubt that genre fantasy (a particular subset of texts within the fantastic tradition which can focus on, but are not limited to reductive ethical binaries, Christian metaphysics, conservative quest structures, and mythological bestiaries) has been much maligned. However, regardless of arguments surrounding its socio-political intent, its presence and popularity in the marketplace suggests a growing cultural influence. However,

such popularity can limit creative freedom— what sells will necessarily tailor the form into shapes that will continue to sell. This seems to be a facet of genre fiction in general. More so than any genre (even sf), a great swathe of fantasy has been defined by the mythopoeic framework of a small cadre of writers (such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Robert E. Howard). And while fantasy owes a great debt to the imaginative scope of these practitioners, Jameson rightly contests that they have spawned a glut of derivative texts that anachronistically transmit their conservative ideological discourses.

Jackson suggests that this type of fantasy—a precipitation of the ‘marvellous’ tale—is one of the few fantastic forms that has been ‘tolerated and widely disseminated socially’ (1981, p.17). Closely related to the myth and fairy tale, these tales are easily produced and their universal themes, uncritical magic, and simplistic ethics are easily consumed. Considering fantasy’s recent global exposure—the multimedia delivery of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, *Twilight*, and *Harry Potter*—consumption has become the most appropriate term, serving to anchor on the dialectical nature of creative writing within a commercial system. The issue remains one of cutting the chaff to confirm Jameson’s concession that *contemporary* fantasy can produce ‘signals and vibrations which are comparable to those of the best SF and yet as different from it generically as they are from more traditional fantasy as such’ (2005, p.68). Enter Brandon Sanderson’s *The Final Empire*.

Given that the basic premise of most fantasy is a dislocation of reality to another landscape, *how* that landscape is portrayed informs the text as a whole. Ostensibly, *The Final Empire* is what Mendlesohn would call a portal-quest fantasy: the reader is ‘tied to the protagonist, and dependent upon the protagonist for explanation and decoding’ (2008, p.1). The reader, oriented with Vin (the central protagonist) is led into a world of metaphysical power and political history that *must be explained and trusted*. However, Sanderson plays a double game. The rebel Kelsier (a secondary protagonist) is of the world and needs nothing

explained, effectively throwing the reader into the world without a guidebook. Similarly, Kelsier also acts as the protagonist's guide (itself a well-worn trope of the genre), delivering exposition on magic, society, and history to Vin (and the reader). And while Vin (as a portal-quest heroine) must accept this 'truth' delivered, Kelsier's immersive narrative allows the reader to witness him 'pulling the strings', filtering information, manipulating action. As a result, we are at once part of the world *and* estranged from it.

Strangely enough (or perhaps not), the initial impression garnered from Sanderson is strikingly similar to Miéville's—they both appear as, what Jackson would term, 'new enclosures of metropolitan nightmare' (1981, p.47). The introduction to Luthadel—the capital city of Sanderson's world—leaves little symbolic ambiguity: everything is covered, stained, and choked by volcanic ash. The city's description is universal: 'Every structure in Luthadel—virtually every structure Kelsier had ever seen—had been blackened to some degree. Even the city wall [...] was blackened by a patina of soot' (Sanderson 2009, p.28). The disquieting physicality of this perpetually repeating point of difference is a constant reminder of the narrative's reflective discourse—capitalism touches everything. There is something of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* here, some correlation between 'kipple' and Luthadel's ash. It is a resuscitation of the idea of 'the layers of dust, the rotting of all that's solid, a destruction of form itself that is worse than death' (Jameson 2005, p.82). There is a constant sense of entropy and dreariness translated into blatant class divisions that characterises the narrative's ethical frame.

Governed by a simple duality, Luthadel and the surrounding territories of the Final Empire are divided into nobility (a viciously mercantile oligarchy) and the skaa (labourers close to slaves). Both are ultimately controlled by the Steel Ministry (a theocratic bureaucracy) under the aegis of the tyrannical Lord Ruler (a self-appointed Godhead). The text apparently conforms to the negative ascriptions associated with the genre fantasy.

However, the traditional good/evil binary pivots from external to internal: the great ‘Other’—the avatar of wrong that is everywhere represented by the dark lord Sauron and his hordes of orcs—is inverted. It is the oppressive society of an illegitimate theocracy. This distinction is all important, channelling the frustrated energies of reflection along a revolutionary path. This is a powerful conceptual tilt, at once conforming to a recognisable convention while historicising that convention’s function. Jameson’s call to historicise gives the pervasive ethical binary its historical memory. This manifests in the rise of feudalism when, after a tumultuous period of destabilisation and isolation, the new nobility had to solidify its authority. At this point, the older ideas of good and evil were necessarily superseded, altered to service the fledgling, but rapidly setting class (Jameson 1981, p.105). Ultimately, this concept modifies how *The Final Empire* can be read.

Where Miéville’s symbolic discourse was inescapable, within *The Final Empire* it acts like exposition—the explication of a problem that needs solving.⁴ Sanderson portrays a reality whose dominant subjectivity is perceived as detrimental to the full expression of human needs and desires. Jackson’s idea, that fantasy (in a secular society) ‘does not invent supernatural regions, but presents a natural world inverted into something strange, something “other”’ (1981, p.17), resonates within a world littered with monsters and ‘scorched by soot and red sunlight’ (Sanderson 2009, p.88).

This initial image is geared towards sympathy/empathy—the reader is almost forced to identify with the protagonists. Consequently, their struggle becomes not only an oblique conflict with evil forces but a revolution against a subjectivity felt as inherently wrong—a revolution that includes (if only vicariously) the reader. Sanderson writes:

Kelsier shook his head. “The homes are still stained black. The soil is still arid and lifeless. The trees still grow leaves of brown.”

⁴ It should be noted that in China Miéville’s *Iron Council*, *Perdido Street Station* can be read in a similarly expository light and the overall frustration of that text translated into a revolutionary aesthetic.

“Of course they’re brown. What else would they be?”

“Green,” Kelsier said. “Everything should be green.” (2009, p.159)

Kelsier’s (the revolution’s leader) point is that their social consciousness is part of the wrongness. He asserts that the ‘world shouldn’t look like this’ (Sanderson 2009, p.284), illustrating Sanderson’s metaphysical premise that their world has been altered, and not for the better. Somewhere in a *forgotten* past, the Lord Ruler supposedly saved the world from ‘the Deepness’—an abstract, vaguely defined, destructive force—but actually enslaved its population, crushed competing cultures, and transformed the natural world into something unnatural. Sanderson writes of Kelsier:

He had heard whispers of times when once, long ago, the sun had not been red. Times when the sky hadn’t been clogged by smoke and ash, when plants hadn’t struggled to grow, and when skaa hadn’t been slaves. Time before the Lord Ruler. (2009, p.5)

The Final Empire, mirroring the destructive forces of the author’s reality, builds a landscape that is, in itself, an inversion on the narrative’s natural world. However, Kelsier possesses an already enlightened consciousness. He has recognised the essence of his repressive reality and his comments act as the reader’s yardstick—through him the reader measures the extent of ideological saturation in the narrative’s supporting characters.⁵

Vin’s gradual recognition of Kelsier’s truth, metered out in conventional, fantasy structures (introduction to magic, dialogue with the wise figure, filial revelations, etc.), matches the reader’s journey into Sanderson’s secondary world. In other words, as the textual

⁵ As the series unfolds, Kelsier’s consciousness and actions are rendered not without a sense of irony. Indeed, his revolutionary design comes to echo (if not mirror) the manipulations and intentions of the Lord Ruler. Ruthless means are used to attain noble ends (both figures are effectively trying to save *their* worlds). However, where the Lord Ruler fell into tyrannical theocracy, Kelsier’s revolution terminates in ineffective bureaucracy. There is a palpable sense of history repeating, of an inescapable reality whose termination only arrives through a metaphysical re-insertion of total human, historical knowledge and culture.

world is unveiled, its underlying ideologies (the same oppressive, destructive, and ultimately repressive ideologies working in Western capitalism) are experienced as intrinsically destructive to nature and humanity, yet so ingrained as it make them seem all powerful.

Unsurprisingly, Sanderson's first page unequivocally announces the text's fundamental conflict as a class struggle between the nobility (combined with the Lord Ruler and the Steel Ministry) and the skaa.⁶ Interestingly, the narrative is first filtered through a noble's eye and the tenor is disdain.

Hundreds of people in brown smocks worked in the falling ash, caring for the crops. There was a sluggishness to their efforts—but, of course, that was the way of the skaa. The peasants were an indolent, unproductive lot. (Sanderson 2009, p.1)

The emphasis is on the skaa as a rightfully exploited commodity. As a workforce, the skaa are treated like slaves, working plantations, mines, household servants—rented out, used up. Predicated by divine will—the skaa are being punished by the Lord Ruler for not aiding him against the Deepness—the slave/master duality is rooted through every strata of society. Necessarily, it is not only the hubris of the nobility but the apathy of the skaa that is targeted by the rebellion. Ultimately, Kelsier's endgame—the discursive terminus of the text—is the complete transformation of this absorbed subjectivity that has transformed every life out its natural shape.

Where this strategy becomes more than critical reflection is in its building 'up *another* universe out of elements of this one, according to dystopian fears and utopian desires' (Jackson 1981, p.43). *The Final Empire* tempers its critical negativity with explicitly revolutionary content: a worker's revolution.

⁶ In Sanderson's later instalments, this conflict mutates to include the nobility in the skaa's struggle against the manifestation of destructive ideology. In other words, this ideology is *destructive for all*.

Where the skaa are used to mine atium (economic equivalent to oil/uranium), living ‘beneath the taskmasters’ lashes’ (Sanderson 2009, p.29), the ruling nobility pursue a life beyond finite resources. They, like the skaa, are alienated from reality. Sanderson writes:

High nobles kept different schedules from regular people; the ability to afford, even squander, lamp oil and candles meant that the wealthy didn’t have to bow before the whims of season or sun. (2009, p.93)

This class distinction is blunt enough that genre fantasy’s ethical binary could be easily applied (the nobles are evil and the skaa good), however the narrative is not that simple. Where the traditional, conservative binary invariably faces outward (towards a foreign enemy that galvanises society through militant cohesion), Sanderson reverses and opens this relationship. The enemy of *The Final Empire* manifests *within* the empire, *within* the mind: the skaa are paralysed by their subservient social consciousness.

