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Unlikely Heroes: Protagonists, Worldbuilding, and the Importance of Diverse Fantasy

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Unlikely Heroes: Protagonists, Worldbuilding, and the History and Importance of
Diverse Fantasy

Casper Miller

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of the
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in the English Department
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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter One: J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth and the Origins of Modern Fantasy	19
Chapter Two: Ursula K. Le Guin, Detailed Culture, and Rethinking Your Own Worlds	49
Chapter Three: Brandon Sanderson, N.K. Jemisin, and Current Fantasy Norms and Heroes	70
Chapter Four: My Own Writing, <i>Advocacy</i> , and Imperfect Worlds	95
Conclusion	109
Appendix: Excerpt from <i>Advocacy</i>	115
Works Cited	137

Introduction

Who, in a story, can be a hero?

An awfully broad question to begin a thesis with. The Oxford English Dictionary provides a few definitions to help us narrow our search: a hero, it says, is “a man (or occasionally a woman) of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favored by the gods; esp. one regarded as semi-divine and immortal. Also in extended use, denoting similar figures in non-classical myths or legends.” When searching for specifically narrative terms, the hero is stated to be “The central character or protagonist (often, but esp. in later use not necessarily, male) in a story, play, film, etc.; esp. one whom the reader or audience is intended to support or admire.”

I will add one more constraint to this, one that is perhaps foreshadowed by the first definition: I ask my question not only in the context of stories but in the context of *fantasy* stories. As implied by the first definition, the terminology of heroism conveys a sense of being larger-than-life, superhuman in many ways often to the point of being seen as immortal or semi-divine. Even in more modern usage, we save the term *hero* for someone seen as going above and beyond the standard we set for people in general; someone who supersedes our expectations and, often, is seen as a savior of something, no matter how small. A hero is always tied to fantasy because the hero is always seen as

more than human, suspended in the space between the rest of us and immortality, godhood, the divine—the *fantastic*.

So who can be a hero in fantasy? In theory, anyone. Fantasy as a genre isn't constrained by the conventions of reality—that's the reason heroes pull to it, and it attracts heroes. Fantasy is a natural stage for the dramatic, the over-the-top, the superhuman and semi-divine, simply because it as a genre *allows* them to exist. In fantasy, the only constraints on the world are dictated by the author's conception of it. Worldbuilding—what Tolkien referred to as *sub-creation*—is the term most commonly used for the author's conception of a world. Often a painstaking process, worldbuilding is the process of building a non-Earth, non-realistic setting that nevertheless is believed by the reader—that is internally consistent but at the same time outrageous enough to deliver wonder to the reader who is in search of it. And worldbuilding has *everything* to do with who is, or can be, a hero.

I. Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding is something that has come recently into the public eye, although it is part of making any story, not just a fantasy story. As a term, it's fairly intuitive—it is constructing the setting of your story, from the simple details (who lives next door, what are the problems of the town you're in) to the complex (who started the impending apocalypse, one person or many? How does magic work, who can use it, and what can't it do?). Fantasy, of course, has a particularly close relationship with worldbuilding,

because often in fantasy *everything* has to be ‘worldbuilt.’ In a fictional story or novel set in a world that is based on or seriously resembles ours, there are certain givens that the writer can allow the readers to assume: the sky is blue, magic doesn’t exist, gravity works, and humans are the only speaking characters.

In fantasy, these constants are not actually constant. The author must choose which details to keep, which things that the audience will be familiar with and which to make strange and unusual. Too far in the direction of the familiar, and the reader expecting magic and adventure is disappointed. Too far toward the strange, and there’s nothing for a reader to grab hold of, to relate to in the story. The fantasy author, in order to maintain the suspension of disbelief for the reader, has to pay close attention to this balance, as well as make their world engaging and enjoyable from the perspective of the reader.

Fantasy worldbuilding, then, is a vital part of the novel to take into consideration during analysis. Because the author is not limited by real-world constraints, and because the world is so carefully constructed by the author, the worldbuilding can and often does speak volumes about the themes of the work and what topics are particularly resonant to the author. Two separate authors can start with the same idea, and end up with worlds that are drastically different based on what areas they chose to highlight, bring forward, or center in the narrative, and that will in turn affect the plot and characters of the novel. There is a reason that worldbuilding has become a common term and topic of conversation among writers (on *Writing Excuses*, a podcast primarily hosted by genre fiction writers to aid other writers, the podcast archives show worldbuilding as one of the

most common keywords, with over fifty episodes marked as involving discussion of it); it is as vital to the story as plot or character, especially in the fantasy genre where a reader often is not looking just for the next compelling character or enthralling writing style, but the next interesting, immersive world.

From early in the genre, the importance of worldbuilding has been clear. In Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories*, he in fact places the world and the worldbuilding as the defining factor of a fairy story, or what has become known as a fantasy story: "The definition of a fairy-story—what it is, or what it should be—does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of Faërie: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country." (*On Fairy Stories*) Without the 'Perilous Realm,' the fantasy-story is not complete and whole. There is importance placed on the plot and the hero, but by this definition a story is not a fantasy story unless the world itself is a wonder; the world itself is magical and wonderful, containing noticeable differences from our own world.

But what does worldbuilding have to do with who the hero of the story can be? I posit that the answer is *a lot*. By setting the constraints of the story's world, who lives in it and who is invested in its conflicts, the author necessarily ends up with a limited group of people who could be the hero. In a world centering on a war story, where the author has replicated our world's gender roles either by design or unthinkingly, the chance of a woman being the hero of a story becomes much less likely. A world in which there are few to no people of color in the area where the conflict is happening will likely not have a

protagonist of color. The world we make defines who we see as protagonists, and our own biases and assumptions define the worlds we build. If we want to analyze fantasy novels, we must take this part of worldbuilding into account as well: the fact that it is made by people who are rooted in this world, and that the decisions that we make based on our own real-world biases then inform our choice of hero, who we think is sympathetic or could be a main character, someone worthy of their own story. Even in the Perilous Realm Tolkien mentioned, we remain human, creating things out of an existing framework.

II. A Brief Timeline of Fantasy

In order to establish what the norms of fantasy heroes are, and thus set the stage for analysis both of them and of the genre as a whole, it is important to provide a brief overview of the modern fantasy genre. Fantasy, of course, has its roots in fairy-tales and myth; that much is obvious. However, the modern fantasy genre is often considered to have begun with the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien's Arda, or Middle-Earth, became seen as the foundational fantasy story, a standard to which others could be held.¹ Because of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that many fantasy authors also felt the need to emulate Tolkien's setting, leading to creatures that he popularized—elves, dwarves, and orcs

¹ "JRR Tolkien did the world a disservice by making every single fantasy writer think that they have to chronicle every [expletive] minute of their world in order for it to be legitimate," comedian Brian David Gilbert said in a discussion of video game writing that focuses largely on the power of writing in worldbuilding; see *Unraveled: I Read Every Book In Skyrim* by the Polygon channel.

being some of the primary examples—becoming mainstays of the fantasy genre, and other tropes Tolkien engaged in also becoming larger fixtures of the genre.

Among these include the chosen one stereotype, which Tolkien placed peripherally in the character of Aragorn but has since become a common form for the main character of a narrative (see: Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series, and even in film examples such as George Lucas' *Star Wars* prequel trilogy); the idea of a necessary departure and magic leaving the world, exemplified by the departure of the elves and Ringbearers, Sam excepted, in *The Return of the King* (reflected in many ways such as Eragon's departure at the end of Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Trilogy*, Terry Goodkind's *Sword of Truth*, Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising*'s finale, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* ending with the end of Narnia, and Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* closing the interworld portals); and the idea of a fantasy world resisting progress, remaining in general technological stasis for hundreds of years². To describe a timeline of fantasy without Tolkien would be leaving out one of the main formative influences of the genre.

From that point, there are two strains that I divide fantasy into, and it resembles that of many other developments: there are those that *follow* the norm, and then there are those that *divert* from the norm. For the purposes of this thesis, normative fantasy I define as having the following characteristics:

² For more information on the typical fantasy setting and the number of its characteristics that can be traced to Tolkien, I would recommend looking to the TV Tropes website, a community-driven database of common literary tropes and their origins.

1) Following the established fantasy norms by having a setting that largely resembles western Europe in the medieval era, with the inclusion of fantastic races as popularized by Tolkien or those very similar to them, and

2) Following cultural norms of our society by having main characters who fit our established cultural ideas of who a 'hero' or protagonist should be, usually a white (or non-racially-marked, which is often interpreted as white by both audiences and the author themselves) heterosexual man.

Much of mainstream fantasy since Tolkien has followed this vague outline, which is not surprising. First of all, it is a compelling and successful model, and as the *Lord of the Rings* is a foundational text for most consumers of fantasy literature, as well as to the genre as a whole, it is a familiar fantasy for most readers. If it isn't broken, the conventional wisdom says, don't fix it.

However, there are deviations, and it is those that this essay is most concerned with. The norm of fantasy literature excludes large groups of people from the status of 'heroes,' or even having their own issues central in the text, simply by virtue of coming from a society that notably does not prioritize people who are not white men and does not pay as close attention to their experiences or their opinions.

Recently in the fantasy community, this issue—that of the flawed norm and absence of other voices in mainstream fantasy and sci-fi—has gathered some prominence, in discussions such as ‘Racefail,’ a conversation that began in the science fiction community in 2009 but moved into the fantasy community as well and began to raise controversy to the surface. As author NK Jemisin described it in 2010, “RaceFail was a several-months-long conversation about race in the context of science fiction and fantasy that sprawled across the blogosphere. It involved several thousand participants and spawned several hundred essays — and it hasn’t really ended yet, just slowed down.” (*Epiphany 2.0*, Jan 18, 2010) Her remarks were astonishingly prescient—in the years since, the fantasy community has been engaged in an ongoing argument about what fantasy *should* be in terms of inclusivity, steered in a large part by writers and fans of color and centered around issues of race. It was a recent arm of this debate, centering around the Hugo Awards and beginning in 2015, that inspired me to begin looking at the issue of inclusivity in fantasy worldbuilding.

The Hugo Awards are a set of literary awards given annually to what is considered the most excellent science fiction and fantasy of the year. They are organized and presented by the World Science Fiction Society at a convention known as Worldcon, and the voting on which books, stories, or other works of fiction win takes place at the convention. They are considered one of the highest honors in the world of science fiction and fantasy writing, and thus are highly coveted—and looked to as examples of what works and themes are currently most appreciated by the community. The controversies around the Hugos began with the founding of a group called the ‘Sad Puppies’ by Larry

Correia and Brad R Torgensen. Believing that the Hugos had become too ideologically liberal, they introduced ‘slates’ of works that they felt represented their own ideology, and encouraged their fans to vote for those books regardless of whether or not they had read them. While this did affect the nominees for the Hugos that year, very few of the Sad Puppies slate went on to win in a category—but the movement continued into the next few years at the Hugos. Moreover, it spurred another, smaller and more vociferously right-wing group called the Rabid Puppies into creation. The latter group, founded by alt-right writer and author Theodore Beale—also known on the internet by the pseudonym Vox Day—was explicit in its racist and sexist commentary, and Beale himself was banned from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association after tweeting exceedingly racist commentary about author N.K. Jemisin. While the Rabid Puppies were largely seen as a fringe group, they associated themselves with the larger Sad Puppies movement, an association that the Sad Puppies never really refuted.

It was in Torgensen’s description of the Sad Puppy viewpoint, as quoted in an article in *Slate*, that I found the argument I now seek to refute:

“A few decades ago, if you saw a lovely spaceship on a book cover, with a gorgeous planet in the background, you could be pretty sure you were going to get a rousing space adventure featuring starships and distant, amazing worlds. If you saw a barbarian swinging an axe? You were going to get a rousing fantasy epic with broad-chested heroes who slay monsters, and run off with beautiful women.

But now:

The book has a spaceship on the cover, but is it really going to be a story about space exploration and pioneering derring-do? Or is the story merely about racial prejudice and exploitation...

A planet, framed by a galactic backdrop. Could it be an actual bona fide space opera? Heroes and princesses and laser blasters? No, wait. It's about sexism and the oppression of women.

Finally, a book with a painting of a person wearing a mechanized suit of armor! Holding a rifle! War story ahoy! Nope, wait. It's actually about gay and transgender issues.

No longer interested in adventure, argue the Puppies, the Hugos have grown elitist, academic, and overly ideological—irrelevant to the average fan." (*Slate*, 2015).

There is a lot to unpack there. Firstly, the phrasing of the statements needs to be taken into account: it is not a space exploration story, but *merely* about racial prejudice; there is a sense of letdown upon the realization that the works involved are engaging in real-world issues of gender, race, and sexuality. That could be dismissed as merely flippant or ill-thought-out wording on Torgensen's part, were it not for the substance of what he is saying. Essentially, his argument has two parts: first, he alleges that science fiction and fantasy works *did not*, traditionally, engage in issues of race, gender, and sexuality—that they were “actual, bona fide, rousing” adventures, as opposed to the “elitist, academic, overly-ideological” works of today. Even the wording that he uses in his argument belie the argument itself—the hero of a fantasy epic ‘runs off with beautiful women’ but the

story had nothing to do with sexism or the oppression of women? And the use of the word ‘pioneering’ in a story with no reference to racial prejudice is telling on its own—the historical connotations of the pioneers was *fraught* with racial prejudice and tension.

The second part of his argument is that the current rush of works that involve diverse themes and characters are not relevant or liked by the ‘average fan’—which clearly, in Torgensen’s mind, is a straight, cisgender white man. Even then, the assumption that the average fan has a life in which sexism, racial prejudice, and queer issues are *irrelevant* is tantamount to saying that the average fan has never lived in the world, and never will. I argue that both points of his argument are incorrect: firstly, that there has not been a time in the history of the modern genre of fantasy when works have not been addressing—for good or for ill—the history of prejudice in our society, and secondly, that popular works of modern fantasy are, in fact, the works that address such issues. Further, I believe—and seek to show through this essay—that engaging with real-world issues of race, gender, sexuality, and other forms of inequality actually strengthen the themes of a fantasy novel, make for more compelling heroes, and result in a narrative that is *more* welcome to adventure, relevance, and the wonder of the genre as a whole.

Obviously, within the science fiction and fantasy community, there was considerable push-back against these viewpoints as well. Two major sources of discussion on the importance of diversity in fiction that I feel the need to cite here, in the introduction, as formative to my understanding of the topic and fully worth investigating for anyone who is interested in issues of diversity in modern fiction are as follows: the Own Voices

discussion, stemming from a twitter hashtag coined by author Corinne Duyvis, and the We Need Diverse Books movement.

Both of these trends are less concerned with the definition of what a fantasy novel should be than the Hugos controversy, but rather address the practicalities of working to expand the range of books available to people, particularly children--Duyvis started the Own Voices hashtag to talk about and recommend children's books that were written by and about people of varying marginalized identities—the catchphrase “Nothing about us, without us” has come up in online discussions of the topic, and the initiative is based around the belief that if someone wants to read a narrative about, say, racial prejudice, the best books on that topic will be written *by* people who have experienced racial prejudice. We Need Diverse Books also states that its mission is “Putting more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children,” and goes on to clarify their definition of “diverse” as “including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.” (We Need Diverse Books, About WNDB).

While these initiatives are based specifically around children, they make compelling points about the benefits of expanding who we expect to see as the main character in works of literature. Both clarify that their intent is never to force anyone to write anything--Duyvis states in an “FAQ” segment on the Own Voices hashtag that “#ownvoices is not about policing or pressuring marginalized authors to write about any particular topic.” and “ People can write whatever they want; that goes both ways.”

(Corinne Duyvis, #ownvoices). Rather, the intent is to promote authors who write diverse fiction, particularly those who write novels that reflect their own experiences. They point out the overwhelming tendency for the authors who get credit and recognition in any genre to be white and male, and the fact that often, even the writers who get credit for writing about minority groups are, in fact, not part of those groups.

It was in this environment that I began looking into what inclusivity in fantasy could and has looked like, and planning for this thesis. However, in order to understand my outlook on this issue, I feel like I need to discuss both the terminology that I am familiar with and thus will be using for the purposes of this thesis, and my own background and familiarity with the topic.

III. Relevant Terminology

The terminology I will be using ranges from personal definitions, to ones that are widely used in discussions of fantasy and speculative fiction, to ones that originated in the fan community as a shorthand for various types of fiction.

The most important term I will be using is that of *setting*. While this is often interpreted to mean the physical location of a story--the particular landmarks that a story visits or takes place in or around--in fantasy this term gains a much larger umbrella. This is what Orson Scott Card, in his *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, refers to as the 'milieu' of the story: "The milieu is the world—the planet, the society, the weather,

the family, all the elements that came up during the world creation phase.” (*Card, How to Write Science Fiction*). It is the expansive view of setting that is often used in worldbuilding to encompass everything the writer creates and takes into account when constructing their world. Setting thus encompasses also the culture of the story—the races or species that are part of society, the societal roles that people are limited to or freed from, and the social tensions present—as well as who they affect.

I also use the term speculative fiction, referring to the larger genre of which fantasy is a part and of which worldbuilding is often seen as of primary importance. The term was defined by Robert Heinlein in 1953: “The term ‘speculative fiction’ may be defined negatively as being fiction about things that have not happened.” (*Heinlein, Library Journal*). A more positive definition would be fiction that does not deal with the world as it is but rather alternate versions of the world, which often include supernatural or futuristic elements. Utopian fiction, Science Fiction, Fantasy, and other such genres are considered under the umbrella of speculative fiction.

Additionally, the fantasy community in particular uses several genre terms to separate out various types of conventional setting. *Secondary world* fantasy was first coined by J.R.R. Tolkien, in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, where used the term to differentiate the world of fantasy from the *primary*, or real, world. “Now “Faërian Drama”—those plays which according to abundant records the elves have often presented to men—can produce Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism. As a result their usual effect (upon a man) is to go beyond Secondary Belief. If you are

present at a Faërian drama you yourself are, or think that you are, bodily inside its Secondary World.” (*Tolkien, On Fairy-Stories*). He continues this line of the ‘secondary world’ to describe the author’s world upon having written a fantasy, or fairy, story. In modern fantasy, the use of the term *secondary world* has shifted, now referring primarily to a world which is distinct from our own; therefore, Harry Potter with its recognizable landmarks would not be called secondary-world, while Tolkien’s own Middle Earth would be.

The terms *high* and *low* fantasy also originate from Tolkien’s essay, but have drifted somewhat in meaning—popular book categorization site *Goodreads* defines the difference as “High fantasy is defined as fantasy fiction set in an alternative, entirely fictional ("secondary") world, rather than the real, or "primary" world. The secondary world is usually internally consistent, but its rules differ in some way(s) from those of the primary world. By contrast, low fantasy is characterized by being set in the primary, or "real" world, or a rational and familiar fictional world, with the inclusion of magical elements.” (*Goodreads, High Fantasy*). Primary-world, as seen here, does not necessarily mean a *wholly accurate* real world, but rather a “rational and familiar” one in which magic has been included.

My familiarity with this terminology and timeline comes not only from being a lifelong fantasy reader, but also from the past half-decade in which I have been writing fantasy novels of my own. My knowledge of the dialogue around worldbuilding and diverse fantasy comes from a place of deep personal investment, not only as a fan but as

an author and as a queer person who lacked any substantial representation in the media I consumed. My own writing in many aspects stemmed from my frustration with what I was reading, which came to resemble the same story and setting over and over again, and I believe in turning a critical eye to my own works as well as to those of others.

Therefore, this thesis will be structured as follows: I will open with a discussion of Tolkien's seminal work *The Lord of the Rings* and his world of Middle-Earth, as well as the impact it has had on the genre of fantasy. Following that, I will turn to Ursula K. Le Guin, another writer accepted as having a place among the 'classic' fantasy writers, but one whose experience as a woman and whose interests in anthropology and the importance of language led to a very different legacy and type of hero. From there I will examine Brandon Sanderson and N.K. Jemisin, who are two modern fantasy writers working to challenge ideas of what or who a hero should be in a fantasy story with their most recent series. Finally, I will turn to a small example of my own work, examining the ways in which I do or do not live up to my own standards, and who in a story I allow to be a hero.

Chapter One: J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth and the Origins of Modern Fantasy

*“Dear Sir,” I said— “Although now long estranged,
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right
(used or misused). That right has not decayed:
we make still by the law in which we're made.”*

-J.R.R. Tolkien, On Fairy Stories

As I mentioned in my introduction, it is hard to overstate J.R.R. Tolkien's influence on the modern fantasy genre. A veteran of World War I and Professor of Anglo-Saxon and English Literature at Oxford College, Tolkien's collected writings—referred to by him as his *legendarium*—on the world of Middle-Earth formed the basis for the way many modern fantasy writers see both worldbuilding and fantasy writing in general. In

many ways, Tolkien is the epitome of what is now “classic” fantasy, having laid down the general groundwork for decades of writing that came after him.