How could they even think of resisting the Lord Ruler? He was ... well, he was the *Lord*. He ruled all the world. He was the creator, protector, and punisher of mankind. He had saved them from the Deepness, then brought the ash and the mists as a punishment for the people’s lack of faith. (Sanderson 2009, p.112)

These religious overtones move hand-in-hand with the idea of rebellion as immoral, a ‘crime against the whole human society and therefore [...] beyond reward and beyond redemption’ (Marcuse 1974, p.92). This is the subjectivity moulding the majority of the text’s population (including the nobility). Indeed, exaggerating via impossibility, Sanderson surrounds the Lord Ruler in a palpable aura of hopelessness and despair—subjectivity as a tangible force. Like the ash and mist that cover the buildings and flood the streets, the reader is bombarded

with the message that the absorbed ideology of domination creates barriers in the mind that beat the individual into submission.

Eventually the reader discovers that the ‘rebellion has been trying for a *thousand years* to get the skaa in the city to rise up’, but they are so ‘beaten down—they don’t have the will or the hope to resist’ (Sanderson 2009, p.113). The actual act of *fighting*, while important in itself, is, symbolically, an internal struggle.

That was what he fought against. Not just the Lord Ruler, not just the nobility. He fought against a thousand years of conditioning, a thousand years of life in a society that would label the death of five thousand men as a “great victory.” Life was so hopeless for the skaa that they’d been reduced to finding comfort in expected defeats. (Sanderson 2009, p.423)

Interestingly, Kelsier’s revolutionary (re)program is directed by a rag-tag crew of thieves. Arguably, this decision attacks any notion of imperial authority holding any *legitimate* power. Simultaneously, it effectively shouts: ‘if you want to live free you must steal and cheat’.

That the text unfolds like a ‘caper’—setting up the heist, infiltrating the target, facing a setback, the mission—further supports the idea that counter-cultural heroes are required to effect any meaningful, social change. Kelsier’s crew appear somewhat outside the ideological structures that dominate the skaa and the nobility. They do not fit either category. Having recognised their repression, they have made an active, progressive choice to act. It is only by breaking free of the norm that a new subjectivity can be created and instilled.

Another way to read *The Final Empire* (and the entire *Mistborn* trilogy) is through Marcuse: a back-and-forth contest between reality principle and pleasure principle. Both are necessary in order to attain and maintain civilisation. Without the reality principle to direct the desires of the pleasure principle, Marcuse argues that humanity would not evolve (socially) beyond barbaric freedom, beyond instant gratification. This need is the cost for

social cohesion, the factor that encourages cooperation. That the pleasure principle seeks out gratification is natural, but dangerous in a finite world; the reality principle defers gratification into certain specific areas at specific times. This is necessary.

However, when the repression exceeds the requirements to maintain civilisation Marcuse identifies a problem. Surplus repression is a by-product of Western capitalism, produced to regulate, if not control individuals. Where fantasy enters this dialogue is in the inherent freedom of its unreal expression. Jackson confirms:

Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with investing elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* “new”, absolutely “other” and different.
(1981, p.8)

Acknowledging that ‘the reality principle materializes in a system of institutions’ (Marcuse 1974, p.15), fantasy’s ability to make the real unreal, the familiar unfamiliar, seems perfectly suited to investigate the destructive nature of surplus repression unconsciously lived. Fantasy can translate the everyday with impossible, shocking displacement.

The Final Empire’s human relationships take on seriously aggressive and malicious undertones. When a nobleman remarks, ‘I’ve never understood men who have trouble with their skaa—I find the creatures easy to control, if you show a properly firm hand’ (Sanderson 2009, p.2), the reader is privy to a gross worldview. Half of the social duality considers the other half as less-than-human—creatures to be enslaved, raped, and murdered without remorse or consequence. When Vin infiltrates a ball and witnesses the brutal killing of a beggar, the death is commonplace. Taken by a guard, he is killed out sight and not a murmur is raised—as if ‘*the death were nothing out of the ordinary. Just another skaa, slaughtered. Like an animal*’ (Sanderson 2009, p.309).

As the nobility gains more power, as their factories, mills, and forges increase production, human becomes animal. This first level of dehumanisation, a level not far removed from fetishised reality, represents what Marcuse calls that ‘growing efficacy involved growing degeneration of the life instincts—the decline of man’ (1974, p.121). The skaa are used and discarded by the nobility. By clearly separating the two, *The Final Empire* begins its narrative from a point where the ‘decline of man’ has already occurred. However, the inhumanity of man runs both ways.

Kelsier left the guard to his gurgling demise. The man was likely a lesser nobleman. The enemy. If he were, instead, a skaa soldier – enticed into betraying his own people in exchange for a few coins ... Well, then, Kelsier was even happier to send such men into their eternity. (Sanderson 2009, p.95)

This ‘us or them’ mentality reverberates throughout the text—a militant consciousness creating a soldiery in a population that, being payed, would kill on order. Even members of the rebellion’s leadership are only involved on the promise of payment. All relationships are mercenary to some degree; everything—loyalty, assassination, knowledge, labour, love—has a price, a cost.

Furthermore, the empire is in a constant state of violence. It erupts in response to the slave/master relationship, between the noble houses, and the two arms (inquisitors and obligators) of the theocratic Steel Ministry. Grounded by scarce resources (crops are difficult to grow and economic activity strictly regulated), it is a society that ‘tends towards self-destruction’ (Marcuse 1974, p.83). The repression necessary to exist, let alone live, in *The Final Empire*’s ashen wasteland is magnified by the power structures used by the Lord Ruler to dominate all life. Entropy appears as the natural state of being.

Then, dehumanisation deepens in the form of three unique creations: kandra, koloss, and Steel Inquisitors. All three begin as humans, but through a violent, invasive procedure

(hemalurgy), they are transformed into monsters. Making up one of three metaphysical arms, hemalurgy alone proclaims the text's critical intent. Metal spikes impale a victim's heart. Next, they are driven into a willing recipient, conferring to them a portion of the victim's life force. Inherently violent, the process itself requires understanding the individual (in both cases) as object—something to be used in the pursuit of power. There is nothing creative in its intent. It is a device translating human life into mechanical function.

All three creatures are designed and given a specific function. The kandra are spies, the koloss shock-troops, and the Inquisitors secret police. Embedded irretrievably in the empire's ideological structures, they 'do not live their own lives, but perform pre-established functions' (Marcuse 1974, p.45). While the kandra are transfigured shape-shifters and koloss surgically modified beasts, it is with the Steel Inquisitors that Sanderson taps into a truly disturbing inhuman vision.

[...] a thick metal spike had been pounded tip-first through each of the man's eyes [...] That flat spike ends shone like two silvery disks, sticking out of the sockets in the front, where the eyes should have been. (Sanderson 2009, p.42)

This description contains a double effect. Pierced by metal spikes, the Inquisitors have taken their empire's domineering ideology into their flesh, letting it shape and control their actions. Impaled 'where the eyes should have been', the spikes emphasise that the Inquisitors cannot perceive their own reality outside of this absorbed subjectivity: their false consciousness. They see nothing but what cold, unfeeling metal allows.

This relates to *The Final Empire* as a whole. The ash covered, brown vegetated, red-sunned, barren reality is the only possible, foreseeable existence. There is no alternative—nothing but a long forgotten memory. The skaa and nobility, conditioned by millennia of theocratic domination, cannot recognise their unnatural reality. This is the unconscious function of ideology mediating individual and harsh existence—making it feel natural.

The Inquisitors' figurative blinding is one of the text's great, unnatural wrongs. This goes beyond simple psychology: their 'evil' flows from a choice to indenture their bodies to destruction, to *transform themselves into monsters*. Granted, an Inquisitor's hemalurgical spikes confer preternatural abilities, allowing them greater control through fear and violence, but the price is the loss of their own human desires. They are no longer human—they are weaponised ideological amplifiers, beholden to domination, destruction, and death.

By labelling the Inquisitors and their (and the other hemalurgical monsters) transformative process as 'wrong', Sanderson makes a very pointed 'ideological gesture' (Jackson 1981, p.52): the Final Empire's hegemonic subjectivity is '*a thing of destruction, madness, and corruption. It would destroy this world not out of spite or out of animosity, but simply because that is what it does*' (Sanderson 2009, p.457). This is the fateful dialectic of civilisation—that 'attacking, splitting, changing, pulverizing things and animals (and, periodically, also men), man extends his dominion over the world and advances to ever richer stages of civilization' (Marcuse 1974, p.52).

Sanderson's combination of monsters and monstrous perception is a warning in the spirit of dystopian sf. Unlike that inherently negative drive however, there is, in the *Mistborn* trilogy, an attempt to create a positive, progressive solution through *balance*.

Introducing *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Jackson suggests that the historical preoccupation when reading fantasy is to argue that it has always been idealistic wish-fulfilment—a genre 'fulfilling a desire for a "better", more complete, unified reality [...] defining it as an art form providing vicarious satisfaction' (Jackson 1981, p.2). But should this desire be wholly avoided? Discussing romance (a literary mode etched with the romantic ideal of resurrecting a fallen world that informs much of genre fantasy's rhetorical, structural, and mythological roots), Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* argues that the 'association of Marxism and romance [...] does not discredit the former as it explains the

persistence and vitality of the latter' (1981, p.91). Indeed, the normative perspective seems to move hand-in-hand with a socialist-humanist desire for counter-hegemonic alterity: an imaginative, Other space that can construct rather than fragment.

Looking at the simple layout of Sanderson's chapters, the problem of utopian desire is taken up as a central theme. Each chapter is headed by a passage supposedly taken from the journal of the Lord Ruler before he gained ascendancy. Full of naïve idealism, the journal sounds out basic premises like:

What would it be like if every nation [...] were united under a single government? What wonders would be achieved, what progress could be made, if mankind were to permanently set aside its squabbling and join together?
(Sanderson 2009, p.213)

This is, for all its dangerous simplicity, the most basic of utopian thoughts. This ground however, is treacherous. The man who wrote the journal (the supposed saviour Alendi) is not the Lord Ruler—he was killed by the man (Rashek) who became the Lord Ruler. Assuming the mantle of a messianic saviour, the Lord Ruler moved quickly to lay the foundations for centralised, religious control. The initial subterfuge and the establishment of hegemonic control aptly demonstrate how simplistic utopian desire can be subverted: the 'Lord Ruler hadn't saved mankind; he had enslaved it instead' (Sanderson 2009, p.343).

It should not be surprising that the general aim of the utopian goal is echoed in imperial justification. Under the aegis of freedom from repression and destruction—the very forces the Lord Ruler is said to have eradicated—those negative forces are used to devastating effect. Marcuse saw this in Western capitalism and in the revolutionary movements in Europe when the bourgeoisie rose with catchalls of liberty. But what if one tyranny was replaced by another? Marcuse quickly recalls:

The critical and revolutionary force of the ideal, which in its very unreality keeps alive the best desires of men amidst a bad reality, becomes clearest in those times when the satiated social strata have accomplished the betrayal of their own ideals. (1972, pp.102-103)

Arguably, the packman Rashek (who becomes the Lord Ruler) attempts to defeat the Deepness by changing the world. He does so with utopian intentions—he wants to save his world from destruction. In the process, he moves the planet too close to the sun, chokes the air with ash, drastically alters human genetics, and becomes a tyrant. Rashek's actions mirror the idealism of the journal, but the image is distorted—unification comes at the edge of the sword.

If I regret one thing, it is the fear I have caused. Fear is the tool of tyrants. Unfortunately, when the fate of the world is in question, you use whatever tools are available. (Sanderson 2009, p.561)

The journal's utopian intention becomes the Lord Ruler's ruthless praxis and, after conquering every nation, he catapults violent, imperial ambition into the 'general cultural sphere as well as in political, ideological, economic, and social practices' (Said 1993, p.8).

Interestingly, there is a corollary between the Lord Ruler's governing methods and Kelsier's rebellion that weakens the revolutionary tone of the text—just as the empire exists on economic and religious lines, so does the rebellion. Seemingly, the narrative's suggested change is not a general shift in subjectivity, but of leadership. Kelsier's identifies that the Lord Ruler maintains authority through hydraulic despotism. He controls the most valuable substance of Sanderson's world (atium), maintaining a 'huge reserve of it to make certain he controls the market' (Sanderson 2009, p.76). That Kelsier wants to steal it, breaking this

economic hold, is only a variation on the same theme. By stealing the atium, Kelsier would gain a measure of control reflecting the Lord Ruler's.⁷

Furthermore, since the Lord Ruler took power the 'Steel Ministry forbids the worship of anyone but the Lord Ruler and the Inquisitors have quite diligently destroyed hundreds of religions' (Sanderson 2009, p.179). Such cultural effacement for socio-political unity is an unsurprising, yet terrifying hegemonic strategy, and organised religion is arguably one of the strongest, most pervasive forms of spreading a particular message.

This is the precise point where the narrative pivots and the divisive 'battle' between the narrative's good and evil historically unmasked. The ethical boundaries separating (established via the rhetorical logic of the portal-quest fantasy) the Lord Ruler and Kelsier blur, revealing a contradiction: what is evil? Jameson suggests:

Romance in its original strong form may then be understood as an imaginary 'solution' to this real contradiction, a symbolic answer to the perplexing question of how my enemy can be thought of as being *evil* [...], when what is characterised is quite simply the *identity* of his own conduct to mine [...]
(1981, p.105)

Defeated, the Lord Ruler loses his shadowy mystique and is now understood (the reader *and* the protagonist) as a historically positioned subject, as a man. Now, the portal-quest logic (where evil remains evil) is channelled into an immersive landscape (where evil can be historicised as a category of otherness). Kelsier (the reader's entry into this parallel, rhetorical world) demystifies any concrete notion of good and evil. His revolutionary method revolves around creating his *own* religion around his *own* martyrdom to proclaim his *own* message. It is this action (Kelsier's death at the hands of the Lord Ruler) that spurs ordinary skaa into

⁷ We need only recall the final moments of Frank Herbert's *Dune* to know how frighteningly conservative this strategy can be.

rebellion. Indeed, the other members of the crew believe it is only this action that would have worked to form the critical mass necessary for the city to revolt. Exactly like the Lord Ruler, Kelsier's entire rebellion thrives on manipulation. Moreover, the rebellion chooses a nobleman as its new king to bring 'some legitimacy' (Sanderson 2009, p.641) to their government. This cements, as Jameson claimed of Le Guin, 'the constitutive undecidability of a representation which affirms and foregrounds Utopia in the very same act by which it calls it fundamentally into question' (2007, p.80). What Sanderson encounters at this impasse, what has been borne out by the majority of historical revolutions is that when you are unable to break free of the past, the past repeats. Kelsier's reasoning, the same reasoning as the Lord Ruler's, is bound to an ideological system based on manipulation and control; *The Final Empire's* rebellion could not escape the conditions of its own reality. In other words, his revolution is not *the* revolution, but a single revolution in a historically eternal orbit.⁸

The Powers of Words: Delany's *Tales of Nevèrÿon*

And slowly, remembering all my listeners' reactions, I began to pick pieces from my own ramblings that they seemed to recognise as true or accurate.

—Samuel Delany

Literature always has a target, always has intent; language is always active, never passive. Ideology is not negative, but necessary. It becomes problematic when dominant ideology represses, oppresses, and dehumanises individuals while obscuring this very fact. The first

⁸ It is not until the final act of *The Hero of Ages* (book three) that the full force of Sanderson's utopian ideal appears in a metaphysical redistribution. Obliquely Marcusean, the opposing forces of Ruin (reality principle/Nirvana drive) and Preservation (pleasure principle/life instincts) are reconciled in one body. This allows for a return to the 'zero-point' reality through the reintegration of all that reality's knowledge which, until that time, had been suppressed. It is a fine example of progressive 'magic'. Be that as it may, this metaphysical enlargement of 'human powers', present in *The Hero of Ages*, should not be taken as wholly successful. Arguably, *returning* of the 'original' reality does not remove the structures and systems of the 'altered' reality: there has been change, but it may be ultimately regressive, rather than progressive.

step of a progressive fantasy might be to ‘dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight’ (Jackson 1981 65). This is an idea that Samuel Delany contemplates in *Tales of Nevèryon*.

Ostensibly, the narrative follows two paths: Gorgik’s journey from slave to revolutionary and the life of Norema. These two parallel, twinning threads form a simple path that allows Delany to expound on several philosophical interests. Broken into five sections, *Tales of Nevèryon*’s heart pulses with story-telling, with the *telling* of tales.

The narrative seems *aware* that it is careful fabrication, that its secondary world is alive with purpose, that its pages turn to understand, criticise, and re-imagine extratextual reality. Gorgik’s tale is the traditional tale of boy becoming a man, while Norema’s life is inscribed by the stories of her teacher Venn. The text hums with stories, with lectures, with parables, and myths that sit atop each other like sedimentary layers of subtle and self-reflexive language.

The text’s temporality (pre-historical, quasi-Africa/Persia), older and vaguer than a medieval backdrop, delves into language, empire, slavery, and sexuality at a moment these structures are being naturalised through ideology. This temporal gulf is the text’s primary fantastic, dislocation. There remains, however, a conduit between past and present where identified civilised ‘patterns’ (slavery, colonisation, money, sexual repression, etc.) are explored, acknowledging Edward Said’s assertion that ‘there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present’ (1993, p.2).

This is where the progressive nature of *Tales of Nevèryon* manifests. The deconstruction of hegemonic ideological structures through their pre-historical relocation *aligns* with counter-hegemonic representations of homosexuality, matriarchy, and revolution. At this confluence fantasy can become a bridge where ‘the orientation of the past tends toward an orientation on the future’ (Marcuse 1974, p.19).

Jackson claims that the fantastic ‘narrative is preoccupied with limits’ (1981, p.78), butting against the norm, arriving at the end points of possibility. If nothing else, Delany is fascinated by the (mis)use *and* limits of language. Accepting that the ‘fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made “absent”’ (Jackson 1981, p.4), the creation of a secondary world where these absences are *made* visible, indicates that language (in)forms consciousness. What cannot be said is difficult, if not impossible, to think. Delany writes:

There have always been some phenomena, however, which are so baffling that neither high language nor low seems able to deal with them. The primitive response to such phenomena is terror and the sophisticated one, ignoral. (1993, p.28)

Registering some sentiment towards the inexplicable, this passage concedes the inability of systemised language to encompass the unseen, the invisible. But why are those spaces so terrifying? Why must they be ignored? These are questions of control.

Nestled at the transition between oral and written culture, the power of language, of words, is of the utmost importance to *Tales of Nevèrjón*. Civilisation’s written word is synonymous with oppression—‘constraint is the very precondition of progress’ (Marcuse 1974, p.11). The ability to write down a name, to name a person a slave, another a lord, infers how the language of hegemony instils fabricated categories of difference. That is, even where no natural cause exists for class distinctions, it is language that allows the divisions—slave and master, beggar and king, even man and woman.

In ‘The Tale of Old Venn,’ Venn addresses how language has become a thing of difference, not inclusion. Detailing a primitive society’s (the Rulvyn) adoption of money, Venn expounds on the differences between the empire’s colonial capitalism and the Rulvyn’s primal commune. The obvious difference is gender. Venn claims:

We say ‘vagina’ or ‘penis’ for a man’s and woman’s genitals, while the Rulvyn say ‘gorgi’ for both, for which ‘male’ and ‘female’ are just two different properties that a gorgi can exhibit—and believe me it makes all the difference! (Delany 1993, p.124)

Here, rational, scientific terms create a dualism that—throughout the narrative—forces value judgments (in this case, man over woman). Consequently, Delany’s ‘civilised people’ have built their economic base upon slavery and colonisation: the empire brings civilisation to the barbarians via economic structure. This civilisation does not correspond with slavery’s dehumanisation, and the reality of *Tales of Nevèrÿon* is one of creating and enforcing difference. This breeds anguish, violence, and dissent.

Back-tracking institutionalised slavery to the proliferation of writing, Delany explores the growth of ‘civilised’ society and the insidiously cultural, unconscious way this society *imprisons*. Alfred Sohn-Rethel discusses this historically, where the ‘rise of commodity production in Greece [is linked] with the rise of Greek philosophy’ (1978, p.98). As such, a society’s means of production has a powerful effect not only on that society’s culture, but the spread and imprinting of said culture on others. However, Delany’s representation is not as blunt as Sanderson’s and more direct than Wolfe’s. Sketching the trauma of colonialism, *Tales of Nevèrÿon* uses the language of oppression to frame its own escape. Approaching the limits of the everyday, Delany demonstrates how imagining the impossible is, by its very nature, an uncovering of human needs that go ungratified.