Tolkien was also very aware of the process of worldbuilding, which he referred to as *sub-creation*. The epigraph for this chapter comes from *On Fairy Stories*, an essay of his on the topic of fantasy and its worth, and is itself a (somewhat humorous, as shown by the fact that he switches from the prose essay to verse) response to a letter that wished to know why he spent his energy and time on creating fantastic worlds rather than on more ‘literary’ writing. The prevailing line of thought at the time, as it remains in many places today, was that fantasy stories and fairy tales were synonymous, intended as moral tales for children and very little more. In contrast, and as the poem shows, Tolkien not only saw fantasy as valuable but assigned a quasi-religious significance to it.

A devout Catholic, Tolkien lays out his belief in the creation of worlds as something that pays tribute to God, rather than something that is hubristic or presumptuous. His poem, in its references to the “rags of lordship” humanity owns and the sense of humans as ‘fallen,’ seems to allude to the idea of the garden of Eden, which is part of the Christian genesis story. In the Eden story, humanity was created in the image of God and was responsible for, among other things, naming all of the animals in the garden. In this way, the role of the first humans in the garden mirrors that of a writer as creator: assigning words to the things around them, making sense of a world that must have at the time seemed fantastic and strange. Of course, the story of Eden ends in humanity being cast out; thus, the lordship is in rags, the grace (another term with religious connotations)

is lost. However, the base nature of humanity as a reflection of the original Creator has not changed, and in creating these smaller worlds the writer engages in imitation-as-homage, being a *sub*-Creator under the larger Creator.

Of course, not every author holds this sense of religious purpose in the creation of their worlds. However, the extreme depth of Tolkien's Middle-Earth remains in many ways the ideal of worldbuilding for modern writers, and the key to understanding Tolkien's dedication to his worldbuilding is his view of it being linked to an act of religious devotion. In a discussion of the medieval roots of Tolkien's sub-creation, scholar Alfred Siewers notes that "Tolkien's confidence in recovering an underlying philological and religious order from the material [of Celtic myth and lore] enabled him to feel comfortable about reassembling in narrative the shiny pieces that had long fascinated him." (*Siewers, Tolkien's Cosmic-Christian Ecology*). Tolkien's love of Celtic mythology, Siewers argues, was supported and supplemented by long medieval traditions of re-writing Celtic mythology to fit with a Christian cosmological order, presenting a pre-existing bridge between Tolkien's fairy-stories and the faith that was so important to him that allowed him to bridge the two and create a cosmology with said philological and religious order to structure his *legendarium* around.

Moving on, though, Tolkien's setting of Middle-Earth is arguably more crucial in its specifics to the legacy of fantasy writing than Tolkien's outlook on his writing is. Many people who read *The Lord of the Rings* can do so without knowing the first thing about

Tolkien's beliefs. However, the world of Middle-Earth itself caught the imagination of generations of fantasy writers.

Tolkien's legacy is enduring, and his writing of Middle-Earth is phenomenal, and so the first part of this chapter will be dedicated to explaining some of the unique races that Tolkien peoples his world with and designates as heroes or villains of his story. However, I believe that while Tolkien should be respected for his contributions to the genre, *respect* does not preclude *criticism*, and the second part of the chapter will be devoted to the various flaws in Tolkien's worldbuilding of races, and the way he and his legacy have perpetuated deeply problematic ideas about people, fantasy, and who belongs as the hero of a story.

I. Middle-Earth: Fantastic Races for a Fantastic World

Perhaps the most enduring mark Tolkien has left on the fantasy genre are the fantastic races with which he peopled Middle-Earth. Rather than just including humans, his setting involves elves, dwarves, hobbits, and orcs as well as, in supplemental material, the angel-like Maiar. Humans are still prominent—in fact, *The Lord of the Rings* ends with the “age of man” impending—but in fantasy, the age of the elves, dwarves, and others still remains vibrantly alive.

Before Tolkien's writing, the terms of *elf* and *fairy*—as well as many similar terms—were used nebulously to refer to mythological beings who were not precisely gods, or

were not seen as gods, but were considered more than human. The Oxford English Dictionary's entry on 'elf'³ reflects this view: 'elf' is "the name of a class of supernatural beings, in early Teutonic belief supposed to possess formidable magical powers, exercised variously for the benefit or the injury of mankind."; the entry continues that they are "believed to be of dwarfish form, to produce diseases of various kinds, to act as incubi and succubi, to cause nightmares, and to steal children, substituting changelings in their place. The Teutonic belief in elves is probably the main source of the mediæval superstition respecting fairies, which, however, includes elements not of Teutonic origin; in general the Romanic word denotes a being of less terrible and more playful character than the 'elf' as originally conceived." (*OED*, "elf.") In this definition we see a lot of the pre-Tolkien conception of the *elf*—they are 'of dwarfish stature,' they cause diseases to fall upon mankind and act as seductive demons, and they steal children.

This is a far cry from the elves of Middle-Earth, who are called the "fairest folk" by Frodo and are described as "wise people" by Pippin (who, admittedly, is not the most reliable source). When the narration refers to them, it is first to their song on the wind, but then they come into view: "Before long the Elves came down the lane towards the valley. They passed slowly, and the hobbits could see the starlight glimmering on their hair and in their eyes. They bore no lights, yet as they walked a shimmer, like the light of the moon above the rim of the hills before it rises, seemed to fall about their feet. They were now silent, and as the last Elf passed he turned and looked towards the hobbits and laughed." (*The Fellowship of the Ring, Three Is Company*). All of this is the first on-page

³ Which has not been updated since 1891

description of the elves of Tolkien, although they are referred to earlier as teachers for the Men and Hobbits, informing them of some of the arts and languages of the area—although they have their own languages, Quenya and Sindarin, which diverged from a common tongue.

Tolkien's elves (not noticeably shorter than humans, beautiful and ancient, keepers of knowledge and without much of the mischief often attributed to fairies, which instead was placed more on hobbits—more on that later) are a different creature altogether from the traditional definition, and yet it is elves in the mold of Tolkien that have persisted in the genre. Popular fantasy game *Dungeons and Dragons*, which does its best to codify popular high fantasy tropes and races in order to facilitate games, offers a description of elves that clearly echoes Tolkien more than tradition: “Elves are a magical people of otherworldly grace, living in the world but not entirely part of it. They live in places of ethereal beauty, in the midst of ancient forests or in silvery spires glittering with faerie light, where soft music drifts through the air and gentle fragrances waft on the breeze. Elves love nature and magic, art and artistry, music and poetry, and the good things of the world.” (*Fifth Edition Player's Handbook, Elves*).⁴

Of course, Tolkien did not create this concept of the elf out of nowhere. Part of the longevity of the archetype is because he did draw on histories of otherworldly or inhuman

⁴ Elves following this archetype can also be found in Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle*, Raymond Feist's *Riftwar*, much of Mercedes Lackey's work, and John Ringo's *Council Wars*. Many other fantasy races are elves in all but name, possessing greater lifespans and magical power than humans, often having an elitist viewpoint, and being seen as gorgeous and superior.

beings—which were also known under the name *elves* in common parlance. In *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien notes this collation of myth and legend under the same names: “English words such as elf have long been influenced by French (from which fay and faërie, fairy are derived); but in later times, through their use in translation, fairy and elf have acquired much of the atmosphere of German, Scandinavian, and Celtic tales, and many characteristics of the huldu-fólk, the daoine-sithe, and the tylwyth-teg.” (*On Fairy-Stories*). Out of this mass of meaning given to the term *elves*, he pulls on some very noticeable histories, one of which is that of the Irish *Tuatha de Danaan*. Much like Tolkien’s elves, the Tuatha de Danaan came from beyond the sea initially, having a migratory nature, and were present before humans on Ireland or Middle-Earth. They were longer-lived and more powerful than humans, with the members of the Tuatha de Danaan being associated with various forces of life and nature (which makes sense, as the Tuatha de Danaan are often considered an early Irish pantheon which underwent editing after being transcribed by Catholic monks). They were *fairest folk*, with imperfections—such as one of their kings, Nuadha, losing an arm in battle—being seen as a sign of unfitness to rule. Like the elves, once humans came to prominence, they ended up retreating to their own world, located alternately under the earth in *sidhe*-mounds, or across the ocean.⁵

⁵ For more on the Tuatha de Danaan, the book *Ireland’s Immortals* by Mark Williams has an in-depth history of the development of the pantheon and its lore, as well as its transformation from a pantheon to the *aes sidhe* of later Irish legend and the saints of modern Catholicism.

Another inspiration that can clearly be seen is the Norse *alfar*, who lived in their own world—*Alfheim*, called the “land of light-elves.” Alfheim is relatively obscure of the Norse realms, as it is rarely mentioned in the original texts, but it is associated with light and brightness in much the same way Lothlorien is. In the prose edda *Gylfaginning*, Alfheim is described thus: “That which is called *Álfheim* is one, where dwell the peoples called *ljósálfar* [Light Elves]; but the *dökkálfar* [Dark Elves] dwell down in the earth, and they are unlike in appearance, but by far more unlike in nature. The Light-elves are fairer to look upon than the sun, but the Dark-elves are blacker than pitch.” (*Gylfaginning*).

This is echoed by the idea of the elves in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth as the *fairest folk*, while the dark elves seem to echo more the dwarves or orcs. Additionally, Alfheim is the domain of the god Freyr, whose name in Old Norse literally translates to “Lord.” The same text refers to Freyr and his domain: “Freyr is the most renowned of the *Æsir*; he rules over the rain and the shining of the sun, and therewithal the fruit of the earth.” (*Gylfaginning*).

In the text of Tolkien’s work, Legolas describes Lothlorien as “the fairest of all the dwellings of my people. There are no trees like the trees of that land. For in the autumn their leaves fall not, but turn to gold. Not till the spring comes and the new green opens do they fall, and then the boughs are laden with yellow flowers.” (*The Fellowship of the Ring, Lothlorien*). This echoes the idea of Freyr as a god of sunlight and ‘the fruit of the earth,’ controlling when and how the seasons change. Finally, much as a Lord rules over Alfheim, Lothlorien is ruled by a Lady who possesses great power, and whose power sustains the utopic paradise of the realm; in the case of Lothlorien, this person is Galadriel, who possesses one of the Rings of elvenkind and thus holds extreme power over her domain.

Finally, one reason for the perfection of Tolkien's elves—as well as their inherent melancholy, which appears even in their earliest depictions in his writing—is linked, much like Tolkien's worldbuilding, to his Catholicism. He is quoted as having written of the elves that “they are made by man in his own image and likeness; but freed from those limitations which he feels most to press upon him. They are immortal, and their will is directly effective for the achievement of imagination and desire.” (*Tolkien: A Biography*.) In this sense they are humanity before the fall of Eden and the ‘estrangement’ that he writes of in the poem that opens this chapter. They do not die, instead returning to the Undying Lands beyond the ocean when their life ends, and they are more graceful, magical, and long-lived than the other races of Middle-Earth. Half-elves, though rare, can choose whether or not to live a human life or an elven one, giving them a ludicrous amount of choice over their own fate. However, the melancholy comes from the fact that much as Eden is unattainable for modern humanity, the elves' time is ending. “Elves, who seldom walked in the Shire, could now be seen passing westward through the woods in the evening, passing and not returning; but they were leaving Middle-earth and were no longer concerned with its troubles.” (*The Fellowship of the Ring, The Shadow of the Past*.) This is one of the first mentions of the elves in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it brings with it the sense of the ending of an age, foreshadowing that whatever the ending to the series will be, it will be bittersweet for the elves in particular. This is true—the *Lord of the Rings* ends with the departure of the characters who have directly been touched by the Ring and the elves from Middle-Earth, leaving only faint hints of their glory behind: Arwen remains, but she has become mortal and will die; Sam plants a tree in the Shire

that will retain the colors and beauty of the trees of Lothlorien, but as Galadriel has left it, Lothlorien itself will fade. Much like Eden, the elves are beautiful because they are unobtainable; in order for the Age of Man to begin on Middle-Earth, they must leave completely.

Few subsequent stories about elves delve this deeply into the lore that Tolkien drew from, particularly the connection between elves and the un-Fallen man, but the themes remain potent throughout modern fantasy: the ending of an age of magic and elves, the beauty and ephemeral nature of beings who, being ageless, should be more permanent than anything else; and, perhaps most frustratingly, the superiority of elves to humans.

Similarly, Tolkien's dwarves draw on many mythological roots, but he formed a codified fantasy notion of a *dwarf* that has persisted since. To return to the Oxford English Dictionary to gain a sense of the pre-Tolkien sense of dwarves, we see a similar entry to that of elves: "One of a supposed race of diminutive beings, who figure in Teutonic and esp. Scandinavian mythology and folk-lore; often identified with the elves, and supposed to be endowed with special skill in working metals, etc." (*OED*, '*dwarf*.') Here Tolkien does not stretch the traditional sense of dwarves as much as he does that of elves; while dwarves and elves are very different in the story themselves, dwarves hew more closely to their mutual roots. They are noted by Tolkien as being "closer to humans" than elves (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, Concerning Hobbits) and as being shorter than humans or elves, although 'touter and stockier' than hobbits.

When singing about their history in *The Hobbit*, they refer to the idea of dwarves as skilled metalworkers: “The dwarves of yore made mighty spells,/While hammers fell like ringing bells/In places deep, where dark things sleep,/In hollowhalls beneath the fells.” (*The Hobbit*, An Unexpected Party). We also see that they have some resemblances, much as the elves do, to the *Tuatha de Danaan*; while the elves took the migratory nature and super-human appearance, as well as the transience, the dwarves have taken the underground dwelling places and the small stature. The dwarves in *The Hobbit*, where Tolkien first introduced them, are all bearded, which contributed immensely to the stereotype; we get other hints as to dwarven nature in *The Lord of the Rings* both in the segment of the story in Moria, an old dwarven mine and kingdom, where the dwarves make the mistake of digging too deep and falling prey to horrors which still dwell in their holds. Another reference to dwarves being skilled craftspeople—and another hint as to the difference between elves and dwarves—comes in Gimli’s interaction with the Lady Galadriel, where she says of him, “It is said that the skill of the Dwarves is in their hands rather than in their tongues [...]yet that is not true of Gimli.” (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, Farewell to Lorien). This contrasts the idea of a fae creature as very well-spoken, something that the elves themselves echo.

It is this idea of the stout, hardy craftsman who is more talented with his (usually his, as female dwarves are rare in fiction) hands in stonework and metalwork, lives under the ground and is devoted to gold and treasure, and who does not necessarily get along with the ethereal, verbose elves that has persisted in fantasy; to use the example of *Dungeons and Dragons* yet again, they describe the common values of dwarves as “kingdoms rich

in ancient grandeur, halls carved into the roots of mountains, the echoing of picks and hammers in deep mines and blazing forges, a commitment to clan and tradition, and a burning hatred of goblins and orcs” and add that dwarves are “bold and hardy,[...] skilled warriors, miners, and workers of stone and metal. Though they stand well under 5 feet tall, dwarves are so broad and compact that they can weigh as much as a human standing nearly two feet taller. Their courage and endurance are also easily a match for any of the larger folk.” (*Fifth Edition Player’s Handbook, Dwarves*).

Finally, there are two remaining races that Tolkien, rather than adapting from something already-extant, created wholecloth that remain fantastic staples in one form or another: Hobbits and Orcs. Hobbits are Tolkien’s everymen, the protagonists of both of his novels. He’s clearly aware of the fact that a ‘hobbit’ isn’t something his readers would have heard of, and so prefaces *The Hobbit* with this description in the opening narration:

I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy of the Big People, as they call us. They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded Dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off. They are inclined to be fat in the stomach; they dress in bright colours (chiefly green and yellow); wear no shoes, because their feet grow natural leathery soles and thick warm brown hair like the stuff on their heads (which is curly); have long clever brown fingers, good-natured faces, and laugh deep fruity

laughs (especially after dinner, which they have twice a day when they can get it).
Now you know enough to go on with. (*The Hobbit, An Unexpected Party*).

This gives us a clear view of the archetype that Tolkien is alluding to with the hobbits: they are small people, who avoid humans and have no real magic other than that which allows them to remain hidden; they enjoy the good things in life and bright colors, and have some sleight traits that mark them as inhuman (besides their stature, their feet). In this, we see a third splintering of the *fairy* archetype that Tolkien has separated out. The elves gained the view of faeries as magical, superhuman beings of great knowledge and other worlds; the dwarves received the height and the famed metalworking talents. Hobbits hearken to another faerie archetype, closer to that of the *brownie*: “*A benevolent spirit or goblin, of shaggy appearance, supposed to haunt old houses, esp. farmhouses, in Scotland, and sometimes to perform useful household work while the family were asleep.*” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, brownie). Here we see both the reclusive nature of the hobbits in regards to men—as brownies are traditionally unseen—and their general role in the story as small, benevolent, and generally good-natured. Hobbits are homebodies who don’t like leaving or adventures—keeping them firmly in the realm of small, domestic faeries and spirits. Their homes, in “hobbit-holes” under the ground, seem to echo a diminished version of the *sidhe*-mounds that the Tuatha de Danaan retreated into.

Tolkien’s most interesting choice, though, is to position these hobbits as the protagonists of both books, despite—especially in *The Lord of the Rings*—the presence of

far more traditionally-heroic people, mostly elves and men, who could have become the standard-bearers for the story. Aragorn, the lost heir to the throne of Gondor, a human man with the blood of elves, is *not* the protagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*. He never touches the Ring. Instead, it is the hobbit Frodo who takes the ring, with help from Sam, another hobbit who is a gardener besides. Hobbits are thus not only the house-faeries and small, quiet sprites of folktale lore, but also the everypeople of Tolkien's setting—he himself has been quoted as saying that “I am in fact a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like, and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats.” (J.R.R. Tolkien). As the simple everyday people in this land, Hobbits are both strange to the reader (for reasons such as their height, their houses in the ground, and the fact that they are introduced as undeniably *other*) and extremely familiar—they have relatable desires (comfort, simple but beautiful surroundings, good food in large quantities) and frames of mind. They also have the same petty feuds and superstitions against their neighbors that humans do, leading to the other point about Tolkien's protagonist-hobbits: not only are they the little people, the everymen of Middle-Earth, but they are also people who are seen as strange within their own communities. The heroes of Tolkien's work are “marginal beings” within their community; they come from “queer folk” such as the Brandybucks, who are considered “unnatural” by their neighbors for their habits and interests that divert from the main interests of Hobbiton. (*Chance*, Tolkien and the Other). In this, Tolkien positions not only the hobbits but his heroes as *familiar strangers*—people who we could imagine in our communities, but towards the outside of them; people, but smaller and more easily

overlooked than we, the collective community of Men, are.

In contrast to the hobbits are Tolkien's other invention—the orcs. To be fair to Tolkien, the word *orc* existed before his usage of it, as the OED (again) explains; an orc is “A devouring monster; an ogre; spec. a member of an imaginary race of subhuman creatures, small and human-like in form but having ogreish features and warlike, malevolent characters. Popularized by the novels of J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973) and now used chiefly in fantasy novels and games.” The likely origins of the word are in the Italian *orco*, a term for a man-eating giant roughly equivalent to the English word *ogre*. However, the idea of the orc as unique from the ogre and the specific race of *orcs* is easily traceable to Tolkien, who introduced them as antagonists in Middle-Earth who work for Sauron and Saruman throughout *The Lord of the Rings*—and yet unlike the animal viciousness of Shelob the spider, the inhuman cunning and cruelty of Smaug, the driven-mad greed of Gollum, or the alien might and malice of the Balrog, are distinctly *people* with their own emotions, goals, and conversations. The other antagonistic creatures of the *Lord of the Rings* are singular or alien; we don't see them in conversation with their fellows (excepting Gollum's dialogue with himself), something reserved for the more human antagonists, Saruman and Wormtongue. The orcs, however, we do overhear the conversations of, getting a glimpse at their inner life.

In his letters, Tolkien described the orcs as “squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types.” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*). While there is a

lot to discuss in that description, most of which will happen below, it is the foundation of the way the orcs are described. The issue of whether or not they are cannibals is skirted around, although throughout the books various other creatures believe it of them; they work in the armies of the main antagonists, Sauron and Sarumon, and in the language of the elves, the word *uruk*—what they call elves—derives from the word *horror*. *Uruk* is also the word that the orcs use to describe themselves.

This linguistic similarity links to one of the possible origins of the orcs as put forward by Tolkien, who proposed several different origin stories for the race in his collected writings. The one put forward in the *Silmarillion* is usually believed to be the “most accurate” in the fan understanding of the Orcs: "But of those unhappy ones who were ensnared by Melkor little is known of a certainty. For who of the living has descended into the pits of Utumno, or has explored the darkness of the counsels of Melkor? Yet this is held true by the wise of Eressëa, that all those of the [elves] who came into the hands of Melkor [...] were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest foes." (*The Silmarillion*). In this interpretation, Melkor—the original Satan-analogue of Middle-Earth, convinced elves to follow him in the early days of Middle-Earth, and then proceeded to corrupt them, turning them into orcs.

This also follows Tolkien’s belief that evil cannot create of its own accord, and can only copy or subvert things that have already been created. Thus, the One Ring that the

plot centers around is a copy of the already-made elven rings; the creature Gollum is a twisted variant of a Hobbit. Trolls are mentioned, by Treebeard, to be “counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents.” (*The Two Towers*, Treebeard). The orcs, in this creation-story, follow this pattern, although even among Tolkien’s other proposed origins for orcs there is usually an element of them being made in parody of the men and elves that Illuvatar—the overarching god of Middle-Earth, a parallel to the Christian/Catholic God—made.