Old Venn argues: ‘Since, we, here, do not aspire to civilization, it is perhaps best we halt the entire process’ (1993, p.85). This is not a refusal of language, but a refusal to use it to separate, enslave, and dominate. To be civilised is to *think* a certain way, a way that violently divides reality into use and value. When Delany injects the idea that to ‘express it was to call it containable’ (1993, p.121), the dialectic of containment and subversion appears. Even as

socio-political superstructures (religion, government, education) mould individual consciousness their dominion is never secure—their universality is too abstract to englobe subjective experience. Gaps appear ... gaps fantasy can exploit.

Initially, Gorgik is taken as a noblewoman's slave. Rehearsing this well-worn trope (a near impossible pairing) navigates the supposed differences between slave and master.

Delany (via Gorgik) ponders:

The social hierarchy and patterns of deference to be learned here were as complex as those that had to be mastered [...] on moving into a new slave barracks in the mine. Indeed, among slaves Gorgik knew what generated such complexity: servitude itself [...] The only question he could not answer here was: what were all *these* elegant lords and ladies slaves to? (1993, p.52)

The precondition for slave *and* the master is servitude. In both cases, culture depends on a lack of freedom, of actions defined by rigid regulations. Where the slave is physically chained, the master is shackled to the economy of slave-labour, reliant on observing irrational hierarchies and 'good manners'.

When Gorgik wonders if 'slave, free-commoner, lord—if each isn't somehow a reflection of the other; or a reflection of a reflection' (Delany 1993, p.242), the sentiment is that an individual's perception of reality is never truly in their hands: consciousness is always shaped by ideology. That *Tales of Nevèrjōn* focuses on slavery emphasises the intrinsically destructive, repressive results of colonialism. Delany's landscape overflows with inequality, pain, violence, and instability, highlighted by the brutal past the narrative inhabits.

Slavery, not to mention pillage, rape, and murder, historically associated with colonisation and cultural hegemony, is difficult to reconcile as a paradigm for civilised behaviour.

However, the transformation of a subject into object, of human into commodity seems a smooth transition. Sohn-Rethel argues that the 'exchange abstraction can become the basis of

a complete mode of thinking when exchange assumes the role of the social nexus' (1978, p.98). Here complete implies a naturalised system of thought and this illuminates the function of that system's ideology: making the unnatural appear natural, oppression appear as liberation. Delany writes:

For it is precisely at its centre that one loses the clear vision of what surrounds, what controls and contours every utterance, decides and develops every action, as the bird has no clear concept of air, though it support her every turn, or the fish no true vision of water, though it blur all she sees. (1993, pp.52-53)

Hegemonic ideology attempts to create a perception of reality that is homogeneous, apparently seamless, unified, and impenetrable. However, Delany's secondary world ruptures this concept, breaking a supposedly smooth space into fragments, making reality's striations detectable. This pares back the ideological camouflage—a simplification of image without losing conceptual complexity. The perceived difference between natural and unnatural becomes immediate rather than vague, and the implicit violence towards the individual made explicitly, disturbingly clear.

Acting like a pivot between the stories of Gorgik, there follows a lesson on the Rulvyn. Their men are hunters and women assume the practical tasks of the village. Consequently, the women command authority, *giving* prestige to the men for their low-value, high-honour hunting. Men usually marry several women (at the women's instigation) so that children can be nurtured in highly efficient family-units. Social relationships are without strain, competition seems non-existent, economics depends on barter, and the village is virtually independent from outside influence. However, their story becomes a lesson on the transformative power of money.

The women are unhappy, for now the men *make* them work, pit them against each other, blatantly and subtly chide them with the work of their co-wives. In the Rulvyn before money, the prestige granted the hunter was a compensation for his *lack* of social power. Now money has come, prestige has become a sign *of* social power [...] (Delany 1993, p.93)

The codes governing the allotment of authority/importance are inverted. Happiness is replaced by unhappiness, appetence with control, freedom with repression. Money was given to men because it is seen as a prestige symbol—just another thing used in between men as a measure of pride—because it had no material value.

However, as trade grew so too did money's visibility, together with the perception of *how* money was *used* beyond the village's cultural boundaries. This perception drives dynamic change, until the 'feel and flow of life among the Rulvyn is very different from what it was before' (Delany 1993, p.95). Life itself becomes subject to the flow of money. Foreign trade, dependant on a symbolic exchange, becomes increasingly important—luxuries are available, foreign foods desired. Controlling money, socio-economic authority is transferred to the men, and 'exchange' recognised (by the lamentation of the narrator) as 'having an erosive feed-back effect on the order of things within' (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p.87).

Adopting the cultural values of imperial hegemony, the Rulvyn transformed simple barter into complex commodification. The inherent value of food, tools, and craft emptied out, transferred to coins. Prestige (a once empty value) becomes the measure of social power as an inherently matriarchal community inverted to patriarchal individuals. And, where the authorial voice was held by the many (women), it was quickly appropriated by the few (men).

For the first, real time, the communal 'us' of the Rulvyn ossifies into a 'me-and-you' driven by the desire to amass wealth. Now, the ideological operation of difference, previously discussed in terms of language, finds an economic root. Distinctions (man/woman,

master/slave) are *needed* when, as Sohn-Rethel suggests, those benefiting ‘from the incipient appropriation become active forces driving on the development in their own interests and organising themselves into a separate social power’ (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p.87). The separation of the Rulvyn, driven by the intrusion of money, fragments the whole, shifting group labour towards an individualist trader society. Competition is the inevitable result.

Ultimately, the narrator laments: ‘woman are unhappy, for now the men *make* them work, pit them against each other’ (Delany 1993, p.93). Labour is forced and competition encouraged because the burgeoning trader class (men) are in direct competition with internal (other Rulvyn males) and external (foreign traders) forces. The desire for luxury and greater ‘clout’ cultivates surplus repression. Marcuse argues that in ‘a society that reproduces itself through economic competition, the mere demand for a happier social existence constitutes rebellion’ (1972, p.99) and Delany’s vignette imagines this process in a direct, destructive manner.

Effectively, the Rulvyn become microcosm of the world beyond their village; effectively, they have adopted slavery. Sohn-Rethel posits that this transferal (a historically early growth of capitalism) fundamentally changes a society’s mode of production (communal to individual) while reformatting the existence around commodities and their ownership.

This constitutes a network of social synthesis entirely in terms of property.

Production is done by chattel slaves who are owned by their masters as their personal property and who themselves do not partake in that network of property, having no access to money. (Sohn-Rethel 1978, pp.98-99)

Contextually, the Rulvyn’s story is an example within a child’s lesson—its focus is ideology itself, centring on the image of a mirror, on the process of capitalist appropriation of labour and abstraction. Delany writes:

‘The image in the mirror,’ Dell said, ‘it *looks* real, and deep, and as full of space as the real. But it’s flat—really. There’s nothing *behind* the mirror [...]’ (1993, p.101)

The ‘image in the mirror’ is the ideological manifestation of perceived objects in the consciousness. Returning to slavery, there exists nothing in reality that makes one individual a slave and another his/her master. These are imposed conditions, derived categories serving economic ends, which divide a unified group (humanity) into fragments (classes).

Flattening out reality while maintaining the illusion of depth allows such distinctions—subjects are transformed into objects through hegemonic cultural, political, economic practices. Initially, money is identified as the starting point for this process; ‘money, like a mirror, flattens everything out, even though it looks at first, like a perfect copy’ (Delany 1993, p.101). Like a copy, it replicates itself within society *and* all societies to which it is attached. Money and the subjectivity it transmits seem to spread like a virus.

Taking the metaphor further, the narrative’s entrenched slavery is symptomatic of the capitalist/imperialist state. Through the expansion of market systems (like the introduction of money to hunter/gather communities), the state reproduces itself, setting up microcosms identical to the text’s central authority. This leaves little doubt that this total, economic transformation is ‘associated with its own appropriate form of thought’ (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p.98). This thought becomes a form of interiority, turning the mind inwards, disrupting and replacing foreign cultural spheres. Effectively, when the Rulvyn adopt currency their reality is superseded and its difference flattened. It is this interiority which poses the greatest obstacle in the attempt to transgress and replace hegemonic ideology.

Recognising that we are ‘sick’ logically imposes a need for a ‘cure’. This is where Jameson concludes his utopian discussion, arguing that *all* ideological content is ultimately utopian—the ideology which seems to divide comes to unify again through the recognition of

shared suffering. Bringing the theory full circle, Jameson's Lukácsian re-insertion—that only 'the class can relate to the whole of reality in a practical revolutionary way' (Lukács 1976, p.193)—suggests that suffering—a group suffering—is necessary to produce this particular consciousness. Be that as it may, Delany goes one step further, attempting to fashion a radical subjectivity combining revolutionary practice with sexual liberation.

At the text's conclusion, Gorgik and his homosexual lover, Small Sarg, are leading a revolution. Gorgik is transformed into an emancipatory figure and his slave revolt steeps the narrative in blood. Trying to free slaves and a self-imprisoned, tortured Gorgik, Small Sarg storms a castle and massacres a series of guards. This visceral un-covering of violence is a transgressive act—direct and concrete violence (a trope of many fantasies) draws focus to the invisible, ideological violence of society. What fantasy can accomplish, via the immediacy of its (predominantly) hand-to-hand conflict, is the exposure of barbarism simmering under the surface of what a matriarchal outsider (the warrior Raven) calls a 'rough, brutal, inhuman place they called civilization' (Delany 1993, p.143). Raven's worldview is indicative of Delany's reflective strategies.

Tales of Nevèryon communicates a desire for something excluded—an 'opposition to the capitalist and patriarchal order which has been dominant in Western society over the last two centuries' (Jackson 1981, p.176). It does so by representing its complete opposite. Aboard a ship crewed by men, Raven is the outsider looking in. 'You people, here in the land of death, you really are crazy, yes?' (Delany 1993, p.154), she remarks, and her comment is more than idle rhetoric.

What follows is an account of a creation myth that unifies humanity as Woman: Man is just a tortured, mutilated Woman punished for a misdeed. Besides pitting matriarchy against patriarchy, the woman's revelations nod to fantasy's aptitude to imagine radical, new realities. What her comment about the 'land of death' suggests (at least in her mind) is a

diametrically opposed social existence: she is from a land ruled by women, a land of life, where males serve and females assume traditionally male roles (warriors, leaders, etc.).

Unsurprisingly, Raven's myth is met with derision and unease. Her subjectivity is too far removed from her colonial, male listeners—too strange, too uncomfortable. The same ideological violence Delany (presumably) protests in the extratextual world is reversed and actualised in text: man is a beaten, destroyed woman forced into servitude by the patriarchy. The point is not that the world of Man is wrong and the world of Woman right, but that ideological force, used to subjugate any individual, is barbaric and disturbing.