From Tolkien’s orcs come the modern idea of an evil/antagonistic race. However, unlike with several ‘evil’ races such as the Walkers of George R.R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* or the brain-hungry hordes of modern zombie fiction, the orcs do, clearly, have *personality*. They have interpersonal arguments and their own motivations. As Gimli notes, they have loyalty to their commanders and, possibly, friends: “Orcs will often pursue foes for many leagues into the plain, if they have a fallen captain to avenge.” (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, Lothlorien). They covet things and have arguments with each other; Sam exploits this to rescue Frodo, and during the rescue comes across the injured captain, Shagrat, having an argument with an underling: “An orc-voice rose in anger, and he knew it again at once, harsh, brutal, cold. It was Shagrat speaking, Captain of the Tower. ‘You won’t go again, you say? Curse you, Snaga, you little maggot! If you think I’m so damaged that it’s safe to flout me, you’re mistaken Come here, and I’ll squeeze your eyes out, like I did to Radbug just now. And when some new lads come, I’ll deal with you: I’ll send you to Shelob.’” (*The Return of the King*, The Tower of Cirith Ungol). We can tell a lot about the orcs from this; they have their own feuds, they threaten each

other (and fear Shelob, understandably). They are, in effect, very human...but not quite. Not enough for any character to express empathy with them, as Sam does with even the Haradrim, as I will mention later. They are *people*, but they aren't people enough to warrant their own language, or a chance of redemption or understanding from the narrative.

And this is where we move from the incredible worldbuilding that Tolkien implemented to the darker side of his legacy: the pervasive presence of sexism and racism in fantasy from the time of Tolkien until today.

II. Tolkien's Shadow

It would be easy to end this chapter after describing Tolkien's contributions to the genre, to chart out the books that have adapted and used his conception of fantasy races to add to their own worldbuilding, to discuss how well or poorly they emulated the man often considered the "Father of Fantasy." But I'm not going to do that, because Tolkien's contributions to the genre do not only include these races and heroes: he helped establish a system of *which* races got to be heroes, *which* people go on adventures, and that has been one of the most restrictive and damaging things to the fantasy genre as it exists.

Tolkien's world is a male world. Out of his central group of heroes, the Fellowship of the Ring, every member is male; the coalition to destroy the Ring and save Middle-Earth is symbolic as it represents the "free races," but in fact it is only representative of half of

their population. In fact, most of the scenes in the entirety of the Lord of the Rings involve and represent only the men of the story. We see no dwarven women—they are, in fact, never mentioned in the story. We hear of a few hobbit women (Rosie Cotton being the most-referenced), but none of them venture out of the Shire with Frodo and his company. Of the elves, we have Galadriel and Arwen, both peripheral characters to the story; and of human women, we have Eowyn, who is perhaps the most-developed female character within the Lord of the Rings, which is not saying very much at all. All of these women are in romantic relationships or defined in some way by them; none of them, with the exception of Eowyn, are particularly proactive. This is not to say that they don't have power—Galadriel is clearly one of the most powerful people on Middle-Earth, beautiful and terrifying. Arwen, in the end of the story, chooses to live the fate of a mortal woman rather than go with her father to the Undying Lands—but that choice is because of her love for Aragorn, making the choice more about him than it is about her. Even with this, none of the women get much central focus, and the romantic couples we see—Sam and Rosie, Aragorn and Arwen, and even Celeborn and Galadriel—never have internal conversations. We don't see how they speak to each other, any indication that they have their own conversations and lives together. In this, the main area where women are in Tolkien's book, we don't get a sense of their lives.

And this is honestly disappointing, because it isn't as though Tolkien can't write women, or—if this was the issue—write conversations that imply deep mutual care. The men in his story have many moving conversations about how they care about each other, in various veiled or straightforward ways; Frodo and Sam's journey is an incredible

example of mutual care being moving and narratively beautiful. Given that most of the women introduced within the story are in romantic relationships, Tolkien could have used that same skill he had to bring those relationships to life and to make them more than just peripheral details. But the most we ever see of the lives and relationships of these women are peripheral and at a distance.

But what about Eowyn? In my description so far, she has been an outlier. She gets her own life—we see her conversations with Aragorn, who she loves as a concept and thinks she loves as a person, and she has her own agency, being key to the defeat of the Witch-King of Angmar. Her writing also shows that Tolkien was aware of the difficulties of being a woman in a society as gendered as he made Middle-Earth's; we see this in her conversation with Aragorn, where he tells her not to follow them into battle:

And she answered: 'All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death.'

'What do you fear, lady?' he asked.

'A cage,' she said. 'To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire.' (*The Return of the King*)

Here Eowyn expresses the very real frustration and fear that women in this situation have: being told they are incompetent or given platitudes as to why they should not fight. She has the same spirit and desires as all of the men in the series: to protect their homes, to fight for honor and glory. And yet she is told not to, and disobeys, moving instead to follow people into the fight and finally aid in killing the Witch-King of Angmar, something she is only capable of doing because she is not a man. She has complex internal thoughts and struggles to find peace after the war.

If Tolkien could write Eowyn this well, then, why couldn't he have afforded the same attention to any other woman in the series? Reading the books for a first time as a child, Eowyn was a breath of fresh air—a woman who got to fight with the men, who got a moment of heroism. Reading the books for a second time, I realized that one breath of air isn't enough to live off of. You will still suffocate. What of Arwen, and Galadriel? What did they fear and hope for? What was Rosie Cotton doing while Saruman controlled the Shire? For that matter, why did we not see women in the Fellowship, or among the armies?

In a 1963 unsent letter, Tolkien writes about Orc women in a way that shows insight into why so few women appear among the groups he writes about: "'There must have been orc-women. But in stories that seldom if ever see the Orcs except as soldiers of armies in the service of the evil lords we naturally would not learn much about their lives. Not much was known.'" (*Sex and the Single Orc, OneRing.net*) This is telling; to Tolkien, it is "natural" that we do not see women among the warriors of the armies. This may

seem to make sense in context of the time, as women were largely not allowed to serve in the military. But then, in his writing of Eowyn, Tolkien clearly shows that he knows that this could be extremely troubling and difficult for women.

Why, then, default to women not being allowed in the armies? Sure, it allowed the character arc of Eowyn to be compelling, but it is possible to write a good female character without her having to struggle against a system stacked against her because of her gender. The clearest answer to why Tolkien made the decision that Middle-Earth emulated the gender biases of our world is that, simply, he saw it as “natural.” In a world of magic, elves, and orcs, women being equal in social and military status to men is simply too unnatural to occur to him. He could take the step to critique that system with Eowyn’s character arc, if only slightly—Eowyn never really argues that there is a larger, biased system, just that the insistence that she stay in Rohan is based on her role as a woman—but he could not just *not institute* that system in his fantastic world in the first place. His unconscious bias seeps through into the world, and through it allows that standard to be perpetuated in other fantasy works. It allows people to think of the archetypal fantasy story as one that excludes women from central roles in the cast and even from equal roles in the setting. Tolkien certainly didn’t invent that idea—our own, patriarchal society did enough of a job of doing that. But he perpetuated it.

Speaking of his unconscious biases, we can also critique his worldbuilding and choice of heroes on the basis of race. The most apparent starting point here is where we left our list of races that he created: with the orcs.

To say the orcs are coded as a racial caricature is untrue, because *coding* implies that anything about it was subtle. As noted in his earlier quotation, orcs have “wide mouths and slant eyes,” sharing features with Asian people in our world; he moves beyond subtlety when he continues to call them “degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types.” This is explicit racial coding, and it is made worse by several other factors: the fact that they were created by Melkor, Middle-Earth’s equivalent of the devil, in parody of the “true” races; the fact that they are portrayed as cannibalistic, inherently vicious creatures; the fact that there are no good orcs shown once in the setting; and the fact that they are devoid of any larger culture, lacking even their own language and instead speaking in a pidgin of other tongues—strange, for a race created by a man who more than anything paid attention to the languages of his races. The elves have two separate languages, and the orcs never developed one?

Author N.K. Jemisin, in a blog post inspired by a question as to why she didn’t use typical fantasy races such as elves and orcs, further explained the inherent problems of this view of orcs, from the perspective of an African American woman:

Bottom line: in nearly every iteration of orcs that occurs in fantasy, orcs are meant to be a warped mirror of humanity. They’ve got all the stuff that’s in humans — emotions, a degree of intellect, sometimes free will — but it’s all wrong. They’re corrupted by evil magic or environmental degradation or their own hubris. In some iterations orcs are sexually perverse, so we’ve got bad genetics to consider too. They are human bodies + bad magic – the essence of

humanity, for whatever value that essence might hold: a soul, a mind, aestheticism, whatever. And therefore, in most fantasy settings in which I've seen orcs appear, they are fit only for one thing: to be mowed down, usually on sight and sans negotiation, by Our Heroes. Orcs are human beings who can be slaughtered without conscience or apology.

Think about that. Creatures that look like people, but aren't really. Kinda-sorta-people, who aren't worthy of even the most basic moral considerations, like the right to exist. Only way to deal with them is to control them utterly a la slavery, or wipe them all out.

Huh. Sounds familiar.

So maybe now you can understand why I'm not very interested in writing about orcs. (*Jemisin, The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing*).

Her point, made mostly through unspoken allusion, is still painfully clear: the concept of writing something that is almost human but is somehow lesser, something that isn't considered to be human by the main characters and exists to be killed *en masse*, is alienating to readers from races which have, in our own world, been seen as lesser and been the target of active, pervasive racism. More than just *alienating*—it is painful to experience this fantasy trope again and again, with all of its implicit baggage for nonwhite people who have dealt with centuries of being seen as *lesser* or *not quite human* by white culture.

It doesn't help that the men of Middle-Earth who are noted to work with Sauron, the Haradrim and the Easterlings, are coded as non-white. The Haradrim, a term that refers to men from lands south of Gondor, are noted as never having been on good terms with the men of Gondor, even when there was mutual trade; "Tis said that there were dealings of old between Gondor and the kingdoms of the Harad in the Far South; though there was never friendship." (*The Two Towers*). In the present day, it is noted that "the Enemy has been among them, and they are gone over to Him, or back to Him—they were ever ready to His will -as have so many also in the East." (*The Two Towers*). In this segment, which features a battle against the Haradrim, Sam creeps closer to the fight to see if he can see any of the action, and sees a dead Harad man:

He came to rest in the fern a few feet away, face downward, green arrow-feathers sticking from his neck below a golden collar. His scarlet robes were tattered, his corslet of overlapping brazen plates was rent and hewn, his black plaits of hair braided with gold were drenched with blood. His brown hand still clutched the hilt of a broken sword. (*the Two Towers*).

From this, it is clear that at the very least, this member of the Haradrim is Black-coded; he has brown skin and plaited hair. While Sam feels empathy for this dead man, wondering where he came from and if he was truly evil, it remains true that he is of the race noted as having gone over to Sauron—or, in fact, having *always been Sauron's allies*. Added to this list are the Easterlings, the general term for men who live in the eastern region of Middle-Earth; they are described as *swarthy* and as being "short and broad ... strong ... their skins were swart or sallow, and their hair was as dark as their

eyes.” (*The Silmarillion*). While one group of Easterlings banded together with the elven Sons of Feanor and were subsequently destroyed, others were noted as having been in league with Morgoth—Sauron’s predecessor and the true Satan-analogue of Middle-Earth—before even the coming of the elves. During the series proper, while Aragorn notes that in his journeys he had met many good and evil Easterlings, they are generally seen as Sauron’s human allies. Which brings us to the question: why are none of the races that support Sauron white?

Let’s put a pin in that question and look at the races that oppose Sauron: the elves, dwarves, hobbits, and men of Gondor and Rohan. The elves, of course, are the “fairest folk.” The most beautiful elven women—Galadriel and Arwen, although Arwen is technically half-elven—are noted specifically as being *fair*. Galadriel’s name literally means “maiden crowned with a radiant garland” in Tolkien’s languages, referring to her golden hair, and when Frodo sees her walking at night, she is described as “tall and white and fair” (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Mirror of Galadriel*). Arwen likewise is described as “as a white tree” in appearance, so while a direct depiction of her skin tone is not present or needed, all indications point to her being fair-skinned. (*The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen*). In fact, none of Tolkien’s elves are coded as anything but white. The elves who track themselves back to the founding of the entire race are called the *Vanyar*, with *Vanya* literally meaning *fair* or *pale*. While the other branches of the elven race are less explicit about this, there is no elf in Tolkien’s legendarium who is noted to have anything but a fair complexion, despite the “sallow-skinned” orcs being related to them.

And this is worrisome in another aspect: the elves are, as mentioned earlier, Tolkien's conception of man before the Fall, of man in Eden. If man in Eden (the elves) is pale-skinned, and it is only among deliberate perversions of those people (the orcs) or lesser, secondary and Fallen creatures (men) that darker skin tones emerge, the entirety of Tolkien's cosmology becomes alarming in terms of its racial coding.

Looking at the other "good" races of Middle-Earth, we have the dwarves. Unlike the elves, the dwarves are not explicitly described as pale or fair, but they do draw on mythology from explicitly northern and white nations. The men of Gondor and Rohan are both fair in appearance as well. The men of Gondor descended from the Numenorans (Numenor being Middle-Earth's allusion to Atlantis), who were described as having fair hair and blue eyes for the majority, with a minority of people having darker hair and grey eyes. Skin color is not mentioned, but it would be rare for people of that coloration—especially the former—to have dark skin. (*Unfinished Tales*, Aldarion and Erendis). Likewise, the Rohirrim—the men of Rohan—are descendants of Numenor, and much of their culture (the focus on horses, Eowyn's reference to herself as a shield-maiden) draw on Anglo-Saxon tradition. The clearest sign of this is the fact that Tolkien's names for the Rohirrim and their particular speech patterns and poetic moments echo the Mercian dialect of Old English (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Return of the King*, Appendix F).

Alone of the good races, the hobbits are described as having "long clever brown fingers" and curly hair (*The Hobbit*), lending to a possible interpretation of them as non-

white. However, in terms of their culture, they are not only white but very English-coded; as Tolkien noted, Hobbits are based largely on his idea of the everyman, down to details like wearing waistcoats and enjoying extra meals (reminiscent of the stereotypical English love of having a semi-formalized extra meal in an afternoon tea). So as for the positively-portrayed races, we have...none who are, in the text, presented as people of color. This is a sharp contrast to the racially-coded Easterlings, Haradrim, and orcs we see on the side of Sauron.

So where do we go from here? Tolkien's portrayal of the good and evil races in his world is, regardless of his intention, racist. So? What effects does one racist portrayal of a worldview have on a genre?

If the portrayal is Tolkien's, the answer is *a lot*. As shown earlier in this chapter, Tolkien's portrayal of magical races had immense influence on the genre. Elves, dwarves, and the like have become fantasy staples, something that recur again and again in games, novels, and movies based on the genre. And all of this work is based on heavy racial coding, in which the evil races are people of color and the good races are white—something which very few following authors thought to correct in their portrayal of the races. It's easy. It plays on inherent biases in Western society, which mean that it is easy to read a character who is *other* as *evil*. But it also provides the context for the discussions I raised in the introduction. This is the reason writers of color and women have been pushing against the traditional fantasy paradigm: it's Tolkien's paradigm, and

as such is either apathetic to or hostile to imaginings of the world where women and people of color are seen to have full personhood.

I do not mean to downplay all of Tolkien's accomplishments. His books remain stupendous and compelling works of both storytelling and worldbuilding, and neither am I saying that they cannot be enjoyed. In fact, when it comes to the issue of heroes, he made one very interesting and important choice: rather than focusing (as the movie adaptation of his work did, and as many fans and subsequent authors have) on the character of Aragorn, the returned heir to the throne, the bold prince and wise leader as the hero, Tolkien's hero is instead a hobbit, an everyman. He is not the character who has prophecies written about him: he is an ordinary man who does an extraordinary thing, with the help of another ordinary man. This is an incredibly important subversion of a heroic tale, and one that is treated realistically: Frodo does not get a happy ending. He suffers from the trauma of what he has done and cannot settle down after the end of his journey. "There is no real going back," He says to Gandalf near the end of the story. "Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?" (*The Return of the King*). Tolkien reflects the trauma of war through this, the lack of comfortable resolution for Frodo. In the end, he passes from the world with the last of the High Elves, hoping to finally find peace in the Undying Lands and never return to Middle-Earth. In this, I commend Tolkien's writing, and to me and many others, the bond of Frodo and Sam and the very human story of a man who willingly takes a burden he

cannot carry, because someone has to, and who suffers more than he should, and is never healed.

What I am also saying, though, is that not all of Tolkien's characters could have had the chance to carry the Ring as Frodo did. None of his women were present at the Council of Elrond to say that they would carry the Ring to Mordor. No characters of color were present there to offer their hand. Frodo is an everyman, but he is a white *everyman*. Could a woman have done what Frodo did? Could a person of color? Doubtless they could have, but due to the way Tolkien constructed the world, they never had the chance. Any claims that fantasy has not always involved elements of racial and gender issues is blatantly false. An absence of characters of color or prominent women among the main heroes is not an absence of those issues; a story that only frontlines men is about gender, and a story where all of the good characters are white is about race. All that the absence, sidelining, or stereotyping of these other characters does is create a world which uncritically reproduces the divisions and inequalities of our own.

Chapter Two: Ursula K. Le Guin, Detailed Culture, and Rethinking Your Own Worlds

Only in silence the word,

Only in dark the light,

Only in dying life:

Bright the hawk's flight

On the empty sky.

-The Creation of Ea, Ursula K. Le Guin

In contrast to Tolkien, I offer another exemplary writer of science fiction and fantasy; Ursula K. Le Guin. Graduate of Columbia and Radcliffe College, Le Guin is an American novelist with a long-standing career and over twenty novels, as well as many acclaimed short stories. Upon her death in 2018, she was credited as having “presided over American science fiction for half a century,” by critic John Clute (*Ursula Le Guin Obituary*). While Le Guin was massively influential across the field of speculative fiction (the larger genre encompassing both fantasy and science fiction, as well as utopian fiction and other forms of literature which explore the possibility of different worlds), for the purposes of this thesis I will be focusing on her fantasy novels, the *Earthsea Cycle*. Beginning in 1968 with *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the cycle as a whole encompasses five novels and a collection of short stories.

I chose Le Guin to contrast Tolkien as a foundational titan of speculative fiction for two reasons: one, because I feel her work, which was influenced by his and yet retains a very different sensibility and ethos, provides a good contrast to his creation of Middle-

Earth, and two, because they are the two authors I credit with my introduction to classic fantasy as a genre. At the ripe old age of seven, I read both *The Lord of the Rings* and the first three books of *The Earthsea Cycle* and had the general understanding of the subject matter one would expect from a child. I fell in love instantly. Returning to the books as an adult, I find the differences between the two worlds fascinating.

In contrast to Tolkien's broad interest in mythology and language, Le Guin's writing shows a distinct and definite interest in the individual people of her world, particularly those who are seen—either in their own world or ours—as *other*. She has spoken openly about the fact that her characters in *Earthsea* in particular but in other works as well are not white, breaking the standard assumptions for fantasy characters. “My color scheme was conscious and deliberate from the start. I didn't see why everybody in science fiction had to be a honky named Bob or Joe or Bill. I didn't see why everybody in heroic fantasy had to be white (and why all the leading women had “violet eyes”). It didn't even make sense. Whites are a minority on Earth now—why wouldn't they still be either a minority, or just swallowed up in the larger colored gene pool, in the future?” (*Le Guin, A Whitewashed Earthsea*).

So here we see a different kind of awareness about worldbuilding than that Tolkien displayed. Le Guin has less of a hard-and-fast cosmology than Tolkien—we have no tomes that detail a precise, year-by-year history of Earthsea, and what we know of the creation of the world is merely that Segoy, a great mage, spoke the islands into being, raising them up out of the water. The poem at the beginning of this chapter is the

beginning of the song detailing this, a song that recurs occasionally through the books and which *A Wizard of Earthsea* opens with the ceremonial retelling of. Other than that, we have no confirmation of a god, single or multiple, in Earthsea. But what Le Guin is interested in, deeply and wholly, is the *people* of Earthsea—what they look like, what they think about, and what a reader of the book sees in them. In an interview that talked about her choice to have people of color in the forefront of her books, she reported that “I have begun to hear from people who write me and say, “Your books were the first I ever found with a black protagonist. I wanted to read fantasy, I wanted to read science fiction, but I wasn’t ever in it.” These are people who are writing me as grown-ups but who read me as teens. I find it incredibly touching. “All right! It worked!” They noticed. A lot of people don’t.” (*Le Guin on Racism*, Monaghan). One explanation of Le Guin’s attention to people and community in her novels is that it was a central part of her upbringing: her parents were anthropologists.