It is only after this alternative world-view is expressed that the final section appears and the central protagonists of the slave revolt re-inserted into the narrative. Explaining their existence, Gorgik and his lover Small Sarg equate their sexuality to revolution.

‘We are lovers,’ said Gorgik, ‘and for one of us the symbolic distinction between slave and master is necessary to desire’s consummation.’

‘We are avengers who fight the institution of slavery wherever we find it,’ said Small Sarg, ‘in whatever way we can, and for the both of us it is symbolic of our time in servitude and our bond to all men and women still so bound.’ (Delany 1993, p.239)

Appropriating the symbol of their servitude, they identify with their group, their class, and so begin their emancipation. Gorgik knows he is entrenched in hegemonic ideology, but in the very next sentence, Small Sarg declares that this knowledge—the consciousness of their oppression—enables them to combat its powers.

Using a secondary world, the narrative lays a thin veneer over extratextual reality, retaining all its gaps and ridges, before giving it fresh, shocking clothes. Where generic, post-Tolkienian sword-and-sorcery escapes, *Tales of Nevèryon* refuses any escape—it makes its world disturbing to reorient the mind. Delany displaces the present in a pre-historical past,

juxtaposing the effects of capitalism with its revolutionary counter. By confronting the alienating effects of hegemonic ideology, by investigating how such ideology works, *Tales of Nevèryon* questions the homogeneity of daily life and how it is mediated. This is the transgressive, subversive, and eventually progressive power of fantasy—as a serious space considering its reality seriously. This is a fantasy that fully understands that thinking seriously about the world is a powerful attack on conformity. Unsurprisingly, the *Tales of Nevèryon*, replete with the various ways humanity is enslaved (by money, by power, by language), concludes with the image of a dragon freed from its captivity. This is the image of fantasy emancipated from the constrictions of convention and a fitting conclusion to Delany's revolutionary subjectivity.

And yet, something is missing. For all its muscular ideas, arguably the *Tales of Nevèryon* is not an effective piece of fantasy. Perhaps, a facet of the feeling stems from Delany's reliance on a post-structural approach. Broken into quasi-connected shards, the narrative, the constructed world doesn't seem to work beyond the role of scaffolding. The underlying theory of the text, its deconstructive intent, is too near the surface, too explicit. In other words, the reader is always aware that the text is embroiled in its purpose. The fantasy of the fantasy is a secondary concern, a necessary alterity for the text's lectures and thought experiment. It seems a conceptual treatise wrapped in fantastic gauze. As a consequence, the connection between the reader and the world, the reader and the characters is strained to the point of snapping: there is little immersion and, therefore, little emotional investment in the narrative as a narrative. Undeniably, Delany fills its pages with vigorously progressive content, but its communication raises a nagging question: does this content stick?

Chapter 4: The Realities of Writing Fantasy

Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light.

—Margaret Atwood, *Negotiations with the Dead*

The two components of the creative practice/exegesis thesis do not exist in isolation, but dialogue. Feeding one into the other allows for two perspectives on the same problem: can a progressive fantasy be written? The preceding chapters have given some insight into techniques, characterisations, and conventions that can be rendered progressively.

Chapter 1 outlined several Marxist paradigms in an attempt to illustrate the theory behind Jameson's discussion of the 'Utopian Impulse'. Applying this theory to Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, Chapter 2 addressed fantasy's opposition to sf, before modifying Jameson's theory to include a more progressive outlook. Chapter 3's case studies (Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*, Sanderson's *The Final Empire*, and Delany's *Tales of Nevèrÿon*) began a mapping process—a process designed not only to open a dialogue between fantasy and sf, fantasy and theory, but a dialogue within fantasy itself (this introduced an inclusive paradigm that may invite a questioning, re-evaluation, and modification of genre fantasy). However, this application of theory to existent literature was only half the battle. Creative practice (*The Legend of the Wanderer*) requires its own voice, a voice that hints at a widening, a shift in the traditional understanding of genre fantasy.

The burden the exegesis has carried is theoretical. The preceding chapters explored the critical theory surrounding fantasy and its relationship to ideology, reality, and Marxist aesthetics. Alongside this (but deliberately separate) was creative practice: one half of this research project is a novel. Necessarily, practice and theory met in Chapter 3's case studies,

but the meeting was distanced, exterior—a meeting after the fact. Between theory and creative practice there exists a third space, a space this chapter roams: reflexive practice.

Getting into the middle of the creative process creates an opportunity to reflect on the connection, the dialogue between practice and theory. At this fulcrum, some questions can (potentially) be answered. How successfully were theoretical concepts and intentions translated into practice? What does creative practice tell you about theoretical ideas? How does the material of creative practice relate to or interact with theoretical concepts? Before attempting the answers, what exactly is at stake?

Writing is always active. And while Atwood's compulsion to enter the 'darkness' and return with illumination may not be universal, writing is (consciously or not) driven by purpose. It is filled with 'utterances', sometimes hidden, sometimes obvious, that inform a text, govern its discourse, shape its structure, and guide its content. Writing can map, reveal, obscure, construct, deconstruct, translate, transform, reimagine, and re-write the ways we perceive and experience reality. Such utterances—we might call them themes, voices, structures, or ideologies—dictate the ways in which writer and reader relate to any given text: this is genre.

Genre fantasy is often associated with particular formations of content, setting, purpose, and form (this fantasy appropriates much of Tolkien's content, setting, form, structure, and purpose which is, in itself, an addition, commentary, appropriation, and reimagining of earlier generations of fantasy). It takes up conventional quest-romance structures, is populated by elves, orcs, knights, and dwarves, and expresses (consciously or not) nationalism, xenophobia, and affirmative Christian metaphysics. Such codification can severely limit creativity. However, it also creates an identifiable site for a transformative dialogue.

In many ways, Mikhail Bakhtin's 'dialogic' is a fitting window for this dialogue. *TLOTW* is in 'conversation' with conventional, genre fantasy. Like two dialects sharing a common root, they 'intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying "languages"' (Bakhtin 1981, p.291).

TLOTW could not exist without Tolkien, Feist, Eddings, Lewis, and Donaldson, but it was not bound to them—they were antecedents, signposts, heritage. There was no restrictive need to conform, but a desire to interact with the same fantastic canvas. It was an effort of perhaps. *Perhaps* new results could be achieved. Perhaps *this* could be used or *that*. Will there need to be a dragon? Perhaps. Accepting that genre is fundamentally a particular *type* of discourse, reframing my writing process, with specific, theoretical goals (the production of a progressive, utopian aesthetic), fantasy could be reassessed.

Fantasy is impossible, it contains things that have never been, can never be, and will (presumably) never be, and yet the act of *creating* takes up very potent material. As Miéville suggests, fantasy can alter how reality is encountered because:

In a fantastic cultural work, the artist pretends that things known to be impossible are not only possible but real, which creates mental space redefining—or pretending to redefine—the impossible. This is sleight of mind, altering the categories of the not-real. (2002, p.45)

By its very impossibility fantasy can interact with a reader's relationship to reality, but only by shifting the idea of the mode from the stagnantly conventional to a discourse of the impossible and possible, real and unreal. Furthermore, this shift allows the form to seek innovative forms not tethered to categorical distinctions. Fantasy, sf, horror, crime, modernism and more can merge and their (supposedly) discrete, generic elements interact with one another. No longer just a composition of recognised (and bound) content, style, and structure, fantasy is given the scope to transcend its traditional roots. Conceivably, this

process can radically alter not only what fantasy is, but how it works. This shift alters the question, ‘what is fantasy?’ to ‘what does (can) fantasy do and have done to it?’

The Utopian Archive: Moving out of Middle-earth

When I started writing my own fantasy—with specific theoretical goals—its aesthetic parameters were vague. There were no questions of content or structure or setting—the word ‘fantasy’ had already provoked certain images, landscapes, spawning stories of dragons, orphans-become-kings, blacksmiths, Dark Lords, grail-quests, magical swords, and prophecy.

This is Tolkien’s legacy: Gandalf is ubiquitous, accompanied by endless iterations of Aragorn and Frodo through so many idyllic worlds under threat from ultimate evil. Lamentably, this deluge of Tolkienesque sword-and-sorcery can be read as a conservative cypher for the mode as a whole.

In general, Jameson’s identification that these portrayals work ‘primarily as the sign of an imaginary regression to the past and to older pre-rational forms of thought’ (2005, p.64) holds true. By appropriating Middle-earth’s reactionary, pastoral feudalism much of the mode feels likewise (and anachronistically) reactionary, invariably carrying (unconsciously or not) Tolkien’s social, historical, and spiritual concerns.

Carl Freedman suggests that for all its deep history, linguistic interest, and epic styling, Middle-earth is a ‘thin and impoverished world: it is miles wide but only inches deep [...] Middle-earth leaves out most of what makes us real human beings living in a real historical society’ (2002, p.263). The problem is that this ‘inches deep’—being so well imagined, so gripping, so fantastic—blinds the reader to the text’s historical deficiencies, while rehearsing the conservative aspects of Tolkien’s itinerant Christianity, nostalgia, idealism, and ethics. However, this picture is out of date.

Modern fantasy is becoming a far more diffuse entity. Indeed, it is increasingly clear that the fantasy pushed forward by writers like Samuel Delany, Neil Gaiman, Brandon Sanderson, and China Miéville, refuses quantification. It is less about wizards and more about intrusions, reflections, and ruptures. However, creating something new, before breaking open the old, the 'old' had to be encapsulated—alternatives require an object to counter.

As Jameson might suggest, simply creating a fictional utopia is, in itself, not utopian. At best it seems naïve, at worst it feels like empty idealism. The first three chapters of this thesis tended to agree. A vital aspect of the utopian aesthetic is fundamentally *critical* reflection. While a progressive literature might seek to create a new, radical subjectivity it should do so in the context of a repressive, destructive reality. In other words, the potential unreality of utopian expression is in constant comparison to the reality of extratextual existence. This was the focus of the first creative choice: an interaction of past and present via archival research.

Fittingly, the archive is encountered through the interplay of darkness and light. When Gant wanders through the mazelike shelves (pp.39-41), a handheld lantern is his only illumination. The atmosphere is deliberately absent—book titles reflect the light, visible for a moment, then gone. Indeed, the archive is defined—at least in Gant's mind—as 'always empty—its tomes unread, artefacts unrecorded' (p.41).

However, the archive is stacked with knowledge—accreted, complete, unique, knowledge. His task, the task of the historian, the writer, echoes Atwood's compulsion to explore the unknown and return with illumination. Imagining himself an 'explorer walking the ocean floor' (p.41), the archive appears somewhat foreboding. The figural translation of the towering shelves into a semi-visible labyrinth of looming shapes suggests unconscious conditioning: what is hidden, what is dark, buried and forgotten induces anxiety. However, Gant feels books need to be read and reread—what is buried should be unearthed, the

forgotten must be remembered. His wrestling with the past is driven by a desire to modify the present, modify the future. And yet, the *choice* to anchor *TLOTW* around an archival project was slow in coming. Just as Gant struggles to pull something new from a dark, forgotten history, my project grappled with a similar problem.

I started writing guided by two Marcusean frames: that civilisation ‘is still determined by its *archaic heritage*’ (Marcuse 1974, p.56) and the ‘past defines the present because mankind has not yet mastered its own history’ (Marcuse 1974, p.58). *TLOTW* was my attempt to rectify these positions, answering the question: can a progressive fantasy be written?

Gant, trapped in the utopian city of Vigilstone, undertakes a historical project. His goal—understanding a past that led to the collapse of a powerful empire (a collapse that still plagues his world) *and* producing a document that confronts the hegemonic ideology built on the bones of this collapse. In turn, this runs alongside the unveiling of the Vigilstone—its society, its technology, and ultimately, its potential to transform Gant and his reality. However, this was the end result, not the initial idea.

One of the most prominent utopians of his time, Marcuse constructed an anthropological map tracing human society through pre-historic groups, patriarchal hierarchies, feudal associations, capitalist reification, and modern mechanisation. This historical progression, he argues, has led to increasing destruction of the natural and human world. Considering the advent of mechanised labour, advanced medicine, and alternative fuels, humanity should be free, but it is not. Repression has increased where it should have declined. Our past defines our present and will continue defining our future.

Not unlike an archive, the first draft of *TLOTW* was a collection of fragments. Roughly matching Marcuse’s historical map, the narrative was broken into four discrete sections: pre-historical bible, creative non-fiction, the interrogation of a holocaust survivor,

and a fallen empire exodus story. And yet, these sections, however distinct/dissimilar, remained *reflections* of the extratextual world—remained lamentation and warning only. In this, my desire to enter into dialogue with the genre stereotype, to reinscribe fantasy with progressive intent, produced something closer to sf. And this blurring proved both a source of discursive vitality and creative limitation.

Jameson writes that the ‘Utopian remedy must at first be a fundamentally negative one and stand as clarion call to remove and to extirpate [...] [the] specific root of all evil from which all others spring’ (2005, p.12). This ‘remedy’ was the logical first step down the road to understanding what a progressive fantasy might look like. It needed to comprehend reality (how reality appears to the individual) before any attempts to alter it. As such, my first draft highlighted several key areas of ‘evil from which all others spring’, responding to a terrifyingly tangible world described by Suvin:

I see our global horizons as at best a struggle lasting for several generations against the amok runs of global capitalism with a bestial face that rapidly spreads hunger, wars, druggings, brainwashing, and prostitution, and at worst a descent into full super-technoscientific barbarism. (2000, p.213)

Taking Suvin’s position to heart, *TLOTW*’s first draft was attached to representations of war, brainwashing, barbarism, that ultimately transformed human into monster. Aesthetically, the intrusion of the more fantastic imagery (demonic creatures, destructive magic, shadowy forces, character splitting) paralleled the growing influence of an imperial ideology.

At first, this portrayal is tamed. Indeed, there is nothing inherently fantastic (disregarding the Reader’s) about the description of the imperial north. Broken into several ‘snapshots’, the thematic consolidation of central authority is distanced—at the edges of perception. The characters appear almost without context, witnessing, acting for, fighting against, or oblivious to inhumanity. The discrete ‘stories’ chart generations of conflict and

social restructuring—they are vignettes of psychological transformation. This is the monstrous mindset. It is a foreshadowing of further transformation.

Then, the tone radically shifts—the direct consequence of the imperial drive manifests as an ethnic purge. Violence and destruction (on a racial and individual level) is more immediate. After being branded, the interrogation's protagonist (Gabraal), claims that his vision changed. The cue is explicit—as his vision changes, so do the individuals around him. In a moment of revelatory terror, Gabraal perceives that the captain and Alno (his captors) are puppets—'wires pierced the captain, punched through his body, and disappeared into ... a void' (p.114). The captain, a figure of imperial authority, controlling Alno, is in turn controlled by some external force—'Black shapes swarmed within black space. There was a presence, a spidery predation, patient, unfeeling, and Alno and the captain were two masks it had chosen to wear' (p.114).

The strings run both ways. Alno and the captain are objects (masks) to be used. This 'nothingness' requires human agents to conceal its effects— human action is controlled *without the knowledge of those being controlled*. The fantasy of fantasy is, in this case, consciously asserted, and the ideological forces of the empire given clear, if not nebulous, intention—the ideological forces generating fear, hatred, and destruction are glimpsed through suffering. Gabraal's testimony is revelatory. Consequently, the scene deals with an ethical inversion. The captain believes that branding Gabraal, identifying him as an animal for slaughter, is the *right* thing to do. Altering Gabraal's perception of reality, giving him the ability to 'see' ideological control, transforms the captain into human monster.

Lastly, the representation resembles more traditional imagery—the destructive, imperial ideology *turns* monstrous. Seemingly, the Darkkin (our dark kin) are orc analogues. However, their description is tied to a violent synthesis—'Red eyes burned like banked coals and long blades gleamed from iron armour that, like a beetle's carapace, protruded from their

bodies as if welded to flesh' (p.172). They are weaponised constructs—a mingling of living tissue and destructive instrument. They are humanity made nightmarish ... and they require opposition. In much the same way that post-Tolkien 'orcs' unify society against an outside enemy, the Darrkin were the attempt to focus a unified, internal conflict much like battling a virus. Emphasised by their association with the Tower (the fictionalised site of civilisation's increasing ability to dominate humanity and nature), the Darkkin are terrifying not in their difference, but their similarities to 'normal' characters.

Each of these examples were efforts to represent a reality that had become increasingly distorted, increasingly non-real. Ideology was made tangible—concrete, immediate, and dangerous. This was part of a conscious bid to portray how (historically) civilisation has tended towards producing (pursuing greater wealth, security, cultural immortality, etc.) greater powers to destroy both nature and humanity.

The four, discrete sections of *TLOTW*'s first draft comprised an archive of sorts, an archive housing fear, war, death, and madness. This was the draft's express purpose: the exaggeration of destructive ideology rendered through a meeting of several fantasy tropes with several discursive styles. Consequently, the discursive result was negative. Like dystopian sf, what manifested was reflective, maybe subversive, but not progressive, and frustratingly fragmented. Something was lacking.

One problem was structural: there was no cohesive story. The other problem was theoretical. By mapping an empire's rise and fall, my work was tethered to the extratextual world's historical patterns: it was a loose reflection of the historical conditions that had led to two world wars, the holocaust, internecine, global conflicts, and the supremacy of Western capitalism. It was an illustration of 'the fatal dialectic of civilization [...] [where] the very progress of civilization leads to the release of increasingly destructive forces' (Marcuse 1974, p.54). This is sf's dystopian echo heard from the decaying metropolis of Dick and Gibson's

techno-intrusions. Fundamentally, I had clothed sf in fantasy's robes: it was the extrapolative model folded in on itself. In this case, purpose defined content, guiding the fiction towards dark, allegorical responses. It was deconstructively negative, not creatively positive.

Althusser's assertion that ideology is a structure of 'representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society' (1965, p.231) recovers fantasy's most useful aesthetic intent: to render the impossible and call it possible—to think it real.

If art relates to ideology, if art is not an image of reality but an image of how we picture reality, it can question these images with alternate images. At its simplest, most general, it can include content that the hegemonic image of reality *excludes*. Fantasy, then, can be invested with very powerful intentions. The conventional, the normal, the real is confronted with the alternate, the different, the unreal. By imagining new, different, strange, dislocated worlds, fantasy has the potential to comment, reinforce, and deconstruct aspects of hegemonic ideology. And it does this (potentially) to develop its own image of reality—its own progressive subjectivity.

Considering Miéville, *Perdido Street Station* is indicative of the majority of his fiction: critical, disturbing tales of grimy cities populated by aliens and monsters. This response to capitalist reality, the same response my first draft produced, aims at the dystopian. In itself, this suggests a positive direction for a form mired in the 'happy endings' of assembly-lined heroic narratives. In other words, a fantasy that interacts with reality by deconstructing its ideological apparatus is modelled, by the writer, to be subversive; it exclaims 'look at how destructive, alienating, and barbaric our reality truly is!' However effective the dystopian representation (in both fantasy and sf), it seemingly offers no alternative.

Jameson suggests that the ‘ultimate Utopian challenge: [is] to imagine a new heaven and a new earth’ (2005, p.120), but would it not be more fruitful to assert that the utopian challenge would be to imagine a new earth from an *old* hell? What my fiction lacked was that ‘urban’ aspect that has dominated sf for decades and is slowly creeping into contemporary fantasy. And so I turned back to voices of a new fantasy and found that Miéville’s *King Rat*, *Perdido Street Station*, and *The City and the City*, Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, and Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun*, all have one thing in common: the city. Following Atwood’s suggestion that in ‘literature, every landscape is a state of mind, but every state of mind can also be portrayed by a landscape’ (2011, p.115), my own fantasy needed to embrace the metropolis, brave its streets, and breathe the smoke.

The Utopian City: Writing Beyond Reflection

When Jameson wondered if culture could be ‘political, which is to say critical and even subversive, or is it necessarily reappropriated and coopted by the social system of which it is a part’ (2005, p.xv), he posed an interesting problem. How far does genre dictate form, structure, content, and discourse? Does the attempt to adhere to established tropes limit creativity? If we accept that a progressive literature should contain a new (counter-hegemonic) subjectivity, then *mapping* reality in a past (or future) might remain lacking—a reflection is only an image of something standing before the mirror.