A moment should be taken here to expand upon this, because referring to Le Guin’s parents as ‘anthropologists’ underplays the specific type of anthropological work they were engaged in, and what effect this could have had on the young Le Guin. Firstly, both Alfred and Theodora Kroeber were cultural anthropologists engaged in discussion of the Native tribes of California. Most famously, the couple were involved in the story of Ishi, the last member of the Yahi tribe in California. Alfred Kroeber was one of the anthropologists who befriended the man and gave him the name by which he was known, due to a cultural prohibition among the Yahi against saying one’s own name until introduced by another person. After Ishi’s death by tuberculosis, Theodora Kroeber—

who married Alfred after Ishi's death—wrote a biography of him, *Ishi in Two Worlds*, documenting his life both before and after his 'entry' into Western civilization. While Le Guin was born over a decade after Ishi's death, her mother's book on him would not be published until 1961. It is not a large stretch to assume that her parents' engagement with Ishi and with his story affected Le Guin's conception of the other. Kroeber and his companions made a considerable effort, by all accounts, to treat Ishi with compassion and humanity despite the fact that he was radically different from every person they had known; it is their interactions with him and their dedication to and interest in his culture that provides us with much of the information we have about the Yahi⁶. Dedication to and interest in *people*—their cultures, their civilizations, and their lives—is something Le Guin certainly inherited.

The possible roots of Le Guin's interest in the lives of ordinary people are far from an original observation on my part: in fact, it dates back to some of the earliest writing on Le Guin, specifically the 1969 analysis Eleanor Cameron offered on Le Guin's writing in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, where she notes that "To me, it is as if Ursula Le Guin has herself lived on the Archipelago, minutely observing and noting down the habits and idiosyncracies of the culture from island to island, variations in dress and food and ways of living" (*Cameron, High Fantasy: A Wizard of Earthsea*). In other words, Le Guin replicates the work of an anthropologist in *her own world*, taking the attention to detail that an anthropologist brings to bear on her field of study to her worldbuilding. Far from

⁶ For more information on this, Theodora Kroeber's *Ishi in Two Worlds* is the most obvious source, and has been adapted into both film and play formats.

Tolkien's distant linguistic and mythological roots, Le Guin's writing has been recognized for its attention to the very real lives of ordinary people across the Archipelago.

This level of attention to detail applies to another constant characteristic of Le Guin's writing: her word choice itself. Le Guin is a strong advocate for the importance of choosing your language carefully and deliberately in order to get the intended response from readers. When she violates common writing wisdom, she does it carefully and knowingly, as she details in a discussion on the use of singular *they*, in her book *Steering the Craft*:

[Use of the singular they]is wrong, say the grammar bullies, because *each one, each person* is a singular noun and *their* is a plural pronoun. But Shakespeare used *their* with words such as *everybody, anybody, a person*, and so do we all when we're talking. [...] The grammarians started telling us it was incorrect along in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. That was when they also declared that the pronoun *he* includes both sexes, as in "If a person needs an abortion, he should be required to tell his parents." My use of *their* is socially motivated and, if you like, politically correct: a deliberate response to the socially and politically significant banning of our genderless pronoun by language legislators enforcing the notion that the male sex is the only one that counts. I consistently break a rule I consider to be not only fake but pernicious. I know what I'm doing and why." (*Steering the Craft*).

As this shows, Le Guin consistently puts a vast amount of thought into both her choice of worldbuilding elements and her choice of actual words, *and* into their real-world repercussions and effects. It is an outlook that focuses intensely on what words can do and influence in our own daily lives—unsurprising from an author whose creation story for Earthsea involves a mage literally *naming* the islands of the world into existence. The importance in Le Guin's notes on her own writing, as well as the creation mythos that she has formed for Earthsea, is on *language*—on the words used to talk about something, and the importance of choosing them correctly. Perhaps it is less surprising, then, that Le Guin seems more conscious of the real-world effects of the language she uses to talk about fantasy.

I. The Earthsea Cycle, the *Tombs of Atuan*, and Unusual Heroes

Earthsea as a setting is very different from the unified landmass of Middle-Earth. It is a collection of islands in a large archipelago, surrounded by water on all sides. As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of the people in Earthsea have dark skin; Le Guin does not explicitly state a real-world correlation for the races of Earthsea, and deliberately leaves descriptions of skin tone until a ways into the narrative, giving the reader time to grow used to Ged as a character before learning anything about the color of his skin. When Le Guin does state skin tone, it is matter-of-fact in her narrative: "He had the accent of the East Reach, and was very dark of skin, not red-brown like Ged and Jasper and most folk of the Archipelago, but black-brown." (*A Wizard of Earthsea*). In

fact, it is more singled out as strange when someone in the setting of Earthsea is white-skinned, as the inhabitants of the Kargad Lands are.

It is in the Kargad Lands in particular that we see an interesting inversion of the ideas of race, good, and evil that Tolkien perpetuated in his novels. When the Kargs are described in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, it is less than flattering: "...they are a savage people, white-skinned, yellow-haired, and fierce, liking the sight of blood and the smell of burning towns." (*A Wizard of Earthsea*.) Without the physical description, one could be forgiven for assuming that this was a description of Tolkien's orcs or one of the countless similar evil races that have existed throughout fiction. It is the description of the Kargs as white-skinned and yellow-haired—or, as Tolkien would have put it, *fair*—that draws interest. It is rare, in narrative in general and in fantasy in particular, for the white-skinned race to be perceived as *savage* by the majority of society, and this inversion invites consideration: it is easy to be outraged by this perception of the only white people within Earthsea's universe, but it is no more unfair than Tolkien's depiction of the Haradrim and Easterlings, to say nothing of the orcs. Moreover, looking at the history of the Western world, it is not *inaccurate* to say that blood and pillaging have often been the sign of white expansion into new lands.

It would be easy to have left the Kargs there, as peripheral to the main story and an analogue to the treatment of other races in fantasy such as Tolkien's. However, in the subsequent books of the cycle, Le Guin takes another step that Tolkien did not: she moves the point of view to the group that she had *othered* in the narrative. In doing this,

she also takes a second step Tolkien never did: she makes the focal character of the story a woman.

The Tombs of Atuan is set in the Kargish Empire, and its central character—Arha or Tenar, depending on what part of the book you are reading—is a young high priestess whose entire identity is tied up in her role. The Kargish Empire is very different from the areas of Earthsea introduced in *A Wizard of Earthsea*: they are largely illiterate, seeing reading as, like magic, a “black art,” and worship entities known as the Nameless Ones, who seem to be representations of the darker parts of nature. They have a more urban and militaristic culture than the rest of the islands, although in *Tombs of Atuan* most of the focus is on the relatively remote island of Atuan.

The society itself is patriarchal, but the temple is a female space. Men are not permitted into the labyrinth that Tenar oversees, and Tenar herself is seen as the inheritor to a long tradition of women: “At the death of the One Priestess of the Tombs of Atuan [...]the Priestesses and Wardens of the Place of the Tombs go forth across the desert, among the towns and villages of Atuan, seeking and asking. They seek the girl-child who is born on the night of the Priestess’s death. [...] If it reaches the age of five years unblemished, then it is known that the body of the child is indeed the new body of the Priestess who died.” (*The Tombs of Atuan*). The vast majority of men in the story are eunuchs, permitted to access the temple and its mysteries due to their perceived lack of manhood. But it is the male God-King who retains power over the space, as seen by the fact that he sends prisoners there for Tenar to kill:

“One of my mistress’ duties, as she knows, is the sacrifice of certain prisoners, criminals of noble birth, who by sacrilege or treason have sinned against our lord the Godking.”

“Or against the Nameless Ones,” said Arha.

“Truly. [...] There are prisoners in the Room of Chains, sent a month ago.”

This is clearly the duty that Arha finds most traumatic, fainting after being confronted with the men and having nightmares: “Each night, in the dark, she woke up screaming, “They aren’t dead yet! They are still dying!” (*The Tombs of Atuan*). It does not help that Kossil, the priestess who instructs her in this task, is both extremely cruel and the priestess who, rather than serving the Nameless Ones, is most open about serving the God-King and his wishes instead.

The story places Arha in an interesting position regarding Ged, the protagonist of the former book. He has journeyed to Atuan in search of one of the treasures in the labyrinth that Arha presides. He appears first as something dramatically out of place: a light in the labyrinth, where light is forbidden. “Not bright, but dazzling to the dark-accustomed eye, was the light that worked this wonder. It was a soft gleam, like marshlight, that [...] burned at the end of a staff of wood, smokeless, unconsuming. The staff was held by a human hand. Arha saw the face beside the light; the dark face: the face of a man.” (*The Tombs of Atuan*). While the light is a simple spell, clearly just existing so that Ged can make his way through the pitch-black labyrinth, it has a very

different effect on Arha—she is transfixed by it, held in place while he examines the graves of the men she ordered killed. It takes her a long moment to react, and when she does all she does is yell for him to leave—which causes the first moment of contact between the pair of them in the story: “She screamed all at once at the top of her voice. Great echoes shrilled and boomed across the cavern, seeming to blur the dark, startled face that turned towards her and, for one moment, across the shaken splendor of the cavern, saw her. Then the light was gone. All splendor gone. Blind dark, and silence. Now she could think again. She was released from the spell of the light.” (*The Tombs of Atuan*).

This scene—finding Ged in the labyrinth—sets up the central tension in the book. The power, in the scenario, is entirely in Arha’s hands. She knows the labyrinth, she knows what is or is not out of place. Later, she takes Ged prisoner, and whether or not he can eat or drink is up to her. She watches him through spyholes in the ceilings of the labyrinth, and she dominates the space between them, much as her voice dominates the cavern where they first meet. But he has something that she does not: light. It is in the light that he brings that the beautiful decorations of the labyrinth’s walls are visible for the first time, even to Arha. This reflects their dynamic in general: Arha has control over the situation, the space, and the darkness around the pair of them. All Ged has to offer is the one thing that Arha has never had: light and illumination. It’s not essential to her the way her approval is to him, but it is something that she is desperate for. And Ged can reveal things that Arha doesn’t know—the true nature of the labyrinth (ornate, beautiful under the light) and of the Nameless Ones (as Ged had encountered one of them and

Named it in the previous book) and, eventually, of Arha herself. The first magic he does around her is an illusion—the only thing he can do, given that his powers are weaker in the labyrinth and that Arha has taken all of his implements. He chooses to illusion her clothes into a beautiful gown:

“It’s like a gown I saw a princess wear once, at the Feast of Sunreturn in the New Palace in Havnor,” he said, looking at it with satisfaction. “You told me to show you something worth seeing. I show you yourself.”

“Make it—make it go away.” (*Tombs of Atuan*).

He shows her herself in another way, as well—he gives her birth name, Tenar, back to her without any thought of getting something in return. In the end of the story, Ged convinces Tenar to leave with him. They both have half of the artifact that he came to retrieve; an armband that Ged comments is too small to really serve as one, but which—as Tenar is a woman—fits her perfectly. They must work together to leave; Ged can prevent the tomb from closing around them and burying them, but Tenar is the only one who knows the way out of the maze.

This inverts the gendered dynamics of many similar stories; an easy example is the fact that in many ways Ged plays the role of Sheherazade in *The 1001 Nights*, in that he is using his one advantage—illumination, light—to forestall his own death by any means necessary. Arha has the power over his life or death; all he has is the ability to show her things she doesn’t know, and as the passage above shows, she is both enthralled and terrified by it. Arha has grown up, both literally and metaphorically, in the dark, and

she does not like being confronted by her own ignorance and accuses Ged of making up his stories just to sound like he was smarter than her, causing her to angrily re-state her power over him.

Still, it is not a simple flip of a gender paradigm, which would give Tenar all of the power. Ged does know more about the world than she does, and in the world outside the Tombs, he is still the expert. Her name isn't something she discovers; it is something that Ged gives to her, although it should have been nobody's to take in the first place. In Earthsea, your name is your identity; it can be used by wizards to control you. The book uses their joint knowledge, and the ways in which they hold each other's lives or identities in their hands, to underline the importance of collaboration between the pair of them. The simplest version of this is the relic that Ged retrieves: when they first speak to each other, Tenar takes Ged's half of the ring. When he's locked in the vault, Ged takes Tenar's half of the ring. He is the one who fixes the ring, but it is her arm that it fits. They work together to survive, and the story is crafted to emphasize this cooperation.

II. Critiques

While this is all true analysis, *The Tombs of Atuan* is not a perfect book any more than Tolkien's work was. As Tom Kinsey noted in his paper on *The Tombs of Atuan*, this book is not, entirely feminist:

“Tenar's growth requires an outside agent to begin. Of course, Ged's involvement, his penetration into the tomb/womb, is the source of her awakening. The question that remains for Tenar, on the other hand, is how does she become a whole person in Tombs and to what is she committed? Though her role is without a doubt necessary for the logical conclusion of the novel—the joining of the two halves of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and the destruction of the Tombs—Tenar needs the help of a wizard to force her to move toward the independence of thought and body that she fulfills in the next novel, Tehanu.” (*The Failure of the Heroine*)

This is a completely valid criticism. Tenar's power in her own character development in the book is deeply limited; it is entirely moved by Ged and his intrusion into her life. While she does have power over his life and death, she does not have full power over her own narrative in the story, instead being moved by the forces around her—first by the Nameless Ones, and then by Ged. He has to give her name back; he remakes the ring and she just wears it. In many ways he is the active agent in the story, despite Tenar being the focal character; he has the knowledge to fix the ring, and in the end he is the one who opens the labyrinth by blasting apart a door that isn't supposed to open. He trespasses into a female space and does not suffer any consequences; in fact, he is one of the only good characters, and this trespass into what Kinsey refers to as the “tomb/womb” is seen as a positive action, despite the fact that he is there as what we would refer to as a tomb robber. In the escape, he takes agency, calming Tenar down, helping her remember the way out (despite the fact that she knows the area far better than he does, at least in theory) and even killing her servant, who was waiting to kill him.

Even in dispatching her own jailers, Tenar does not get agency. Not only has the labyrinth, Tenar's place of power, been found to be unsafe and related to the evil of the Nameless Ones, but she even has lost the power to be authoritative in it, while Ged remains confident and in control.

As Kinsey notes, however, Le Guin does improve her writing in later years, returning to the character of Tenar in her later book *Tehanu*, which does allow Tenar to have much more power (partially because, by that point, Ged is no longer a young and heroic wizard, but an older man who has lost his magic voluntarily). The main story in *Tehanu* is led by Tenar's kindness in adopting a young girl who has been horrifically burned, and the ways in which her willingness to take on outcasts ends up being massively important to the world as a whole. The story in *Tehanu* is much more focused on Tenar and the effects of her actions, and Ged—while present—powers a lot less of the narrative than in *The Tombs of Atuan*. Perhaps the easiest explanation for this is the twenty-year gap in between the publication of the books, which allowed Le Guin to reflect on her writing and alter her approach in later books. In that respect, she shows considerable growth and development in her conception of her characters and of her world and allows Tenar the agency and heroism she was not fully afforded in the earlier book.

III. The Later Earthsea Cycle and Radically Re-structuring Your Own Worlds

As mentioned earlier, there was a two-decade gap between the publication of *Tehanu* and *The Tombs of Atuan* (as well as *The Farthest Shore*, the final book of the first Earthsea trilogy) and over that time, Le Guin clearly revised many of her original thoughts on the world of Earthsea. *The Farthest Shore* ends with what seems to be a complete story, and a re-imagining of the world of Earthsea; we've had a changing of the guard, with Ged/Sparrowhawk falling out of power and Arren coming into his own as the King of Earthsea. Ged flies off into the sunset, metaphorically, and back to his home island of Gont, literally. His hero's journey seems finished, and the series is not updated for twenty years.

But in that time, Le Guin's thoughts and actions did not remain static. She writes about this in the introduction to *Tales of Earthsea*, saying that "In the years since I began to write about Earthsea I've changed, of course, and so have the people who read the books. All times are changing times, but ours is one of massive, rapid moral and mental transformation. Archetypes turn into millstones, large simplicities get complicated, chaos becomes elegant, and what everybody knows is true turns out to be what some people used to think." (*Tales of Earthsea*). With this viewpoint, this massive, rapid change, in mind, Le Guin's return to Earthsea is not only for the purpose of telling new stories. It is also to bring that change to Earthsea—to question the archetypes, simplicities, chaos, and common knowledge that she initially wrote into her world, testing to see if they have survived the test of time. It is a return to her attention to *people*—to their changeability

and complexity. No other author addressed in this thesis has turned their scrutiny onto their work as thoroughly as the second trilogy of Earthsea—consisting of *Tehanu*, *Tales of Earthsea*, and *The Other Wind*—problematizes and overturns the initial trilogy of works, all while taking place in the same world and with many of the same characters.

This reflection back on the archetypes of the series and their fallibility begins in *Tehanu*, a book centering on Tenar in her life on Gont after becoming a widow, her adoption of a young girl—Therru—who was deeply injured by domestic violence that culminated in being pushed into a fire, and her reunion with Ged, who has to come to terms with his lack of magic. Up until this point in the series, power has been equated with magic, which is explicitly the province of men. The saying “Weak as women’s magic” or alternately “wicked as women’s magic” shows up throughout the first trilogy, denoting the fact that women are not seen as competent or men’s equals in terms of magic. In fact, they are specifically barred from Roke, the school of magical learning that formed the origin point for Ged’s journey, and the mages of Roke have very little contact with women in general. But by placing Therru and Tenar at the center of the story, and making Ged come to terms with his lack of magic (ie, masculine-coded power), Le Guin asks a question of her world: why should magic and power belong primarily to men? What happens when you realize other faces and forms of power? And what happens when her characters start realizing this as well?

Tehanu questions all of the old assumptions in the setting, most obviously when Ogion—Ged’s old master, Tenar’s foster-father, and a mage in his own right—gives

Tenar these instructions about the child Therru: “Teach her, Tenar,” he whispered. “Teach her all! Not Roke. They are afraid-Why did I let you go? Why did you go? To bring her here-too late?” (*Tehanu*). *Teach her all! Not Roke. They are afraid.* It is a radical re-imagining of the previous books, in which Roke held the keys to knowledge, to magic. Here, Ogion issues a warning as well as an instruction. Roke’s mages will not help the young Therru, who is more than she appears; instead, they will fear her and lack understanding. Ogion was correct, for another like Therru went to Roke in this time—Irian, also known as Dragonfly, who appears in the short story by the same name in *Tales of Earthsea*. Her presence on the island, although all signs of magic pointed to her need to be there, frightened and angered the mages, splitting the island. From Master Windkey, we get an image of what, precisely, Irian threatens:

“Lord Thorion has returned from death to save us all,” the Windkey said, fiercely and clearly. “He will be Archmage. Under his rule Roke will be as it was. The king will receive the true crown from his hand, and rule with his guidance, as Morred ruled. No witches will defile sacred ground. No dragons will threaten the Inmost Sea. There will be order, safety, and peace.”

None of the mages answered him. In the silence, the men with him murmured, and a voice among them said, “Let us have the witch.” (*Dragonfly*).

Roke “will be as it was”—without women, without challenge, ruling over the Isles. This—the male-dominated order, with kings and mages at the top of the hierarchy and witches—women—and dragons positioned as outsiders and threats—is order, safety, and peace. In the mind of Master Windkey, and several of the other mages, to allow in

women and dragons is to allow in chaos, danger, and violence—but the only sources of those things shown in the book are in male responses to the presence of women.

Thorion, the mentioned mage, literally came back from death in an attempt to restore what he saw as the proper way of things, to denounce the proclamation of “a woman on Gont” as critical to the new age Earthsea was entering. Just for existing in their space, searching for answers and being a woman with magical connections and power, Irian is a threat who must be expunged. And they are correct that she is a threat to them, as they learn when they attempt to expel her. She came to Roke to learn what she was, and so of course—as the pivotal moment in *A Wizard of Earthsea*—her story turns on the Knoll, where things—as the books state repeatedly—are what they are. She even declares this to be where she belongs, in a direct challenge to Roke’s policy of excluding women: “Learn your place, woman,” the mage said with cold passion. “My place,” she said, slowly, the words dragging, “my place is on the hill. Where things are what they are. Tell the dead man I will meet him there.” (*Dragonfly*). When Thorion—Master Summoner—does meet her there, he attempts to use her name to control her, an act of forcible domination. As Master Summoner, he is the one who has mastered the art of commanding people using their names—this is his area of expertise, the thing he should be able to do better than any other. And she defies him, refusing to accept the name he gives her and the order he gives her. On the hill where things are what they are, he and his power are revealed to be nothing—his name for her false, and his body as already dead. Stepping onto the hill—to strike her? To confront her physically, when confronting her magically had failed? —he is transformed into what he is—a dead man, a bundle of

bones in a staff. And Irian appears as who she is, for a moment—a dragon, a creature of fire and wind, whose true language is the language of naming, and with whom—as Ged puts it and Le Guin references in the last part of *Tales from Earthsea*, “the dragon and the speech of the dragon are one.”

Roke is no longer the authority. There would be nothing for Therru there, just as there was nothing for Irian—they could not give her what she sought, her true name. For once, Roke had nothing to offer a student, and she had everything to offer them—a rejection of the old ways, a forced opening to the new, the changing. Not only that, but Thorion’s promise—that *Roke will be as it was*—is revealed in the same anthology to be based on a lie. The first of the short stories contained in *Tales of Earthsea*, “The Finder,” details the founding of Roke—an endeavor in which women were crucial. The exclusion of women, the supposed wickedness of women’s weak magic, was invented later. It was not the true history of Roke. The rules and doors of Roke, their gatekeeping and masculine power, were all founded upon a lie. In order for the world to change, for growth to truly happen, that lie had to be exposed in *Dragonfly* for what it was—a flimsy illusion and old spite, holding together a bunch of dead bones.