Jameson’s dystopian curative uses ideological exhaustion—it extrapolates the ideological forces that dominate reality into a totalising representation of the future. It exposes, demonises, and acts as a warning. However nothing new, nothing in opposition, is (by and large) created in their place. Contemporary, capitalist subjectivity is found disturbing, made horrifying, but replacement finds serious resistance because the alternatives to the capitalist systems are ‘unviable and impossible’ (Jameson 2005, p.xii). However, fantasy’s

inherent, unavoidable use of the impossible affords it the potential to imagine radically different realities. Bould suggests:

All fiction builds worlds which are not true to the extratextual world (itself an ideological—and, arguably, therefore a fantastic—construct), but fantasy worlds are constructed upon a more elaborate predicate: they are not only not true to the extratextual world but, by definition, do not seek or pretend to be. (2002, p.81)

Arguably, this is a fundamental difference between sf and fantasy: sf *pretends to be*. Because it must extrapolate, sf's relationship to reality is that of an echo. Fantasy, on the other hand, can be whatever it wants, whatever the writer chooses it to be. Fantasy worlds are conscious constructions of the non-real, built from the ground up with purpose (however prosaic or remarkable they may be). By deciding that *TLOTW* would aim to be a progressive fantasy, my writing was drawing a line between itself and the popular understanding of the mode, but it was also entering a dialogic relationship. One flowed into the other, informing and disarming, arguing and agreeing, bring real and unreal into a summit of interaction, of flux. It is this expression of the not-real alongside the real, the exploration of new potentialities with old actualities, which forms the basis of *TLOTW*'s (potentially) progressive voice.

While *TLOTW*'s initial draft began to map a 'real' historical progression, its discursive scope was limited by the lack of a cohesive narrative and a reliance on traditional, fantasy tropes. Consequently, much of the four, discrete sections were conscious examples of proven, fantasy forms. The biblical section aped Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. Similarly, the third and fourth sections' respective first and third person narrations, together with the use of dark, shadowy forces, and quest-like plots, neared 'epic' fantasy storytelling. The problem was not that the reflective nature of the draft was being overshadowed by the need to use recognisable aesthetic techniques, but that the combination of the two was leading nowhere new.

Perhaps, a solution (a solution I explored) for this problem is for the artist to define the theoretical parameters for their creative practice, to define what genre actually means, allows, and limits for them. Perhaps, intent should be defined, a conscious decision regarding what socio-political utterances a text might voice. These parameters need not be strictly followed, but rather they can act as a scaffold on which to build. As previously discussed, Marcuse argues that phantasy performs a powerful role, connecting deep unconscious material to conscious creations (art), what he calls ‘the dream with reality’ (1974, p.140). And while Marcuse is not talking about genre fantasy, we cannot help but see the meeting of dream and reality in all fantastic texts—from Tolkien’s Middle-earth to Miéville’s New Crobuzon, from *Heart of Darkness* to Wolfe’s far-future Earth.

However, where stereotypical, sword-and-sorcery fantasy is arguably more interested in the dream, the genre as a collection of opening, impossible, disturbing, subversive, progressive utterances feels fundamentally concerned with affecting some leverage on reality—a reality increasingly concerned with the metropolis.

Where the cities navigated by Miéville (New Crobuzon), Sanderson (Luthadel), and Gaiman are dark, dystopian reflections, the space I wanted to navigate, between the first draft’s discrete sections, was utopian. Inserting a continuous, metropolitan narrative—the city of Vigilstone—between *TLOTW*’s initial four sections, completely changed how those reflections, how the novel as a whole, could be read. By juxtaposing the two, the fiction was able to suggest an alternate social direction, anchored by an understanding of and reconciliation with the past.

Fundamentally, Vigilstone became a vision of a future liberated from the barbarism of imperial history; it was the artistic expression of ‘Utopia as an enclave outside of historical time’ (Jameson 2005, p.187). It stood apart; an almost sentient conglomeration of people, architecture, and technology positioned as a radically different society. Aesthetically, this

manifested most strikingly in the city's technological advances (clockwork, solar, and steam engines) that underscored its harmonious population. It is at this point that the importance of fantasy's much criticised, but inescapable 'escapism' becomes apparent. Suvin argues:

I believe we need more precision about which elements or aspects of capitalist rationality, commodification or organization does Fantasy usually react against. What ways out of them does it take, to living or dead ends? And as the end-all, what is the *main effect* of its (perhaps various) ways out? (2000, p.236)

The issue is not that fantasy 'escapes' reality, only that its traditional escape routes (in terms of structure, plot, characterisations, etc.) have pushed the mode towards conservative 'dead ends'. However, shifting fantasy away from its rational, popularised antecedents allows the potential for a conscientious, self-reflexive, ultimately progressive fantasy. As a result, the continuous, Vigilstone narrative was written to 'escape' (from traditional fantasy, from capitalist hegemony) with a very particular, discursive strategy.

The majority of the city's advanced technology revolves around light: illuminating darkness, revelation, clear sight. In all cases, this light is renewable, working from solar or human sources. Initially encountered in the darkness of the archive, it is a light produced through human effort (the induction lamp), picking out endless shelves of books amidst the looming shadows. This imagery is similar to the post-Tolkien, ethical binaries, marking 'light' as good and 'darkness' evil. However, the emphasis shifts to discovery, not conflict. Historical truth, unknown or kept hidden, is brought to light, re-covered, and used to produce several examples of fantastic 'art'. Materially, this illumination manifests in the streets 'ever-lights'—the inference is on Vigilstone's eternal brightness in a dark world. In other words, Vigilstone's knowledge and the written works it inspires act like an induction lamp, lighting a

progressive subjectivity, (through a conscious effort on the reader's part) against the surrounding grim and violent reality.

Secondly, Vigilstone is a city *still-evolving*. In contrast to the stagnant air of the biblical section and the 'patterned' aspect of the creative non-fictions, Vigilstone's use of coal-fired carts alongside the Witnesses' magic-like, light-boxes suggests societal movement: a transition from fossil fuel to renewable energy. Underlined farther by the use of trees in the construction of the city walls, this environmental-in-urban motif suggests a relationship with the natural world founded on harmony and growth, not exploitation, not destruction.

Thirdly, Vigilstone is under siege—a siege not physical, but ideological. There are no armies assembled before the gates, no annexation, no battles, rather the city is isolated, transforming it into a reality unto itself—alone and other. In part, this was an active response to Jameson's theory of the 'enclave'—a place that 'radiates baleful power, but at the same time it is a power that can be eclipsed without a trace precisely because it is confined to a limited space (2005, p.17). Vigilstone's utopian subjectivity is not a global phenomenon, but insular, contained.

Its lack of money, a standing army, poverty, and internal crime are in stark contrast to an 'outside world' that breeds terrorism, manipulation, domination, and inhumanity to man. It is anathema to the Protectorate Kingdom's remnant imperial ideology. Therefore it is a reality to be feared, despised, exploited, and—when all else is said and done—destroyed. Vigilstone is a model, a thought experiment that *requires* a global dissemination of its achievements, its radical alterity, to be truly effective.

Lastly, Vigilstone's utopian character is *never* drawn into doubt. It is never questioned by its populace, only those that refuse to acknowledge or accept its unique subjectivity. Necessarily, its juxtaposition to the discrete sections' repetitious violence, war, and inhuman transformation is stark. Via this technique, *TLOTW* begins to modify Jameson's negative

imperative at work within the utopian impulse that makes ‘us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment’ (2005, p.xiii). In other words, the most effective Utopias are those that spectacularly, completely fail. Vigilstone’s utopian success is never opened (intentionally) to debate— it is a functioning, utopian site offering a radical social alternative. The debate is structural, subtextual, not laboured on content. Its battle, Gant’s struggle, is the mediation between the two competing, represented ideologies—a smoothing of the road that leads from regress to progress.

The Utopian Voice: Characterising a Progressive Subjectivity

How should fantasy approach progress? Althusser wrote that the ‘penetration of philosophy into the proletariat will be the conscious revolt of the affirmation against its own negation, the revolt of man against his inhuman conditions’ (1965, p.226).⁹ In order to deliver a utopian ‘voice’, a progressive subjectivity that aims at negating alienated reality via a utopian expression of desire, *TLOTW*’s voice needed to be a human one.

Placed within the utopian city, the sections that had, at first, *appeared* like archival documents, *became* archival documents. They formed the research and output for my protagonist’s project—a project that set about uncovering history, acknowledging its horrors, and reconciling its mistakes so that they could be unmade or not made again. It was only by fabricating the impossible, by imagining a utopian alternative *beside* the dystopian warning, that this (hopefully) counter-hegemonic subjectivity could be realised. This was *TLOTW*’s base-code: the purposeful mingling of real and unreal, possible and impossible, to produce alternatives to the present, informed by the past, in order to witness new futures.

Interestingly, Tolkien spoke of fantasy as recovery; recovery ‘(which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—a regaining of a clear view’ (1964, p.52). The

⁹ While this comment must be regarded with some scepticism—Althusser’s Marxist aesthetics leaning away from humanism—the sentiment, disregarding intent, is applicable.

emphasis is on fantasy as a curative. My first draft was a reflective investigation of history; incomplete, it looked back without looking around, without looking forward. Where I went, where modern fantasy is going, was the city. Including an urban narrative set far in to my text's future suggested new possibilities—a city of desires expressed and gratified, where technology serves to support, not destroy, humanity and the natural world. Here was a society founded on harmony not destruction, recovery not cover ups, art not propaganda, peace not war.

In this place my protagonist, Gant, set about a research project much like my own: a critical, historical project seeking to comprehend the patterns of the past that dominate civilisation, reconcile them with the present, and then offer a creative 'escape' for the future. In many ways, this was spurred by Miéville's articulation that 'changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real, its potentialities and actualities' (2002, pp.45-46). It is this expression of impossible potentialities, that exploration of new actualities, which formed the basis of my fantasy's potential utopian voice.

Traditionally the province of sf, fantasy's increasing interest in urban space can shunt its discourse for wish-fulfilment to political praxis. Considering sf's predilection for the dystopian warning, for utopia as idealism or propaganda, using the two to write a progressive fantasy is problematic. We have seen that fantasy can appropriate the sf mindset—that desire to map reality (and our perception of it) in order to find and expose its deficits. By introducing a stark, utopian image to the dystopian 'map', by placing the two in dialogue, I sought to raise a new position. Atwood states that the utopian form is:

[...] always bracketed by two journeys: the one that transports the tale-teller to the other place and the one that transports him (or her) back so he can deliver his report to us. (2011, p.109)

What I had discovered through the interface of the utopian city (Vigilstone) and the dystopian past (*TLOTW*'s discrete, reflective sections) was two journeys: one back, one forward. And it was only via this interface that those journeys—journeys not unlike my own as a writer—became a causeway above the mire of allegorical warnings and wish-fulfilling idealism.

Marcuse affirms that the 'liberation of the past does not end with its reconciliation with the present [...] the orientation of the past tends toward an orientation on the future' (1974, p.19). By mingling a research project that flicked back and forth with Vigilstone's, utopian reality, the past became something more dynamic than simple history: it became a living entity, not separate, but part of the present *and* the future.

Of course, this dynamic had to be interesting, had to fit the story, be a story. Gant, a young man born *outside* Vigilstone, finds himself the outsider looking in. It is through *his* eyes that Vigilstone is seen, its everyday technology turned to wonders, and its utopian subjectivity felt as alien. This 'journey' is nothing new to fantasy's milieu, owing more than a little to the *bildungsroman*. Gant gains knowledge (if not power) as he sinks deeper and deeper into Vigilstone.

Attebery suggests that the 'the most profound political statement that fantasy can make is to let the Other become self' (1991, p.24) and this is Gant's trajectory, his purpose. Through his research project, through the un-covering of historical truths that have been denied to all outside Vigilstone, he is an obvious figure of transformation. When Gant walks the streets, uses its technology, the impossibilities of Vigilstone—its social equality, its lack of money, its archival collection of historical record—become possibilities, normalised (for him) until they become his everyday reality. Arguing that this meeting of impossible/possible is one of fantasy's great progressive strengths, Miéville states:

Bearing in mind Marx's point that the real and the not-real are constantly cross-referenced in the productive activity which humans interact with the

world, changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real, its potentialities and actualities. (2002, pp.45-46)

Gant acts like a fulcrum between possible and impossible, past and future. At a plot level, his relationship with Tasha echoes a psychological realignment to Vigilstone's way of life.

Absent from the discrete sections, sex enters the narrative free of manipulation or reification—it is opposed to the 'interpretation of sexuality as an essentially explosive force in "conflict" with civilization' (Marcuse 1974, p.42), Gant's ability to negotiate and combat the destructive forces defining his (and the Protectorate Kingdom's) past resonates with the liberating nature of his and Tasha's relationship. Their mingling parallels his mingling with the city, driving his own creative practice and its potentially progressive subjectivity.

However, the delivery of this new subjectivity is complicated. In this instance, producing an alternative subjective, a new future, required more than stark representation—the process was gradual. Just as utopia can be dismissed as idealism, Gant's 'quest' to retrieve a stolen ocular-recording device proceeds along the line that civilisation is not ready to have one 'truth' replace another, to have one subjectivity uprooted and supplanted by its opposite.

That *TLOTW*'s historical nature leans into the concept of a past unrefined, unburied, unfiltered, is indicative of Gant's desire to comprehend a past, a present, a future without manipulation. In a very real sense, Gant's time in the archive is time spent in the unknown. His symbolic 'dig' into the shelves, towards the illuminating light of first-hand documentation, captures this want, this need to know history as it was, not as it was edited. For him, its violence and destruction must be accepted, so those forces can be reconciled and avoided.

This idea is amplified by his association with the Witnesses. Watching a ghost-image of a ferocious battle, they are exposed to history, not as document or memory, not as

something segregated from the present, *but as a thing in and of the now*. Vigilstone evolves only because of this watching, this painstaking recording. The Witnesses' are involved in a similar historical project to Gant's, with a similar progressive intention. However, their goal manifests provincially—Gant's is ultimately global.

The problem is one of time. Vigilstone has evolved, the outside world has not. As such, the theft of the Witnesses visual device (the Panoptic Globe) represents a grave danger: its images are too sudden, too raw, and terrifyingly unmediated.

Gant's political praxis, portrayed via his personal transformation and the scope of his research, is one of a slow education—like a pebble on the beach, caressed by the approaching tide, before being carried into the sea. It functions as a means of mediation, a bridge between an imperial past, across a hegemonic present, into a progressive future. Be that as it may, there remains a question about representation. How can Gant's transformation be measured?

Like the Darkkin, an answer was alighted upon in the monstrous. However, differentiating Gant from orc analogues would have been too pithy an exercise. In this regard, the appropriation of post-Tolkien content was avoided. Gant's antagonists, a very conscious decision, needed to be closely *tied* to his character. Only then could his own ideological transformation be properly contextualised. Speaking of 'Weird Fiction', Miéville suggests:

The fantastic has always been indispensable to think and unthink society, but traditional monsters were now profoundly inadequate, suddenly nostalgic in the epoch of modern war. Out of this crisis of traditional fantastic [manifests] the burgeoning sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality [...] (2009, p.513)

Granted, Miéville's monsters borrow heavily from Lovecraftian zoology, but his point is sympathetic to any discussion of the disturbingly monstrous. Gant's shift from repressive to

progressive subjectivity (obviously) changes his perception of reality—impossible becomes possible, the normal is disturbing.

Seemingly, this transformative narrative could only be accomplished by measuring Gant's changes against two characters, Veleen and Mal, whose own transformations (or lack thereof) were designed to reorient the reader's own ideological bias. In other words, the reader is meant to identify with Gant and, therefore, view *TLOTW* through his continuously evolving eyes.

Mal's transformation is reversed: he is Gant's doppelganger reflected and inverted. Initially, his animosity towards Gant is based on distrust—he and Tasha are chasing the thief, Veleen (Gant's friend). However, as the story continues, his motivations become more sinister; greed and envy of the outside world's apparent affluence creep into his psyche. Finally, Mal appears as an enraged zombie whose shadow has taken on sentient, bestial aspects. That he attacks Tasha, positions him in direct opposition to Gant, to Vigilstone. Just as the ideology of Vigilstone seeps into Gant, Veleen's desire to exploit and destroy (the subjective of the Protectorates) incubates in Mal as he lashes out, impervious to violence in his ghastly inhumanity.

This 'immortality' became the most important aspect of Mal's portrayal. Violence (the stamp of the text's imperial ideology) does not affect him. It is only Gant's use of the glass recording tube—a container of an unadulterated, historical event—that defeats the monster (and it is only Vigilstone's evolved technology—a motorised vehicle—that destroys the monstrous body). However, this is not the final obstacle, nor the conclusive measure of Gant's progressive subjectivity that emerges as:

[...] a *rejection* and a denunciation: a rejection of all human discrimination, be it racial, political, religious or whatever. It is a rejection of all economic

exploitation or political slavery. It is a rejection of war. (Althusser 1965, p.237)

Veleen is the key to truly deciphering Gant's character. As he changes, she remains constant; as Gant accepts, Veleen denies Vigilstone. That she becomes a terrorist, destroying infrastructure, bombing innocents, is far more disturbing (to Gant) than Mal's fantastic conversion. Stagnant, Veleen becomes more and more destructive as the story moves forward. Furthermore, as Gant comes to amplify a progressive 'voice', he repeatedly claims that he cannot understand Veleen, that she seeming speaks a different language, that she is essentially unrecognisable. Brandishing a gun, she highlights the destructive ideology guiding her words, her choices, her actions. Inevitably, she had to disappear from the narrative so Gant can escape the subjectivity of his past. Like the ghost of a memory, she disappears. Then, Gant's 'writer's block' dissolves and his creative practice enters the narrative.

The Utopian Aesthetic: Fantasy as Medium for Progressive Literature

With every map there's an edge—a border between the known and the unknown.

—Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds*

The preceding sections outlined this research project's creative practice, highlighting fantasy's (growing) cultural importance, expanding critical thought, and potential transformations. Fantasy has the potential to escape from establish truths, to dismantle the everyday, and replace all we know and take for granted with new ideas, new life. Certainly, its conservative bindings have become strong. However, by actively suggesting how the mode could be treated, unknown paths can be walked and unseen monsters fought. Like Miéville, I believe 'we need fantasy to think the world, and to change it' (2002, p.48), change it for the better, change it for the now, change it for our future.

Mapping reality to extrapolated futures or generalised pasts can demonstrate the violent, manipulative, destructive nature of capitalist hegemony, but it offers no replacement, no alternative. Arguably, reflection is not enough. It *is* necessary to understand the problems, the lacks, deficiencies, gaps. It *is* necessary to illustrate how monstrous the reification of the individual can be, the danger of transforming subject to object. It can be deconstructive, subversive, and transgressive, but is it *reconstructive*? Is it progressive? It can imagine an extension of the present, but is this ultimately geared towards the future? It is warning. It is a call to arms. It is leverage. Seemingly, it is only half the equation.

Similarly, the portrayal of utopia can be a long and perilous road. Too easily it can slip into propaganda or idealism. Granted, expressing *impossible* perfection is an ideological act in itself, highlighting that border between the real and non-real, butting against that space supposedly beyond imagination. But, by itself, utopia may not be enough. It feels too disconnected, too alien, too other. In many ways utopia is the height of fantasy, the most fantastic of daydreams—it is imaginative, it is suggestive, but its difference out of context is difficult to channel progressively.

By bringing these two ‘voices’ together, by mingling negative and positive, there exists the potential for a progressive, fantastic aesthetic. This is a type of fantasy that uses the impossible (be it temporal, material, transformative, metaphysical, anachronistic, etc.) to identify social ills and elicit shocking recognition, while offering radical alternatives (be that socio-political, spiritual, technological, cultural, historical).

That fantasy naturally, intrinsically ‘escapes’ suggests that hegemonic representations of reality are lacking, that needs (individual and social) are not being met, that people require more. This is a power of the impossible, a power that fantasy can grasp, potentially, if it wants to step out of Tolkien’s shadow, jump through the looking-glass, and land in the ruptures being explored by Miéville, Le Guin, Wolfe, Sanderson, and Delany. This fantasy—

a fantasy I have attempted to emulate—can use the strange, the weird, the unreal, to explore, interrogate, and (even if it wants to or not) change portrayals of the possible, the real.

Perhaps, Attebery underscored fantasy's significance as a cultural phenomenon most succinctly when he suggested that it 'denies what everybody knows to be the truth. And, if you're lucky, the untruth shall make you free' (1991, p.25). Un-covering, un-veiling, un-earthing, speak of a journey into the darkness, discovering a piece of the world that has been hidden or forgotten. The impossible is such an artefact. Fantasy has the ability to delve into that darkness Atwood described, dig up the unreal and bring it to light. That is why we should not mistake fantasy for fallacy or confuse its un-truth with non-truth.

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