Together with *Tales of Earthsea*, *Tehanu* reframes the entire world of Earthsea and its assumptions about gender, which had gone unquestioned in the first trilogy. Ged, coming to terms with life without magic, lets go of his former mastery and learns to appreciate women’s work and women’s power, having long conversations with Tenar in which he struggles to understand her world. Crucially, his healing really begins after the

two begin an intimate relationship—something which is, inherently, a rejection of Roke and its insistence on separating the genders. In contrast, the main antagonist—Alder—is openly dismissive of Tenar because of her gender, voicing the implicit biases that flew under the radar of the first trilogy.

The Other Wind continues the theme of radically re-imagining the world of Earthsea, this time by overthrowing the entire premise of *The Farthest Shore*. The main plot of the last of the first trilogy traced Ged and Arren's journey to heal a breach in the gap between the land of the dead, the Dry Land, and the land of the living, which was caused by a powerful mage who feared death so greatly he sought immortality. Within the book, the Dry Land is portrayed as bleak and unforgiving, a place without joy or soul—far from other fictional afterlives such as Tolkien's Undying Lands, which share more with ideas of Eden or Heaven. In *The Furthest Shore*, the characters—Arren in particular—must learn to accept their fear of death and the loss of power, and heal the breach in the worlds. But *The Other Wind* turns this on its head: the issue is not that the Dry Land is something that one has to come to terms with, it is that the Dry Land *should not exist at all*. It reveals that the Dry Land was stolen from the territory of the dragons by humans in an attempt to create an artificial afterlife, and that the true end of life should be a return to the world, as Tehanu—revealed at this point to be the true name of Therru—muses in the book: "I think," Tehanu said in her soft, strange voice, "that when I die, I can breathe back the breath that made me live. I can give back to the world all that I didn't do. All that I might have been and couldn't be. All the choices I didn't make. All the things I lost and spent and wasted. I can give them back to the world. To the lives that

haven't been lived yet. That will be my gift back to the world that gave me the life I did live, the love I loved, the breath I breathed.” (*The Other Wind*).

The Farthest Shore ends with a return from the land of the dead, a stereotypical emergence from the underworld. *The Other Wind* ends with the destruction of the wall keeping the spirits of the dead out of the world, allowing them to give back to the world and bringing truth to the poem of the creation of the world: *only in dying, life*. It is the rejection of the idea of having to choose between two bad options, between hurting others for immortality and an afterlife of misery. Like the discussion on women, like the dismantling of Roke, it steps back from the original trilogy's assumptions and looks for other explanations, changing the world Le Guin is writing in completely, while keeping it familiar. As she says in *Tales*' Introduction: It's been a joy to me to go back to Earthsea and find it still there, entirely familiar, and yet changed and still changing. What I thought was going to happen isn't what's happening, people aren't who-or what-I thought they were, and I lose my way on islands I thought I knew by heart. So these are reports of my explorations and discoveries: tales from Earthsea for those who have liked or think they might like the place, and who are willing to accept these hypotheses: things change: authors and wizards are not always to be trusted: nobody can explain a dragon.” (*Tales of Earthsea*).

Chapter Three: Brandon Sanderson, N.K. Jemisin, and Current Fantasy Norms and
Heroes

I get a lot of questions about where the themes of the Broken Earth trilogy come from. I think it's pretty obvious that I'm drawing on the human history of structural oppression, as well as my feelings about this moment in American history. What may be less obvious, though, is how much of the story derives from my feelings about science fiction and fantasy. Then again, SFF is a microcosm of the wider world, in no way rarefied from the world's pettiness or prejudice.

But another thing I tried to touch on in the Broken Earth is that life in a hard world is never just the struggle. Life is family, blood and found. Life is those allies who prove themselves worthy by actions and not just talk. Life means celebrating every victory, no matter how small.

-N.K. Jemisin, Hugo Acceptance Speech 2018

In the time since the writing of Tolkien, and the more recent writing of Le Guin, younger writers and series have moved into the spotlight of fantasy fiction. In this chapter I aim to look at two modern fantasy writers—Brandon Sanderson and N.K. Jemisin—and view how their work measures up to their predecessors in terms of diversity of world and hero. I chose these two authors partially because they are both quite popular and acclaimed in the world of modern fantasy, with Sanderson being handpicked to finish the popular *Wheel of Time* series after the death of its previous author and Jemisin being the first-ever back-to-back-to-back Hugo Award winner for her *Broken Earth* trilogy.

First, I look at Sanderson as someone who, like Tolkien, is a member of the dominant culture—a straight white man writing fantasy that is largely consumed by the same demographic. Compared to Jemisin (more on that later), Sanderson faces far less pushback from the vocally conservative parts of the fantasy readership. His most popular series at the moment is the massive *Stormlight Archive* series, with each of the three current books measuring easily over thousand pages, but he is also known for other series set in the same general universe: the *Mistborn* trilogy and the currently single novels *Warbreaker* and *Elantris*, as well as short stories set in the same universe and other, unrelated novels. The conceit of his connected works, known as the *Cosmere*, is that every story taking place in the novels is happening in the same dwarf galaxy, the titular Cosmere, on separate planets. The ‘gods’ of each planet, for those which have them, are ‘shards’ of a greater entity which they shattered into fragments of power, each with a theme—Ruin, Cultivation, Honor, Autonomy, Preservation, and the like. These gods then create how magic works on each planet, with some of the systems being able to apply to other worlds.

Most of the novels, though, do not involve explicit crossovers, instead only featuring a few characters who may come from other worlds. Instead, the novels or series are self-contained stories, each with their own independent heroes and themes. The novels we will be centering on for this discussion, the *Stormlight Archive*’s three published books, do involve more explicit crossover than the previous works, but remain understandable without that knowledge.

I. The Stormlight Archive and Unusual Heroes

On the surface, the premise of the Stormlight Archive is classic epic-fantasy: an ancient evil, called the Voidbringers, used to destroy human civilization in endless cycles, fought by knights with supernatural powers called Radiants. Thousands of years ago, in the Last Desolation, the Radiants defeated the Voidbringers and then abandoned humanity. In the present day, though, signs are pointing to the Voidbringers' return, and the focal characters of the story—of which there are many—develop bonds with *spren* (creatures akin to nature spirits or fairies) which allow them to become Radiants.

It is *who* the heroes of the story are that complicates the narrative, making the story far more interesting. Firstly, the world of Roshar does not resemble that of many fantasy worlds; the main nation, Alethkar, is far to the east of the single continent that spans this world, and the vast majority of people on Roshar are not white and would appear, should they be in our world, vaguely Asian, given that every race save one possesses epicanthic folds, and the lack of them in the final race, the Shin, is called out as unusual from the narration dealing with Szeth, the only Shin major character: “his people’s large, round eyes, shorter stature, and tendency toward baldness led Easterners to claim they looked like children.” (*The Way of Kings*). Shinovar has a wildly different culture than the rest of the continent, leading the Shin people to be othered—and so it is ironic that they are the people who look most like the author, and in fact most readers.

The main nation of Alethkar, moreover, is explicitly peopled by dark-skinned and -haired characters. As Sanderson notes, “[Roshar] natives other than the Shin have the epicanthic fold, but the Alethi wouldn't look strictly Asian to you--they'd look like a race that you can't define, as we don't have them on earth. I use half-Asian/half-arab or half-asian/half-Polynesian models as my guide some of the time, but Alethi are going to have a tanner skin than some of those.” (*Sanderson, reddit.com AMA*) Skin color is not, however, a major factor in the culture: instead, it is *eye* color that determines the class of people in Alethi society. Those with dark eyes, encompassing both brown and black but also less normal colors such as dark green, indigo, or navy blue, are lower-class and allowed fewer opportunities. Those with light eyes (bright green, blue, purple, yellow, and tan among others) are in positions of power, and all nobility are lighteyed. Relationships across eye color are shunned, with the result of one such relationship—a man named Redin—used by his father the king as an assassin. His very appearance is noted as strange when Shallan, one of the protagonists, recalls meeting him as a child: “One of his eyes was an intense blue. The other dark brown. Both lighteyed and dark. Shallan felt a chill.” (*Words of Radiance 39: Heterochromatic*). So the issue of class in Roshar is an alien one, but not one that is without traits we would recognize: discrimination based on physical features, an unease around those who transcend the boundaries.

Moreover, Roshar shares some of the same gender-based discrimination that we do, although with a twist: women are kept off the battlefield and out of most public spheres, but are the only ones allowed to read and write, being designated to scholarly pursuits as

men are designated to active, military ones. Even one of our protagonists, Kaladin—himself a darkeyed man who has ascended to an astonishing level of power due to his heroism—balks when a woman asks to join the fighting, assuming that she wants to instead work with the paperwork for his squad: “Oh,” Lyn said. “A scribe.” “Of course,” Kaladin said, turning back toward her in the hallway frowning. “You’re a woman, aren’t you?” [...] She blushed. “Sir, I didn’t join the scouts because I liked sitting around staring at ledgers. If that’s what you’re offering, I’ll have to pass.” Her shoulders fell, and she wouldn’t meet Kaladin’s eyes.” (*Oathbringer* 392). Realizing his bias, Kaladin opens his squad to allow women in combat positions, but that someone who rejects so much teaching on the assumed place of darkeyes is so willing to assume the position of women in society is both telling of the culture and very, very realistic to cultural issues in our own world.

So, in a setting such as this one, who can be a hero? The obvious heroes are, of course, the Knights Radiant, the heirs to an ancient order, fighting the forces of an evil god. But how does one become a Knight Radiant? They form a bond with a spren, a personification of part of a larger force or ideal—*honor, justice, lies*, and the like. But the bond can only form in a certain kind of person: a person who has undergone incredible trauma. Kaladin, one of the focal characters, learns this in a conversation with his spren, Syl: ““You want too much of me,” he snapped at her as he reached the other side of the chasm. “I’m not some glorious knight of ancient days. I’m a broken man. Do you hear me, Syl? I’m broken.” She zipped up to him and whispered, “That’s what they all were, silly.”” (*Words of Radiance*, 68: *Bridges*). This is expanded upon throughout the novels: it

is only the cracks in someone's being that come from experiencing trauma that allow the bond to come in and 'fill' the cracks. The Knights Radiant—the heroes of the story—are then indelibly linked to issues of trauma, healing, and the difficulties of mental health and recovery. The first of the 'oaths' that the Radiants have to swear provides a paradigm through which to see the world and facilitate this growth: "Life before death. Strength before weakness. Journey before destination." This focus alone makes the heroes of the story unusual for the typical fantasy paradigm.

Sanderson has spoken about the effort he applies to writing characters who are positioned with different beliefs and socioeconomic status levels than he is. One of his repeated pieces of advice for other authors addresses this; he speaks on the importance of doing justice to views that are not your own or has a very different lived experience, and has spoken repeatedly on the importance, to him, of having readers who have had that experience read and edit the book before it goes to print (in this excerpt using LGBT characters as an example): "And so when I put in characters who are LGBTQ, I do have to be really aware that I am likely a person to get that experience wrong. If you're going to find somebody who is going to get that wrong, I am at the top of the list. So ... I go to my friends who are gay and ask, "OK, guys, how am I screwing up here?" (*Deseret News, Brandon Sanderson Interview*). It is this attention to the story that allows the diverse world of the Stormlight Archive to actually feel real and fully-realized, as many of the characters have opposing viewpoints and experiences and the narrative does not fully lean on any of them as 'right' or 'wrong.'

The protagonist focused on by the first book is Kaladin, who I mentioned earlier is darkeyed. Before the story had started, he had survived both the wartime death of his younger brother and betrayal by his commanding officer that ended in him being sold into slavery. At the beginning of the story, he is a slave who is sold into the most dangerous job in the army, despite the fact that he was a capable soldier. Throughout the early book, his mental health gets worse until he actively contemplates suicide, but decides that he should stay alive to try to help the other men that he is working with—people who are similarly the lowest of the low, who don't have anyone on their side: “He clutched [their] names, repeating each one in his head, holding them like precious gemstones. The names mattered. The men mattered. Perhaps Kaladin would die in the next bridge run, or perhaps he would break under the strain [...] but as he settled down to plan, he felt that tiny warmth burning steadily within him. It was the warmth of decisions made and purpose seized. It was responsibility.” (*The Way of Kings*, 11: Droplets).

So Kaladin is framed as an unconventional hero in two ways: one, in that he is a disadvantaged, chronically depressed slave with no initial connection to nobility and nothing going for him except for the fact that he is determined. The second is that he finds his heroism through his belief in the importance of others—that, in a sense, he is important because he believes in the ability of the downtrodden to be important. In fact, his entire storyline and heroism is based on the refusal to discount the importance of people who others see as “expendable” or beneath notice, and raising them to the level of heroes. The culmination of his character arc in the first book is when he has a perfect opportunity to desert the army, achieve freedom for himself and his fellow slaves, and get

what he has been working towards for the entire book—a new life for the people who matter to him—and can't do it, because it would mean leaving behind an entire army that was betrayed and left for dead:

It seemed to crush him. Sadeas's betrayal, his exhaustion, the deaths of so many. He was there again for a moment, kneeling in Amaram's mobile headquarters, watching the last of his friends being slaughtered, too weak and hurt to save them. He raised a trembling hand to his head, feeling the [slave] brand there, wet with his sweat. [...] Life before death. *I've failed so often, I've been knocked to the ground and trod upon.* Strength before weakness. *This would be death I'd lead my friends to...* Journey before destination. *...death, and what is right.* "We have to go back," Kaladin said softly. (*The Way of Kings, 67: Words*).

It is this decision—to prioritize doing the right thing, helping people who he owes nothing to at the expense of the shorter-term goal of getting free from slavery—that marks Kaladin's true transformation into a young Knight Radiant and one of the heroes of the series. And his heroism is rewarded: Dalinar Kholin, the general whose army Kaladin saved, gives up a priceless artifact in order to buy the freedom of not only Kaladin's group of slaves, but every slave in the army Kaladin worked for. Kaladin's crew themselves are given the opportunity to leave, but they stay, becoming guards to the royal family—as it was the king's uncle who Kaladin managed to save. Kaladin expected none of this as a reward, he merely found himself incapable of doing the wrong thing in that moment. He is shocked to find a kindred spirit in Dalinar:

“What is a man’s life worth?” Dalinar asked softly.

“The slavemasters say one is worth about two emerald brooms.”

“And what do you say?”

“A life is priceless,” he said immediately, quoting his father.

Dalinar smiled, wrinkle lines extending from the corners of his eyes.

“Coincidentally, that is the exact value of a Shardblade. So today, you and your man sacrificed to buy me twenty-six hundred priceless lives. And all I had to repay you with was a single priceless sword.” (*The Way of Kings*, 69: *Justice*.)

This exchange places Kaladin and Dalinar in the position of *heroes* for the series: a specific type of hero that is defined by finding worth in people that other people look down upon or ignore, and placing importance on ideals and beliefs that other people find cumbersome, idealistic, or naive. They reject the narrative of doing what one must for some greater good, which places them in opposition to the villains of the narrative—the man who abandoned Dalinar’s army and the one who betrayed and killed Kaladin’s squadmates and sold him into slavery. Both antagonists justify their actions as being ones for the greater good, or for the betterment of their nation, and some of their arguments are even convincing. But the narrative condemns them, as their actions—regardless of intent—only lead toward worse consequences.

It is in contrast with these other characters, who justify their atrocities and seek to convince others of their righteousness, that Dalinar comes to the fore in the third book as someone of whom the question really does have to be asked: *can he be a hero?* For the

first two books, the answer seems self-evident. Dalinar Kholin is the man who gave up his sword in order to save Kaladin and his crew; he is, perhaps, the most honorable man in the entire army. Despite the strange factors in his heroism—the fact that his story arc is about giving up fighting on the battlefield and accepting a role as a backseat commander, the fact that he is an older man rather than the typical young hero of the story—he has been one of the most trustworthy authority figures in the book and on the side of the heroes.

And then, in the third book, we learn his past. It was always known that he was a fearsome warrior in the past, but in the book we see what that actively means: Dalinar was a monster. A simple excerpt from the flashbacks embedded into the narrative is this: “It was gratifying to see how much one could accomplish in both politics and trade by liberally murdering the other fellow’s soldiers.” (*Oathbringer*, 66: *Strategist*). This is not an unusual viewpoint for the young Dalinar, who was the epitome of Alethi manhood: someone who was a force of nature on the battlefield, with no remorse or shame about his violence. Through his story, we see him escalate from just a brutal warrior with some semblance of honor (refusing to kill a child despite the chance that they would grow up to be a threat) to someone who commits multiple war crimes, ending with the immolation of the Rift, an entire city full of innocents—including his own wife, who attempted to negotiate for peace with the city. This final act is what breaks him: even as a consummate warrior, he couldn’t live with what he did:

“Dalinar left [his wife’s] corpse to the ministrations of others. As he departed, he strangely heard the screams of those people in the Rift. He stopped, wondering what

it was. Nobody else seemed to notice. Yes, that was distant screaming. In his head, maybe? They all seemed children to his ears. The ones he'd abandoned to the flames. A chorus of the innocent pleading for help, for mercy. Evi's voice joined them.”

(Oathbringer 76: An Animal).

Dalinar tries to escape his guilt for years, delving into alcoholism and neglecting his two still-living sons. And this attempt to escape guilt is something that we see over and over again in those people who have fallen under the sway of the main antagonist, a god named Odium. The repeating motif of guilt shows up throughout the book, from a priest justifying the fact that he let the queen pitch the kingdom into decay: “Enjoy this. Enjoy the feeling. It's not our fault, right? We didn't fail her. We were only doing what she asked. Don't cause a storm, girl. Nobody wants that...” *(Oathbringer 78: The Revel).*

From a side character who betrayed Kaladin at the end of the last book: “*Let go, Moash,* something deep within him whispered. *Give up your pain. It's all right. You did what was natural. You can't be blamed. Stop carrying that burden. Let go.*” *(Oathbringer 54: An Ancient Singer's Name).*

In the man who sold Kaladin into slavery: “I hurt, once,” Amaram said. “Did you know that? After I was forced to kill your squad, I...hurt. Until I realized. It wasn't my fault. None of this is my fault.” *(Oathbringer 120: The Spear That Would Not Break).*

Most importantly, it is the offer that Odium offers Dalinar, after Dalinar has undergone weeks of torment as the memories of the atrocities he committed return to him:

“Don’t blame yourself,” Odium said as Dalinar winced. “I made you kill her, Dalinar. I caused all of this. Do you remember? I can help. Here. [...] Blame me, Dalinar! It wasn’t you. You saw red when you did those things! It was my fault. Accept that. You don’t have to hurt.”

Dalinar blinked, meeting Odium’s eyes.

“Let me have the pain, Dalinar,” Odium said. “Give it to me, and never feel guilty again.” (*Oathbringer*, 118: The Weight of It All).

How can a man who has committed atrocities be a hero? Odium’s answer is that he can’t. That the only thing that should be done with the pain of your past actions is deny it, to reject all responsibility for your actions to continue pretending that you are a good person. *Never feel guilty again*, by denying yourself all agency in your own actions—and thus, inevitably, giving control over your life to someone else. It is a deal that is presented as incredibly, incredibly attractive, and this tracks with real life. It is a natural instinct to try to justify one’s own actions in retrospect—many notable phenomena, such as the concept of *confirmation bias*⁷—stem from this instinct. We like to be in the right; we don’t want to admit that we have been wrong, or worse—that we have, *as people*, committed acts that hurt others. Nobody wants to be a monster, and we can see the point of view of all the people who have bought into the deal—all of them had reasons why they did what they did, reasons that they thought justified their actions. Perhaps they were being selfish in the moment of their actions, or perhaps they genuinely believed they

⁷ Confirmation bias is defined as the tendency to interpret any new information as supporting one’s previous conclusions, regardless of whether or not it actually does.

were doing the right thing, but the men who fall to Odium have one trait in common: when they saw the pain their actions caused, they chose to abdicate all responsibility for their actions rather than face the truth of what they'd done.

But Dalinar does not take Odium's offer. In rejecting it, he takes a rare step in professing the belief that accepting and learning from pain is something inherent to the idea of a hero, rather than something a hero should avoid. A hero, in this paradigm, is not only someone who is broken, but someone who is willing to take responsibility for their own mistakes:

“You cannot have my pain [...] If I pretend...if I pretend I *didn't* do those things, it means that I can't have grown to become someone else. [...] Journey before destination,” Dalinar said. “It cannot be a journey if *it doesn't have a beginning.*”
(*Oathbringer* 118: The Weight of It All).

Through this discussion, taking place at what is functionally the end of the first act of what will be an epic-length (ten book) series, Dalinar adds another qualification to who can be a hero. Heroes, in the world of the Stormlight Archive, are more than just people who choose to do the right thing; they are people who have been through traumatic circumstances and are judged, almost solely, by their actions. Just being the son of a king, or named by a prophecy, is not enough to qualify as a hero in this universe. A hero, instead, is someone who strives to become a better person by acknowledging and overcoming their flaws and weaknesses—and the attempted hero who refuses to confront these is just a villain in the making.

This is in many ways a radical re-imagining of the hero, and one that is deliberate. And a very compelling argument can be made that Sanderson can only get away with doing this and remaining a very popular author because he is a white man, and thus receives very little public blowback for including diverse characters. Instead, the trend seems to be for fans who have problems with the diversity in Sanderson's work to attack other fans, rather than the author himself.

Of course, this is a difficult point to prove, due largely to the impermanence of the internet and the fact that nobody wants to openly portray themselves as racist. But the views still become clear during conversation: while they understand that in the canon of the books, the characters are not white, discussions of (for example) a hypothetical movie casting of the books expose some dramatic biases about which actors would be appropriate to characters, and what features of characters are more vital than others, and comments start appearing such as "I don't think things like (real-world) ethnicity really matter[s] in fantasy," or "I found [another] casting biased because it says how they made it with the assumption all Alethi were Asian looking and it was one compromise they weren't willing to make," even extending to justifying the use of cosmetic blackface to achieve the right skin tone for actors: "I however agree the entire cast should be made to look ethnic," argues a contributor by the name of maxal, apparently without either irony as to the vast umbrella the term 'ethnic' covers (do they mean that these characters should look Hispanic? Black? Asian? They leave it unclear) or knowledge of the multiple protests actual people of color have had to white people's insistence on casting white

actors and making them up to *look* colored rather than actually cast people of color⁸. (17th Shard commentary)

Moreover, despite Sanderson's own openness to having his characters read as not heterosexual⁹ and inclusion of queer characters in minor roles, fans can be incredibly hostile toward queer readings of the characters, with one commenter going so far as to both make a list of characters who 'can be assumed to be heterosexual' with no provocation and going on to argue that he was shutting down queer interpretations of the character in because "gay and bisexual characters have better representation when we can compare them to straight characters in the same series, proving to be just as valuable, if not more so, than the straight characters around them," and, when addressed by reasonable arguments, calling the person engaging him in conversation "clearly insane." (*stickinahighstorm*, Stormlight Characters We Can Infer As Being Straight). None of the main characters are stated to be bisexual in the text of the books; the closest we have gotten is the author being open to Shallan being viewed as bisexual in an exchange on twitter, and one gay side character. Other fans have stated in response to queer interpretations of characters such as Kaladin that "we've been emotionally invested in Kaladin's journey and progress, and to not mention something important like that when a lot of people's enjoyment of the story is hinged on this character could be seen as a bit of a deception/betrayal." (*Fistsofrage*, Character Analysis, 17th Shard).

⁸ For an example of this, the recent controversy around the casting of Ghost in the Shell featuring white actors provides a good example.

⁹ Seen in an exchange on twitter where he agreed with a fan interpretation of Shallan as bisexual, as archived here: <https://wob.coppermind.net/events/95-general-twitter-2016/#e9474>

Most of this interaction was, thankfully, in the past; as time has changed and Sanderson has been more and more vehement on the race of his characters, most of the more vocal troublemakers have died off or trickled away to other series that are more accepting of their quiet biases. However, as someone who has taken part in these arguments and been called at best wrong and at worst victimizing myself when I suggested that heroes in the books can be queer, it is telling that this happens at the slightest indication that an author is open to having his characters read as queer, or the first insistence by a fan that race is, in fact, important when dealing with characters. Fantasy fandom is incredibly slow-moving when change happens, favoring the status quo over any change, especially from a source that they have come to see as ‘safe’ such as Sanderson, a white Mormon man who has previously written books mostly populated by white men.

The reactions to a Black woman doing the same thing are, predictably, even worse. Fortunately, the author in question is incredibly talented—and very aware of the cultural biases standing against her.

II. Jemisin and Radical Inclusion in Fantasy

For an example of popular fantasy written by someone who is not a white man, and who has received great acclaim for her writing, I turn to the novels of N.K. Jemisin, whose Hugo speech provides the opening quotation for this chapter. She has appeared in the margins and footnotes of this thesis, in her commentary and writing on fantasy; in

many ways, her blog posts and her speeches have formed part of the ideological backbone of my thoughts on writing diversity, which ironically makes writing about her harder. It is difficult to analyze the writing of someone who analyzes her own writing, especially when so much of her work and her commentary does center around issues of identity and diversity in fiction. How to credit her and offer a view of her interpretation of these challenges without merely spending an entire chapter copying her own writing, which would be a profoundly unsatisfying analysis?

An American psychologist and fantasy and science-fiction writer, Jemisin is the only author in the history of the Hugo awards to win the award three years in a row with her *Broken Earth* trilogy. The *Broken Earth* is a radical trilogy in many ways, and has no problem marking itself as such from its first sentences: “Let’s start with the end of the world, why don’t we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things.” (*The Fifth Season*, you are here).

The series is written in second person present tense, a decision that Jemisin states is due to the trauma that the main character has experienced: “I’ve always thought of second person as distancing; after all, it’s impossible for the reader to ever truly be “you”. Yet I’ve read some incredibly intimate second-person stories, and as I actually tried writing it for the first time, I found that it’s sort of amazing and powerful — both distancing and intimate at the same time. You can’t be this person, but you can understand her.” (*N.K. Jemisin, The Big Idea: The Fifth Season*). She proceeds to tell a story that is divided between three timeframes and three named characters—Damara,

Syenite, and Essun—who are revealed at the end of the first novel to be the same character, at three separate times in her life. So the structure of the story inherently deviates from most of the typical paradigms we are used to—it isn't chronological, it is focused on women and their stories (specifically, women who are *othered* by the society around them, who are also women of color) and which is written to allow characters to feel the character's pain and anger through the use of an extremely nontraditional viewpoint. And the central character is a traumatized black middle-aged mother who does not conform to many societal stereotypes as to what a hero—or a woman—should look and act like.

Much like Le Guin, Jemisin has thought deeply and written at length about her choices in this book. She is aware of the challenges in portraying a hero—a protagonist—like Essun, and specifically relates the a-temporality of the book—the fact that it was written about one woman at three points in her life—to this challenge:

I expected people to hate Essun. She's so many things that readers dislike sight-unseen and story unread: a middle-aged mother, a collaborator, a revolutionary, a mass murderer, a woman who refuses to be sexy or nice. She's traumatized for much of *The Fifth Season*, and she displays this in ways that don't tug the heartstrings, because trauma doesn't usually look sympathetic. [...] I wasn't sure [her story] would be enough to get her over the empathy hurdle. I suspected readers would find it easier to relate to an innocent child in a horrific situation, and a snarky, frustrated young woman journeying across a strange land with an irritating companion... even though these were literally the same person as Essun. And I hoped that by the time people

twigged to the fact that they were all one woman, I could effectively “cash in” on the empathic capital built by the younger versions of Essun and transfer it to her.

(*Jemisin*, Tricking readers into acceptance).

Jemisin has made a deliberate choice to write her novel in a way that both works for the story and which takes on the challenging task of making readers empathize with a character that they normally would not. The ‘empathy gap’ she speaks about is a very real cognitive bias: it prevents us from putting ourselves in other people’s shoes when we read them as significantly *other* than us. Emile Bruneau, the scientist who has pioneered the research of the empathy gap, explained to the New York Times: “When considering an enemy, the mind generates an “empathy gap.” It mutes the empathy signal, and that muting prevents us from putting ourselves in the perceived enemy’s shoes.” (*The Brain’s Empathy Gap*, NYTimes). It’s a powerful instinct, and the research that goes into it, while hard to make concrete conclusions with, suggests that this is behind many long-term conflicts, as the longer people become used to seeing other people as *other* and *wrong*, the harder it is for the empathy gap to be bridged, and we can see the effects of this in writing in the predominance of white, cisgender, straight men as the protagonists of fiction—and the fact that up-and-coming authors are often told that anything else won’t be able to sell. This is the opponent that Jemisin has leveled her writing style as a weapon against.

Like any author, she writes for the reason of telling stories that she believes to be important, but she does so with a tenacity and dedication to circumventing that empathy

gap that other authors—many of whom are neither Black nor female—do not dedicate themselves to, or do not write protagonists who are hindered by that gap. It is far easier to write a character who does not alienate readers, after all—the empathy gap can also be a barrier to an author who tries to write characters different from them, one of the reasons that authors such as Sanderson emphasize the importance of research and why groups such as *We Need Diverse Books* emphasize the importance of promoting works by diverse authors that highlight people who have undergone their own experiences. The latter is the easiest way to ensure that the writer, at least, sees the character as a complete person—a crucial step for the character in general to be sympathetic. If the writer does not write a character with full consideration of the tropes and stereotypes that they could run across, you get something like Tolkien’s orcs—creatures that may not have been intended to be racial caricatures, but nevertheless reinforce extremely harmful ideas of other people, and very inaccurate ideas of what both the past and fantasy works look like.

For a long time in fantasy, fueled by the dominance of Tolkien’s fantasy and its descendants, a view of fantasy based on medieval Europe—and on a false, whitewashed version of medieval Europe—has been predominant. We identify with people like us, and we write what we identify with because it is easy. And for the largest amount of the history of fantasy, the people in charge of publishing, and the people most likely to have the time and opportunity to write, have been white men. The bias is both present and unsurprising. It is the fact that it has become so omnipresent that it is accepted as background; that, as I mentioned in the introduction to this work, someone could say without irony that “is [a story] really going to be a story about space exploration and

pioneering derring-do? Or is the story merely about racial prejudice and exploitation...” (Torgensen) and not realize that any story that involves white people engaging in anything *pioneering* brings with it extreme connotations of racial prejudice and exploitation. In many ways, Jemisin’s writing is what Torgensen’s group and the associated more radical factions were complaining about: literature written by a black woman that deals explicitly with racism, sexism, and the fact that these are things that happen both in fantasy worlds and in our own world.

Even within *The Fifth Season*’s prologue, the focal character of the section—Alabaster—has no qualms about the explicit mistreatment that happens to people who are seen as *lesser* by the dominant society: “And then he reaches forth with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection. His fingers spread and twitch as he feels several reverberating points on the map of his awareness: his fellow slaves.” (*The Fifth Season*, Prologue: you are here). Every word of this is clearly chosen for effect: from the repetitive labial thuds of *brainwashed*, *backstabbed*, *brutalized* to the specific choice of *unnatural selection*, referring to ideas in our world of nature distinguishing the fit from the unfit—and establishing both the fact that slavery is decidedly *not* part of that natural rhythm, and that Jemisin is unafraid to allude to the history of natural selection being used, through Social Darwinism, to justify racial prejudice.

While there are region-based races in *The Fifth Season*, Jemisin herself notes that it is also accurate to classify the orogenes—who can come from most populations, but whose talents at manipulating earth and heat can also be passed down genetically—as a race. “Race in our own world is a social construct, not anything related to actual biology, so it makes sense that a world which has such complicated feelings about orogenes would conceptually fission them off from the rest of humanity. In fact, as Essun alludes at one point in TFS, Old Sanze officially classified orogenes as non-human a few centuries back. The better to oppress.” (*Jemisin, Creating races*). She goes on to note that the orogenes intentionally take some traits from racial minorities, particularly drawing a connection to Black experiences in the United States. Orogenes, particularly those who have grown up in the Fulcrums that exist to control them, have a very specific vocabulary that is hard to understand without being part of the in-group, much like many racial dialects and specifically AAE, or African-American English. They practice certain behaviors when out of the Fulcrums to ‘pass’ and are competent at spotting one another by identifying these behaviors. And, much like people in racial minorities in our world, they are seen as less than human. The story itself begins with Essun’s son being beaten to death by his own father for showing signs of being an orogene. In this, placing Essun as an orogene also places her as someone not many people *within* the world will sympathize with, let alone people from our world.

While writing about a secondary world, one where Earth is not present and its races are absent, Jemisin’s use of the second person and willingness to risk that fourth-wall break in order to put the reader in a position to be *other from* her protagonists while

understanding them means that she also does not let the reader forget these parallels. None of this is unique to the Stillness—cruelty of this sort, tragedy of this sort happens in our world too. The reader is not allowed to forget themselves for long before the narrating voice returns, reminding us of our separation from the characters, our presence in our own world full of its own problems. The fact that the book manages to be deeply immersive while also continually reminding the reader of their position as *outside* the main events is a testament to Jemisin’s writing.

And unsurprisingly, she has faced a lot of opposition. As she reported in her most recent Hugo acceptance speech, over the course of her writing she has “smiled and nodded while well-meaning magazine editors advised me to tone down my allegories and anger. (I didn’t.) I have gritted my teeth while an established professional writer went on a ten-minute tirade at me—as a proxy for basically all black people—for mentioning underrepresentation in the sciences. I have kept writing even though my first novel, *The Killing Moon*, was initially rejected on the assumption that only black people would ever possibly want to read the work of a black writer. I have raised my voice to talk back over fellow panelists who tried to talk over me about my own damn life. I have fought myself, and the little voice inside me that constantly, still, whispers that I should just keep my head down and shut up and let the real writers talk.” (*Jemisin, Hugo Award Speech, 2018*). This is the kind of list that women, particularly Black women, find very familiar—the phenomenon of being attacked for being vocal about your own experiences,

especially on the internet, where anonymity is abundant, is unfortunately common¹⁰.

Much as Essun struggles to bridge the empathy gap within fiction, Black people—and any person commonly othered by dominant narratives, both those in and out of fantasy—struggle to achieve empathy from the dominant culture.

We see this in issues of race, where groups like the orcs are based off racial stereotypes and considered archetypal to fantasy, something included without question. We see it in the commentary around the Hugos, where the idea of something being about race, gender, or sexuality—or rather, any race other than white, gender other than male, and sexuality other than straight—becomes a point against the quality of the literature. We see it again and again in any form of fiction, where queer characters, women, and characters of color are killed again and again to make room for the white, straight male characters to have growth¹¹. As Jemisin has pointed out, the empathy gap is real and exists—and the more we reinforce stories in which white, straight, and male equals *hero*, and anything else is more and more removed from the center of the story, from the narrative, or from the side of the ‘good guys,’ the harder that gap becomes to bridge.

¹⁰ For an example of this phenomenon, any literature surrounding the #Gamergate phenomenon provides a concise summation, such as this article from the Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/12/with-gamergate-the-video-game-industrys-growing-pains-go-viral/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8ed222511178

¹¹ Examples of this can be easily found when searching the “Bury Your Gays” trope, any discussion of ‘fridging’ female characters, and discussion of the prevalent trope of Black characters dying first in horror-type movies; for an analysis of how this appears as an overall trend regarding queer women, this article presents a good overview: <https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2017/7/11/62-lesbian-bisexual-female-characters-killed-over-past-two-television-seasons>

Sanderson and Jemisin provide two examples of re-imagining the idea of heroes to address this gap: Sanderson by constructing his world and magic to specifically offer up heroes that defy our traditional narratives of who gets to save a world and couching their heroism in their personal reactions rather than any intrinsic factor of birth or ability, but placing it in a familiar save-the-world narrative that engages the fans of epic fantasy, and Jemisin by picking protagonists and stories that are not usually told in fantasy, and using her writing, including the fact that she is unafraid to break genre conventions, to encourage the reader to empathize with them anyway. The two approaches are not entirely unlike each other, and they are both effective, as the success of both series clearly shows. The fantasy genre is ready for stories that are about race, class, gender, and sexuality as well as those about white men, and authors have begun to deliver.

Chapter Four: My Own Writing, *Advocacy*, and Imperfect Worlds

“There’s a difference between saying what you think is true and believing it’s right.”

-Advocacy, Chapter 2

I have mentioned, at several points in this thesis, that my interest in the topic is not only that of a fan or a scholar, but also that of a fantasy writer myself. For the past seven-odd years, I’ve been writing fantasy novels, varying in quality from a fourteen-year-old’s attempts to emulate whatever their favorite book of the moment was to more recent, serious attempts. It is the latest of these attempts that I aim to examine here. As much as this thesis has been a study of examples of the genre and how they handle the idea of who is allowed to be a *hero*, it also invites a study of my own writing. I would be a bad writer, and a poor analyst, if I exempted my own works from the critique that I offer others.

Through further discussion of these issues, I hope to hone my own writing and thinking to check the blind spots and biases that I, undeniably, write into my own works. I, as a person, do not typically find myself in the pages of a fantasy novel—while white people like myself are common enough, the number of times I find a bisexual character who is treated with any modicum of respect is rare, let alone a character who is bisexual and who does not fit into binary male/female genders. In that, the issue of who can be a hero in fantasy is personal as well as academic: in scholarship and writing, I am motivated in part by a desire to find a hero who matches my own experience, hoping with

each page read or written that I will either find myself, or provide the story through which someone else finds themselves.

Advocacy, my most recent finished work, is too long to include in its entirety, but the opening two chapters have been included as an appendix. The story in full is a secondary-world fantasy, as are those I have been discussing, and one that I tried to write in a way to avoid what I saw as trite or problematic aspects of fantasy that I read. The story and world of *Advocacy* center around an island archipelago, the Aaclian Isles, with a long history of violence between ruling Houses that control trade in the region. Each House has laid claim to a magical monument called a *Channel*, which allows those born into the house control over two opposing elements or parts of reality—life and death, earth and sky, fire and water, and truth and falsehood, for example. The fight over who has these powers or controls the channels shaped much of Aaclian culture, leading to a present where the general warfare is over, but where Advocates—a job title that includes the professions of bodyguard, lawyer, lobbyist, and assassin—are trained to and tasked with furthering their house’s cause through any means necessary, held back loosely by limits that prohibit the killing of civilians and of killing without ‘reason.’ Obviously, this is a culture with many, many problems, and the interaction of the central characters with these issues forms most of the personal conflict of the plot (the general conflict centers around a murderer targeting civilians and an attempted coup of the isles).

In designing the setting, I tried to make choices designed to make my characters unusual for typical fantasy. Very few of the characters are white; I chose to place Aaclia

in an equatorial region, much like a more southern Venice, which provided a partial model (mostly in the idea of an island trade nation riddled with canals.) As a result of this placement, most of the people in Aaclia have dark skin, and would appear roughly Middle-Eastern to people in our world in terms of skin color (although hair and eye color can wildly vary, and of course would change how someone is racially read in our world). The only named character who is noted as having pale skin is Vanessa, who is mixed-race and whose skin tone is notably abnormal: “Vanessa crossed her arms, painfully aware of [...] the death-pale pallor her skin appeared as to anyone used to normal people’s appearance” (*Advocacy* 11). Vanessa is set apart by her paler skin tone, which plays into a larger narrative about her character isolating herself and being isolated from other people.

Additionally, the Isles do not have the same gendered expectations that Western society in our world does—women, historically, have been found in the same high-powered positions that men have been. One of the signs of this in the story is that the oldest of the House Lords, who run the nation, is a woman—Endriet Nicolai—and she is respected as a powerful and knowledgeable source of information. I did this partially because I was tired of seeing none of the people in power in a nation be women, or for there to be only one woman in power. Out of the Court of Aaclia, the coalition of heads-of-house who run the city, there are two men—Lords Tyraine and Avriol—two women, Lords Endriet and Maitlin, and two whose gender is ambiguous, Lords Havaris and Iskelai, the latter of whom is only referred to using they/them pronouns and the former of which is only mentioned obliquely.

This point leads into the fact that I wanted there to be a place in this culture for people who did not fit gendered expectations—that effectively there was a cultural acceptance of nonbinary people in the society. One option for dealing with this would have been to include a third-gender, such as those present in many cultures across the world (such as the two-spirit tradition among Native Americans, the Māhū of traditional Hawaiian and Tahitian cultures, and the hijra or kinnar of the Indian subcontinent), but I decided not to do this for two reasons. Firstly, none of my central characters were nonbinary, and so I was more interested in worldbuilding the aspects of the world that dealt with my main characters. The other reason I didn't choose a system like that is that I would have to do a considerable amount of research on real-world three-gender systems to ensure I was including a realistic one, and not just copying another culture's gender systems and changing the names for the sake of making the world more interesting. So I took the path of including nonbinary people in an unexamined context—they exist in the world, but there is no particular explanation given for how they are seen differently by society than men or women, and it is left unexamined how someone might come out as nonbinary, and what reactions to that might be. All that is known is that nonbinary people *exist* in the world, and are referred to without gendered terminology. Additionally, while transgender people exist in this world, there is only one character in the series who has transitioned medically in a way that is even implicit—Lysandar, a side character and friend of the main characters, is mentioned as having undergone an intensive surgery and being shorter than most other men, but I did not explicitly state that he had transitioned physically from

female to male prior to the events of the novel, although that is my image of the character.

Aaclia also does not have any particular prohibitions against same-sex relationships, which is fortunate for my main characters, two sets of same-sex couples. *Advocacy* is in a large part a romance novel, although I suspect it has far too much murder to ever be shelved as such. I wanted to write a queer romance novel where the central conflict was not the queerness of the characters, but rather the kind of fantasy adventure that straight characters have—one where their heterosexuality isn't the main conflict in the story. Additionally, including homophobia or transphobia in a setting where it didn't add anything to the story would have only been painful to me as a queer person. I don't *like* writing about people who hate me, and in many ways I find it more radical to create a world where discrimination on this basis just doesn't exist. If I write a book where a major focus of the novel is oppression or the mistreatment of people based on sexuality, I would obviously include those biases, but this was not that book and it didn't have to be.

The other decision I made about the general setting that affected who could be the hero of the story was the fact that magic is not genetic in this setting. Families tend to have the same magic if they are born near one Channel, but for most people in the Isles, the type of magic you have is determined by what factors most influenced your young life. This also aided building the setting, because it made certain abilities a resource that could be fought over—if you want a child who will definitely have magic controlling fire and water, you have to have control over the area in proximity to that channel. I made

this choice partially because I was tired of the idea of power coming from someone's bloodline and being immutable. That always veered too closely to saying that some families were inherently better than others, a viewpoint that is too close to that used by eugenicists for me to be comfortable with echoing in my worldbuilding.

With that background set into place, we can start examining the characters who I *did* choose to be heroes in my story. The focal character is Endriet en Damian, a young man who was adopted into House Endriet—the house with power over Life and Death—and who works as a medic at the school that trains young people to be Advocates. This places him in direct proximity to the violence at the heart of Aaclian culture, but also in opposition to it; he works at the school teaching children to, essentially, be murderers, but his specific job is saving lives and even returning people to life. The decision to have a gay man be a healer was also deliberate; given the trend mentioned earlier for queer characters to be killed for the sake of the plot or the development of other people, making a queer character with deliberate power over life and death was an intentional subversion of the typical queer narrative.

Ian's personal power also plays into his complicated position in regard to the violence of Aaclian society. He has the ability to heal people and himself, but it comes at the expense of draining energy from the people around him. Despite being a healer and the closest thing in the main cast to a pacifist, he is the most lethal of the main characters, capable of killing with a touch should he want to. He notes several times in the story that it is difficult to *stop* draining energy from people around him, even if those people are his

patients, and that a lot of his training as a medic was teaching him to control that particular instinct. So he's a healer whose job is abetting a system teaching children to kill, and his healing itself is tied to the ability to kill others. It places him, as a character, in the middle of the tension in the story—and his choice to use his powers to heal rather than harm makes a statement of what kind of decision leads to someone becoming a hero in this world. There are many people in the story who are more powerful than Ian, or who are more proactive, but they don't buck the system in the same way he does. Through the story, it is revealed that Ian was, at one point, training to be an Advocate himself, but upon having some personal experience with the level of backstabbing that is expected from young people who have graduated, he quit the program to learn to heal instead.

Moreover, he feels extremely guilty about the fact that his magic requires energy from other people, something that the Channel through which he gets his powers confronts him near the end of the story: "You bleed yourself dry healing your friends. Anywhere but Isle Centrale, you'd be dangerously low on energy all the time. You don't sleep and then use your energy to heal other people's insomnia headaches." (*Advocacy* 219). Ian sees himself as a burden on others, and much of his character growth is around accepting that he isn't one—that he is worthy both of other people's care and of being a hero.

The other central character is Vanessa, who I mentioned earlier as being the only mixed-race character in the story, and additionally as someone whose personal story involves dealing with isolation. While Ian is placed in conflicted opposition to the cycle

of violence in Aaclia, Vanessa is thoroughly entrenched in it. The heir to one of the major houses—and the child of the main antagonist—Vanessa was not only raised in the system of advocates, she now acts as an instructor at the school, perpetuating the system onto another generation. Traumatized by her father's insistence on making her an advocate, she helps replicate that trauma in another generation because she thinks that it is the only option. The opening quotation is from one of the other characters—Lysandar—confronting her about the speech she gives the students at the Academy, informing them that they should be prepared to kill each other if necessary.

Vanessa is a character largely shaped by going along with her environment, as opposed to Ian, who manages to avoid the expectation that anyone who has the skill should become an Advocate. Her life is shaped, for a large part of the story, by the fact that she has been trying to go along with her father's wishes, seeking parental validation that she is never going to receive and trying to convince herself that her father is correct in his worldview, which does not allow for anyone to show weakness. This is, of course, a manipulative tactic that prevents members of his house from feeling safe in reaching out for help, or realizing that his behavior is something out of the ordinary, let alone something abusive, and Vanessa is the greatest success his tactics have had. Of course, then, her story relies on deviating from this behavior and realizing that she can take power into her own hands.

Why these story arcs, for these characters? Partially it came down to when I wrote the characters first. I am not the kind of writer who claims that my characters write

themselves—I don't find that entirely true in my experience—but I do get definite ideas of a personality when I begin writing a character. Ian's care for others, willingness to put his own life on the line, and refusal to kill were present in early drafts of the character, and it was extrapolation on how that could have emerged in such a violent culture that led to Ian's struggles with guilt and feeling like he is a burden on others, which in turn leads to his determination to help those same others. Vanessa was always a character who was not very emotionally expressive (to the point where she required another character, her half-brother Kesper, to talk to before she would start expressing emotion in a way that ensured a reader knew she actually had feelings) and was the child of the main villain, without realizing that he was wrong at the beginning. Much like with Damian, asking how these traits came about not only created her conflict—realizing that her isolation and repression, far from helping her, only hurt her further and allowed others to be hurt like she was—but formed the basis for *why* Clarent, her father, was the villain—he was the kind of person who manipulated everyone around him and encouraged toxic coping mechanisms so that nobody would think to challenge him on his own actions.

But there was another reason that these arcs in particular called to me. First, it centered the characters themselves at the center of the narrative. While the defeat of Vanessa's father is important, my intention was to have the main *victory* of Vanessa's story be when she successfully shakes off her father's worldview and starts acting for herself and on what she wants to do. Ian's victory is less about whether or not he aids in solving the murder mystery that has been plaguing his storyline since chapter one, but rather about him finding ways to subvert the system of violence in Aaclia and advocate

for mercy and the ability to solve conflicts without killing. According to the handful of readers I have found, this has mostly been a success.

The other reason is that both of these individual stories work together to enhance one of the larger themes of the book—the importance of human connection and groups working together over the actions of one lone person. The main cast start out acting more or less alone—Vanessa and her brother Kesper are nominally on the same side, but are working in different areas and speaking rarely. Ian is not speaking to anybody about his own problems, instead merely acting as a sounding board for others, and Leo—the final of the central four characters—works alone and often ends up seriously injured for her troubles. It is only when the group begins working together that they make progress, something reflected in Ian and Vanessa’s individual stories. Ian’s lack of self-worth and feeling that he cannot rely on others is disproven in part when he is put in danger and the three other central characters put aside their arguments to help him. Likewise, Vanessa is made to realize the toxicity of her home and her father’s actions when she opens up to Leo about what is happening, and Leo reacts in horror. It is realizing that other people are willing to and capable of helping them that allows these characters to go on to be the heroes of the piece, creating a story that emphasizes the importance of heroes being a group rather than a lone figure, and the essential nature of human connection.

Of course, my own writing isn’t perfect. My characters are all members of the Houses—they are people of relative privilege in the Isles, although some of them did spend time outside of the house system. None of them are othered in their community to

any considerable extent, and Vanessa's self-consciousness about being mixed-race is largely internal, rather than something other people emphasize. Additionally, as I mentioned before, I wrote about queer characters without actually engaging in either dedicated research to make the presence of queer people in this world something that was fully integrated, or discussing any real-world queer issues explicitly in my work. While I don't think a work should *have* to discuss real-world queer issues in order to have queer characters, this remains a choice I made that prevented that topic from being addressed more fully in my work.

All of these are peripheral concerns, though. The most damning critique of *Advocacy* as a story is whether or not it succeeds in its attempt to subvert the violence-based system I created as the setting. Life in Aaclia is brutal if you are a member of the Houses—assassination is not only legal but tacitly encouraged, and there is a high chance you were raised to see yourself as just a tool for your family's use and disposal. Given a system like this, I placed characters in opposition to it—but do they succeed in their arguments against the use of violence?

The main argument that they do not lies in the fact that in the end of the story, despite the discussion throughout on the benefits of mercy, the main antagonist is sentenced to death, and the characters within the narrative overwhelmingly treat this as a good thing. In making the choice to kill Clarent at the end of the story, I felt that I was following the narrative trajectory the rest of the book had moved towards, but whether or not that is a

fit justification for ending a book about healing and mercy with death is, in the end, not my call. I can only present my arguments as to why I did it.

Primarily, my argument is that it was the ending that made sense for the characters. Aaclia, as a society, is not someplace that would avoid the death penalty. It has legal assassination as a regular part of politics; having it avoid the death penalty would strain the limits of belief and be nonsensical. Moreover, being raised in a society where death was a common occurrence and meted out to people for as slim a reason as being a political opponent to someone else, the idea that the affected parties (in this case, Clarent's two children) would not have accepted the death penalty seemed to make little sense to me as well. But the other main antagonist was exiled—surely that could have happened as well?

I chose not to do that because I felt that it did not give the characters of Vanessa and Kesper the closure they deserved. Clarent's actions against them were not physical, for the most part; they were emotionally manipulative, and Clarent's main power in the narrative was in getting other people to agree with him and do his work for him. If he were still alive, I felt that it would be reasonable to say that his children would not feel safe—and a large part of their narrative was about moving to a place where they could feel safety and security.

So how do I reconcile writing a story that emphasizes the importance of mercy while still having characters accept the death of another person, no matter who he was? Is the

freedom and peace of mind of these people worth the death of another person—and how do I feel about having written a book that can legitimately be interpreted as saying yes, it is? I don't know the answer to either of those questions fully. Whether or not I did a sufficient job in the novel of explaining why these characters chose what they did is not for me to decide.

Personally, I would argue that the characters in question *do* show mercy—by allowing their father to have the dignity of a trial, despite being given the opportunity to take revenge into their own hands. Vanessa, near the end of the novel, consciously makes this choice:

“I meant it,” Vanessa said, breathless and exhausted. “No more killing in the dark. No more dealing with problems where nobody can see them. No more freezing the world out. He’s going to court, and then he’ll get the punishment due to him under law.” She forced herself to her feet, her legs wobbling; Kesper caught her as she almost fell.

“You sure?” he asked, voice too quiet for the crowd to hear. “Nobody would blame

us, if—”

“I would,” Vanessa re-asserted. (*Advocacy*, 252).

Given a choice between a murder that nobody would blame her for and a long, painful trial process that would involve her opening up about very personal wounds and putting the trauma and pain of her family on display to an entire nation, Vanessa chooses

the latter because she believes that she alone cannot make the call to kill her father, no matter how much he might deserve death. That is the merciful choice she makes. The society as a whole has not reached the level of the main characters of the story in terms of mercy; in fact, if it had, they would not be as exceptional as they are. They would not be heroes.

Conclusion

So, who can be a hero? And why do I care?

I spent the last chapter dissecting my own writing, but I'll drop in one more comment: all the characters I wrote about there? Their arcs, the ways they intersect with the conflict in the setting in order to highlight the critical issues of both?

None of those characters were originally the focus of the book.

Originally, *Advocacy* was titled *The Advocate's Academy*. The focal characters were a group of children attending it for the first time, and the story had the tone of a macabre *Harry Potter*, where the magic school was, instead, an assassin's academy. The conflicts remained the same—the same antagonist, the same background to the story—but the characters who now form the backbone of the story were supporting characters, the mentors and teachers of that original cast. And the book didn't work. I rewrote it four different times, trying to beat the story into some semblance of order, until I realized: my story *had the wrong heroes*. The world I had made, the conflicts that I had focused on, meant that the characters I was trying to frame as heroes had no connection to the events. It was like telling a story about a flood from the perspective of the person who was watching on the television, rather than the person who was trying to evacuate their own house. An emotional connection to the events was missing.

Those early characters are gone now, existing only in a few in-jokes to myself, names that linger on the mentioned students of the school. But they taught me a very important lesson as a writer: having the right hero can make or break a story, and who that hero is *is entirely dependent on the world you have created*. For a story to work, it is impossible to extricate characters from the world that created them, and both are entirely dependent on the author who created the world. It was a lesson in not rushing into a character idea before I've thought it all the way out, and on the importance of revision, but it was as powerful a lesson on the importance of worldbuilding. You cannot have a certain kind of protagonist if the world does not give them the ability to *be* a protagonist.

In this sense, it works much like our own world. To use a classic example of a protagonist who could never be, I turn to “Shakespeare’s Sister” a thought experiment from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. To summarize the experiment, Woolf asks if—had William Shakespeare a sister, Judith, who was his equal in talent—she would have become as popular, as well-known a name as he. The answer, of course, is no—Judith Shakespeare would never have been sent to school, never have been encouraged to write, received no help from stage managers or actors in getting her work recognized or performed. (*Woolf, A Room of One’s Own*). This applies across other axes of oppression—could an openly queer person be given the same acclaim? Someone who wasn’t white? Someone who didn’t live in England? Much like Judith Shakespeare, we can look to examples of women, of people of color (or people so coded), and other peripheral characters. Could an orc have joined the Fellowship of the Ring, or would they have been shot on sight upon entering Rivendell? As Le Guin herself realizes in later

books and brings to the fore, a woman born on Gont with Ged's magical talent would never have been the hero of *A Wizard of Earthsea*; she would have been turned aside at the doors of Roke.

Unlike in the case of Judith Shakespeare, though, the gateways barring these people from heroism are not immutable. They were created by an author, for a reason. The early stories I mention are not stories about these characters on the peripheries, the characters who cannot be allowed into sacred spaces and war councils, those who are not trusted within the world that the author has created. And in some cases, the 'reason' behind these obstructions, these gateways, are thoughtlessness and inherent bias; the idea that because our world was unaccustomed to female warriors, so to would a fantasy world exclude half the population from combat, for example. As people still argue today on the internet, a story where the protagonist is revealed to be bisexual would be dishonest, lying to the reader. These peripheral stories are more difficult stories to tell, bringing in issues we don't want to think about—addressing the empathy gap we don't want to admit we have. It's *harder*, people say, to write these stories...but is it? Is the writing itself actually harder?

“The core of the problem isn't actually that women are harder to write. The problem is that readers have been trained to like women less. Writers have to work against a weight of deeply-embedded societal bigotry which literally, actually causes readers to have trouble empathizing with anyone who's not a straight cis white guy. We see this empathy failure everywhere and not just in fiction; for example, people actually have a harder time perceiving women's pain versus that of men. And

everything gets worse as you add intersections: race if the character isn't white, gender identity if the woman isn't cis, age if the woman isn't young, and so on. If you really hate someone, you'll find even their laughter a grating irritant, and a challenge that must be put down." (*N.K. Jemisin, Tricking the Reader into Acceptance*).

And that is a lot to ask of a writer. How do you write a story involving someone whose laughter irritates you, whose pain you are blind to? It requires something more than writing: it requires introspection, examining yourself and the biases you hold, and piecing them apart to see what might lie beyond them. Next to that, even the herculean effort of worldbuilding seems easy. At least, with worldbuilding, all you have to do is build—you don't have to deconstruct. You, like Tolkien, can create your world in its beauty and keep it as it is—and after you die, perhaps generation and generation of writers will be dedicated to keeping your world as it is, rewriting it again and again in another slew of Western-Europe Elves-and-Dwarves fantasy where the true king returns and all is set right in the land, the Orcs are cast out, women are allowed perhaps one sword, one breath of air, people of color are peripheral, and queer people dead or nonexistent. That's easy. That requires dismantling no structures, questioning no biases. Those stories are easy to like.

Or, well, they are if you're the person who gets to be the hero. If you want to, to crib words from Torgensen, be a "broad-chested hero who slays monsters, and runs off with beautiful women." If you look at the fairest elves and the men of Gondor and see yourself

as you want to be, or if you look at the Archmages of Roke and see who you could be as you grow older.

But what if the only place you see yourself in these *fantasies* is in the orc, the woman who only exists to be run away with or killed for a man's pain, in the monster who is killed, time and again, by the hero? In the women and dragons whose existence spells the end for Roke? In the queer character who, even in theory, has their existence decried as duplicitous, as lying? What kind of *fantasy* is that? If you turn the empathy gap around, if you see it from the side where *you* are the person who nobody empathizes with, who becomes the joke or the monster or the villain, whose pain is unseen and whose joy is repulsive...where can you find your respite, your consolation?

This is an important question, because if we return to Tolkien, our origin point, we find that this is precisely what he declared to be the virtue of fantasy:

“First of all: if written with art, the prime value of fairy-stories will simply be that value which, as literature, they share with other literary forms. But fairy-stories offer also, in a peculiar degree or mode, these things: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation, all things of which children have, as a rule, less need than older people.”
(*On Fairy-Stories*).

Fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation. These remain vital to the success of the genre—they are the urges and desires that underly the desire to build other worlds, to invite people into them. We want to see a place that is *other* from our own world, but

where we can still find familiar landscapes and figures. We read fantasy for the breaths of air it provides, for the escape from our normal lives and the recovery from our hardships. This is not to say that fantasy should be all happiness; let us not forget that our books have touched upon war, apocalypse, and the inevitable end of great ages. They grapple with the fear of mortality and the difficulty of resolving moral dilemmas in a world where there is no perfect solution. But one form of consolation is *company*. Seeing other people, people like us, going through things and coming out successful, or just coming out alive. The awareness that we are seen, that there is someone—somewhere—who feels that our stories are worth writing. This is its own form of solace.

This is the reason why I care about who gets to be a hero in a fantasy story—because who is the hero, and who is not, determines who can find the most sustenance in these books, in this genre, and I believe that we all have need of its wonder, its escapes and its heroes. I'm not the only one who feels this way—slowly but surely, the genre is changing. As Le Guin's works provide a microcosm of, the genre as a whole is coming into its maturity, looking back at its roots and beginning to question their biases. New fantasy writers are asking questions—why should a story be about white people? What makes the pseudo-European setting better than any others? Why shouldn't your main character be a woman, or a person of color, or queer—or an orogene, or an orc, or a person with mental illnesses, or a person who committed atrocities, someone who is hard to empathize with but who is trying to do the right thing?

Don't they need heroes as well?

Appendix: Excerpt from *Advocacy*

Chapter One

It was, Ian thought, a bit early in the year for there to be a murder. The Month of Storms had only just abated, and the New Years' Celebration still was present on the edge of his memory—Channels, the Court season hadn't started yet, and that was what usually started the first round of bloody-mindedness among the students. Still, he supposed there were always overachievers.

The student who'd been sent to fetch him was new. Ian hadn't seen them before—they were small, with trim on their uniform that said they were from House Maitlin and short hair a shade darker than their skin, the warm-brown of polished wood. They shifted nervously in the doorway—the clearest sign of their freshness to the Academy and what happened there. This had to be their first murder.

Ian pushed himself up from his desk and headed for the door, offering them what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"They'll be fine," he offered, pushing open the heavy door to the Infirmary and letting the Maitlin student go in front of him. Their movements were jerky and startled—but he was used to dealing with that, setting a gloved hand on their shoulder, making sure his voice was low and calm. "I mean it. They'll be fine. I've done this a hundred times."

The student glanced up at him, and took in a deep breath. Slowly, Ian felt them relax, and pulled his hand back.

"You alright?"

"I'm—I'm fine, Medic Endriet," they stuttered out. "The—uh, the attack, it happened in the third ring—"

“Alright. I can find it from there. You go get some rest.”

They ran off, clearly grateful, and Ian sighed, tucking his hands into his pockets and heading for the third ring. The Advocate’s Academy was structured in concentric circles; the Infirmary, where he worked, was out in the fifth ring, while classrooms and the like were further in, and the rooms of staff—including, technically, his room—were closest to the center. He moved on autopilot through the curving grey-stone walls; he could tell when he got close to the third ring because he could hear the babble of a concerned crowd.

Outside the Academy, murders usually made people scatter. Inside it, they drew crowds, students alternately horrified and looking for pointers for their own work. Sure enough, there was a crowd—amidst it he saw a familiar head of red-gold curls, a voice raised with long practice directing the students to stand back, give the body space. Avriol Lysandar—the speaker—clearly relaxed when he saw Ian approaching, the short man offering Ian a smile over the head of an even shorter student.

“Alright, everyone, let Medic Endriet through, *now*,” he said, and the crowd started moving. It was mostly unnecessary—nobody wanted to get in between a Medic and a murder scene—but Ian appreciated it anyway, moving forward until he could see the body.

It was an older student—a member of House Havaris, by her clothing. A mess of copper curls were splayed under her head, and blood had soaked through her clothes, creating a unpleasant pool under her body. *No wonder so few of the students were trying to examine the body.* Most of them were still squeamish about blood. Ian dropped to one

knee in the pool, pulling his gloves off and noticing how the crowd moved back as he did.

And then he shut his eyes, giving up his regular sight to focus on the more important version of it—*lifesense*, the unique ability of mages of death-and-life. In it, Ian's hands shone warm and bright like stars; he was carrying more energy than he really needed to. The crowd around him appeared as a sea of glowing figures, brightness depending on how much energy they had—people who were injured, sick, or exhausted seemed to have a dark filter thrown over their light.

Motes of light spun from them, filling the space—as soon as Ian had arrived, they'd started gravitating towards him, spinning into star-strings of light and energy, feeding into him as he walked among the unwitting donors. Well, not entirely unwitting—people *knew* that when you were around a servant of death-and-life, your own energy was getting drained. It was one of the many reasons people found Medics like Ian...unnerving.

Well, it's not like I can stop it from happening, Ian thought. Externally, though, he turned to Lysandar. "What happened?"

"It seems like someone was trying to complete the Trial of Blood early," Anda—as the man usually liked being called—was much less wary around Ian than the students were. He was an adult, and moreover, had spent more time than most around Medics, Ian especially. "It was a knife wound in the back that actually did it, and then bleeding out. Instructor Tyraine took the student away to talk to them."

What's Vanessa going to do, congratulate them? Give them tips? Ian shut down the bitter thoughts as soon as they came. This—death—was a normal part of being an

Advocate. Vanessa—Instructor Tyraine—was still an Advocate because she was comfortable with that. Ian had quit and become a Medic because he wasn't.

In any case, he could have determined cause of death himself, but he trusted Anda's opinion. Carefully, he pressed his bare hand to the young woman's forehead and focused.

Some people called this ability the "touch of life," but Ian had always found that overly poetic. And it ignored half of what his magic could do. More practically, it was the ability to transfer vast amounts of energy through skin-to-skin contact. It was incredibly useful in healing. It was also more lethal than any knife in the back.

But Ian wasn't in the business of killing people. Instead, he fed a slow, glowing stream of energy into the corpse, eyes searching through her form until—*there*. Faint, a guttering candle-flame next to the stars that were other people. But there still was a memory of life there, a draining bit of energy. There always was—for seventy-two hours, the life would still be there, clinging faintly to its old form, and you could heal a person. More than that, and the life would fade, returning to the waters or the channels or wherever it went after death, and even the greatest Medic couldn't raise someone.

Fortunately, they hadn't gotten to that stage, and as Ian fed the small spark light and energy, drawing more from the crowd to make sure he didn't run too low, he saw the flame start burning brighter, growing until—finally—it was self-sustaining, creating its own light rather than just reflecting what Ian had put into it.

He heard the woman give a sudden, heaving breath, all the more startling because of its prior absence, and he let his eyes slide open, pulling his gloves back on as exhaustion settled around him like a heavy coat. Healing—especially from death—was

exhausting. Not only for him, but for the person he healed—while the woman was breathing, she wouldn't wake for at least a day as her body recovered. That was probably for the best—if she got into trouble or overstrained herself when she was recovering, she had a high chance of accidentally catapulting herself back into death.

She'd rest in the infirmary for a few days, possibly up to a week, after which she could return to her classes. Of course, she might not. Their first brush with death changed people's minds about being an Advocate, some of the time—it was enough to get many people to return back to their houses and consider a change in careers. Others, of course, went the other direction, panicking and desperate, determined to strike out in revenge against the person who had killed them. Still, though, all of this was supposed to be good training.

Ian wasn't sure how much he believed that.

Carefully, he stood, feeling the crowd start to disperse around him. Lysander was still there, and steadied Ian as he swayed upon standing—Ian winced as he accidentally yanked some energy from the other man, but it was like a splash of cold water to the face, sharpening his nerves and restoring energy to aching muscles.

“Sorry,” he managed, and Anda shrugged, waving it off.

“It's fine—it wasn't much. You alright?”

Ian shrugged. “I'll be fine. More importantly—do we know why people are pulling the knives out this early in the season? Were their families pushing them toward this—”

Anda shrugged, shoving his curls out of his face as he did. “Don't know. Instructor Tyraine might, if she's asking the right questions, but the chances of her telling

me...” He trailed off. It was no secret that House Tyraine and House Avriol hated each other, for reasons that Ian didn’t know and wasn’t too interested in asking about. Still, it meant that even on technically-neutral ground like the Academy, there was a bit of animosity.

“Well, I’ll ask,” Ian decided, before seeing that one student hadn’t left with the others. She was familiar—like him, she was a foundling brought into House Endriet, the house of death-and-life. “Ilari, can I help you?”

“Uh—I was told to give this to you, when you were free.” She thrust a small rolled piece of paper at him—a note. The somewhat awestruck look in her eyes was all Ian needed to know who it was from. *I take it Ileone is back on Isle Centrale, then.* He looked over at Lysandar.

“Would you mind taking her—” he gestured toward the sleeping ex-murder-victim, “back to the Infirmary? I wouldn’t get this unless it was something important.” As Anda nodded, Ian unrolled the small scroll.

Ian—

Incident down by the docks. Too far gone for healing, but I want your opinion.

Something weird.

—Leo.

As Ian had thought. He shoved the paper into his pocket and dusted off his gloved hands.

“Thanks, Ili—go get back to your class. I’ll be back in a moment. Let’s just hope nobody else dies in the meantime—”

“I’ll tell everyone to put their knives on the desk where we can all see them and sit in their chairs like good trainee advocates,” Anda said mock-seriously, and Ian rolled his eyes at the other man as he headed for the door.

A short walk later found Ian in the familiar territory of the docks of Isle Centrale. As the largest of the eight Aaclian Isles, it had the largest docks—but at the moment, this section was empty and silent. Unsurprising, if there had been a murder. Ian had grown up here—he knew how it worked. The second something happened, you made yourself scarce. The last thing you wanted was to get the attention of whatever Advocate would inevitably come looking.

He hadn’t been back here for more than brief moments in years, but he still knew his way around. Besides, Leo was not a hard person to find. Ileone—better known to her friends, of whom there were few, as Leo, and better known to the public in general as the Last Legate-Commander—was crouched on the ground, her signature long, white coat pale in the gloom from the tall buildings around them.

Hearing his footsteps—or, given that it was Leo, just knowing this was when he would arrive—Leo stood, brushing off her leggings and turning to face him. Even standing, she was shorter by him by a good foot, tenacity and muscle shoved into a frame that seemed to small to hold them. Her eyes were the stained-glass color of the Channeltouched, those who had been born in one of the six houses; Leo had a rare version, one eye being tea-green like shallow seawater and the other a vibrant, sunset red-pink. Having both trained on you was an unnerving experience, if you weren’t used to it.

Ian was, so he just raised a hand in greeting as he hurried over. “I came as soon as I could—there was a murder at the Academy, and—” he trailed off at Leo’s understanding nod—she knew that he was the only Medic on staff.

“Killing already? That’s worrying.” She commented. “But—come here, it’s just around the corner. You’re not going to be able to heal them—this person was skilled.” Of course, she wanted him to inspect a murder scene. He wasn’t even surprised. “I want to know your opinion on *how* they were killed.”

Ian rounded the corner with no small amount of trepidation, and immediately sighed. That...was more blood than he had expected. Whoever had done this fell into the small portion of Advocates who were both talented and *messy*.

The body seemed small, especially with most of its chest missing. The attacker had cut away the internal organs, leaving a gaping cavity in place of them. It was a smart, if gruesome, tactic. Even a Medic couldn’t heal someone with missing internal organs—the energy required to grow them back was too much. All trying accomplished was dooming the person to a second, more painful death drowning in their own blood.

Carefully, not removing his gloves, he rolled the body over, scanning it with both his physical eyes and with lifesense. Leo let him work, leaning against a nearby building, arms folded tight over her chest. From here, Ian could see the red lining of her coat, as stark as blood against stone.

“This was the actual killing blow,” he commented, pointing to a cut at the back of the neck. “Thrown from a distance with incredible precision—it severed the spine. There wasn’t a struggle, either. Most of the blood comes from the organs being removed post-mortem.” He turned the body back over, looking at the face. There was something

familiar about it, something tugging at the back of Ian's memory. "Do you know who this was?"

"Not...really anyone connected to anything," Leo admitted. "A dock worker—worked for some houses and some independent shipping companies, but...nothing special. That just makes this more confusing—"

Ian tuned her out, looking at the face again, studying it. *There's no way...* it had been over a decade since he'd last seen the man he was thinking of. It was probably just a coincidence that this man looked like him. Still, he felt a cold sense of dread settle in his gut.

"Leo? Any reason you're so interested in this case in particular?" It took an effort to keep his voice light. Leo—whose eyes had been unfocused, somewhere in the air above the buildings—turned to look at him.

"Well, it's a murder of a civilian that was *clearly* done by a trained Advocate—and that breaks the Aaclian Accords, and, well, my *job* is keeping those." That was all true. The Order of the Barren Isle—the Order for which Leo was the newest and, now, only member—was the law enforcement of the Isles, in theory. "And...Ian, there aren't footprints, anywhere near the scene. With this much blood—"

There should have been footprints. If Ian felt cold dread earlier, this sensation was closer to his veins turning, inch by inch, into ice. A talented Advocate, with unnatural skill with a knife. One who targeted people without regard to the Accords, one who didn't leave footprints—

"Leo—"

“It *has to be her*, Ian.” Leo pushed herself away from the wall, her hands balled into fists. “Nobody else kills like this, but every record of the Masked Killer puts this as the method. It’s her again.”

The Masked Killer was what they called her, in the absence of any name or idea who she might be. A trained advocate in dark clothing and a white porcelain mask who didn’t clearly work *for* any house—but ceaselessly worked against Leo’s Order. As much as Ian hated it, Leo was probably right. She was, after all, the one best-suited to recognize the signs; she’d been hunting the elusive murderer for two years, ever since the attack that left her the sole survivor of an attack by the Killer.

“She hasn’t done anything in years, Leo,” Ian pointed out, looking at the man’s face again. “Do...you know if this man had any ties to the Order?” It was a reasonable enough question; the Killer had only struck people related to the Order before. Ian just hoped that Leo couldn’t see that he knew the answer to his own question.

It was impossible—it was *impossible*—but, somehow, the Killer had found them.

“I...don’t think so. Ian? Why are you staring at him like that?”

Waters, he swore in his mind. She needed to know, at least a bit of it. What he could say, without breaking promises or digging up old wounds.

“I...think I recognize him. When I lived here, there was another kid who looked like this—his name was Adino, and the rumors said he was an Order brat.”

Order brats—children trained as advocates whose parents weren’t in any house, but were the advocates of the Order of the Barren Isle. Raised on that lonely spur of rock, they were taught to fight—but as the Order had gone into decline, they’d left. Most

people didn't know about them, which was fair—they weren't, in the grand scheme of things, very important. But Leo would know what he was talking about.

“An Order—his parents were in the Order? Why was he in the streets, then?”

Ian shrugged, pushing himself to standing. “I don't know, but there were a lot of kids who people said were from the Barren Isle. None of them wanted to talk about it, but I got the sense that even then, the Order wasn't doing very well—and most other houses wouldn't take them. They never really liked the Order, just put up with it.”

“And you think she might have figured out he was connected to the Order and killed him?” Leo stepped up, putting a hand on Ian's arm and jerking him out of his thoughts. “Are you sure about this?”

“I don't know how she would have figured out where he was from,” Ian admitted. “But it's a connection. I don't think you can really afford to overlook it.”

“Hm.” Leo frowned, looking at the body again. “Ian, could you remember any more names? If there are more of these kids out there—”

Yes. He knew the names, but—he'd promised. They'd all promised, to put the Order behind them. It seemed like the only way to survive—ignore the bloodshed, ignore the growing panic and darkness, put it *behind* them and swear, *swear* to never talk about it again. He opened his mouth to say he could, and the words caught in his throat.

“I...don't know. I'll tell you if I remember any.” It was a feeble lie, but Leo—focused on something else, already—didn't notice. *Thank the Channels.*

“I wonder if there are records of them, if those survived the Massacre,” Leo wondered aloud. Ian winced at the mention of it—the Barren Isle Massacre, the event that was clearly supposed to be the end of the Order two years ago. He'd been studying to be

a medic when he'd gotten the news. The Order of the Barren Isle, once the strongest force in the Isles, reduced to one member by a mysterious killer. Ileone, alone on the bloodstained rocks, the mantle of Legate-Commander falling on her shoulders because there was nobody left.

"I'll stop keeping you from your job," Leo said abruptly, and Ian got the feeling that she, too, had been drawn into thoughts of the Massacre. "If you know any other names—just send me a note, or something. I'll figure it out, though." She exhaled, a long breath that blew some of the auburn hair falling in her face back out of it. "I wish this wasn't happening *now*, of all times. Court's about to open, I don't need *this*, too—"

Ian rested a hand on her shoulder. "If you ever need to talk to someone—"

"I know, I know," she actually managed a smile when she looked over at him. "The Infirmary door is always open. I'll see you later, alright?"

"Alright," Ian said, although that word was the furthest possible from the way he felt. He shoved his hands back into his pockets, starting on the walk back to the Academy, focusing on each footstep as a way to distract himself from his thoughts.

The Order brats. A whole chapter of his life he'd pushed away, stamped into dust when House Endriet took him in. It didn't *matter* anymore. That was what they'd all had to believe, just to keep moving.

But then, how had the Killer found Adino?

Chapter Two

Vanessa closed her eyes, taking a moment to gather herself as she felt the temperature around her cool. She'd never been a fan of public speaking, but that didn't matter—it was expected of her. Here, she wasn't *Vanessa*; she was *Instructor Tyraine*, and she had to act as such.

The long, high-ceilinged meeting hall she was in was half-full of students; while there was always a talk like this after the first murder of the year, every student wasn't obligated to attend. Only the new students and those the Instructors felt needed a reminder of the reality of Advocate life were made to be here, although others could come. Vanessa wasn't sure why they'd *want* to—it wasn't really a celebration.

“If I could have your attention,” she began, stepping forward so she was standing directly in front of the large windows at the back of the room. The light from them cast her face into shadow, making her expression hard to see—which was just what she wanted. She didn't *like* public speaking, but that didn't mean she wasn't *good* at it. “As I'm sure you've all heard, we have the first confirmed kill of the year.”

All the conversation stopped as she spoke; she let herself have a small smile at that. Eyes were swiveling forward toward her—some of the students interested, some bored, some—the ones who had heard this before—more apprehensive. She couldn't blame them.

“Havaris en Irin, who was killed, is in the Infirmary; I am sure she will make a full recovery. Most killed in training situations do.” She let that moment of relief sit for a

moment. “You all are here because the Academy believes it is important, after an event like this, to ensure you all understand exactly the job you are training for.”

She wanted to pace, but that would be distracting to the students, so she just clasped her hands behind her back, nails digging into her skin. “The job of an Advocate is to be a tool of their house.” An old speech, a traditional speech, one she’d heard every day since childhood. She could recite it by memory, which was why, she thought, she was the one who gave it. “That is what you are here to learn. Here, we teach you to argue a case before the court, to protect the members of your House who are critically important, to broker a deal with other houses—and, most importantly, to remove obstacles that impede your House’s progress.” *Remove obstacles* sounded so much softer than *kill people*, but everyone knew what she meant. At least, she hoped they did—if not, the only people they would be hurting were themselves. Best be explicit.

“These obstacles include each other.” Her enunciation was perfect, just as she’d been taught it. “Once you leave this Academy, or even while you are in it, your Houses are not going to agree. They will obstruct each other. They will feud, and you will be called upon to solve these problems. The classmate next to you may be called to do the same, for their house. Neither of you will have the opportunity to refuse.”

She took a breath. “*That* is the true point of the Trial of Blood. Not just whether or not you can *kill*—whether or not you can kill someone who you’ve eaten with, trained with for a year or more. If you can, you show your house that you are reliable.” She paused, for a moment. “When full Advocates duel, someone will always die, no matter your prior connections to each other. And those times, they’ll know how to kill you so nobody, not even someone as skilled as Medic Endriet, can bring you back.”

She scanned the room again, and caught—surprisingly—a shock of curly red hair at the back of the room. *Instructor Avriol?* She wasn't sure why he would have dropped in for the speech, although a member of House Avriol appearing just as she spoke about houses not getting along was amusingly apropos. She looked down at the students again, singling out one in particular—Tyraine Caelano, a member of her own house. They were one of the students who'd been specifically requested to hear this. As Vanessa had expected, they looked stricken, for a moment.

They're too kind for this line of work, Vanessa thought—but she couldn't *make* someone leave, no matter how much she thought it would be better for them.

“I know this seems like a harsh worldview, especially to those of you who were not raised in the Six Houses.” She let her tone soften, slightly. Sympathy would do more here than unrelenting bleakness. “But it is the truth, and sugarcoating it would do all of you a disservice. There is no room for mercy in the life of an Advocate, and if that is not the life for you, I suggest you turn away immediately. For those of you who remain—interact. Gain information from each other. I do not suggest you all become paranoiacs or hermits. But remember—your classmate today might be your enemy tomorrow.”

She shut her eyes for a moment, feeling ice coat her arms as she struggled to keep a lid on her own feelings on the matter. Those didn't matter—she was Instructor Tyraine, here, and Instructor Tyraine's opinions were only those of the House.

She looked around the room, one last time, making sure the students had paid attention, and stepped back. “You are dismissed to return to your classes. I will be in my office if any of you wish to speak with me, as will many of the other Instructors. Your House's personal Instructor may be the most fitting for you to speak with about this

matter.” Each house did things slightly differently, after all, and Vanessa couldn’t pretend to speak for all of them.

As the students filed out of the room, she let herself exhale, tension falling from her shoulders and the ice slowly evaporating. It had crept all the way up to her elbows, she realized—but at least it wasn’t fire. That would be—that would be bad.

Hm. Instructor Avriol hadn’t left the room, instead lingering in the doorway. She raised an eyebrow at him as she moved to leave.

Being in the same room as Avriol Lysandar wasn’t an entirely pleasant experience. She was aware of the rumors surrounding him—he was one of the people in House Avriol that even his own house saw as “dangerous” due to his connection to Lies-and-Truth, the Channel and the magic of his house. By rights, he should have been heir to his house, much as Vanessa was heir to hers, but he’d been removed from the line of succession, passed over for his own cousin. It was an uncomfortable reminder that she, too, could be pulled from her position at the slightest show of weakness—and she was sure her father didn’t have much use for a daughter who wasn’t a fit heir.

It didn’t help that Lysandar looked almost *obnoxiously* Aaclian, his skin dark with a smattering of freckles, his hair curly and vibrant-colored, his build strong, if not particularly tall. Vanessa crossed her arms, painfully aware of her own prematurely white hair, the death-pale pallor her skin appeared as to anyone used to normal people’s appearance, the way she stood taller than most of the men around her. Lysandar had never pointed out that Vanessa looked, well, *foreign*. He probably never would—for all that he was a member of House Avriol, he seemed like a decent person.

But he didn’t have to say it for Vanessa to know it was true.

“What is it?” She asked, hoping her voice came out less icy than it felt in her throat. Given Lysandar’s expression, it didn’t entirely succeed.

“Just reporting in on Irin’s condition,” he said. *The student who was hurt.* Vanessa nodded for him to continue. “Ian said she’s going to be fine, but she’ll probably have to sleep for a day or so, and she should be excused for classes—and from sparring practice for a bit longer, her spine got hit pretty bad. He’d tell you this himself, but he got called away for a minute by a message.”

Vanessa couldn’t stop the polite smile she’d affixed to her face from dropping off entirely, just for a moment. Lysandar definitely noticed, but it wasn’t really a secret that the person most likely to call Ian away was the Last Legate-Commander of the Order, and it was even less of a secret that Vanessa and the woman were...not on the best terms.

Ileone. It had been years since Vanessa had even spoken to her, thanks to no small effort on, she imagined, both of their parts. That...was probably for the best.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said, shaking her thoughts out of her head and leaving the room, holding the door for Lysandar. “I’ll pass the news to the other Instructors about classes and the sparring. Did Medic Endriet say anything about if visitors would be allowed?” Sometimes, if the situation was particularly precarious or messy, other students were told not to come visit their companion.

Lysandar shook his head. “No—I don’t think he had time, but he’ll tell you later, I suppose.” He paused—they were at the cross where he’d turn away to go to his office, and she’d continue on to hers. “I hope you don’t mind me asking, Instructor Tyraine, but—do you really believe that speech you give?”

She blinked at him, surprised. “I...of course I do. Shouldn’t you, of all people, be able to tell that?” He could detect lies, after all.

He shrugged. “There’s—it’s complicated. There’s a difference between saying what you think is true and believing it’s right, you know? I like investigating that. Anyway, sorry to take your time.” He turned, before thinking for a moment and turning back. “By the way, I think I saw your brother heading into the Academy on the way here. You expecting him?”

Vanessa frowned, the sudden topic shift surprising her. “I...wasn’t, but that rarely effects whether or not he shows up. I’ll see you later, Instructor Avriol.”

Lysandar raised a hand in farewell, heading down the hallway at last.

Vanessa frowned, thinking over his words again. Something he said was bothering her—*there’s a difference between saying what you think is true and believing it’s right*. Why would he call attention to that? It didn’t matter what Vanessa thought was *right*—that didn’t come into the picture of an Advocate at all. Moral decisions like that were left to the House Lord, usually. And contradicting them tended to get...complicated. She turned, returning to her office to get ready for Kesper’s arrival.

Ian, too, was returning to his office—but someone was already there waiting for him. A figure dressed in the blue-and-orange of House Tyraine was leaning against the stone wall, flipping through a small red notebook with one hand. His hair was a bright copper-red and long, tied sloppily back into a tail; when he looked up to find the source of the approaching footsteps, his freckle-spattered face broke into a grin.

He was getting better at that—it almost looked sincere, this time.

“Medic Endriet! And here I was, thinking that you’d quit and nobody had had the heart to tell me.”

Tyraine en Kesper was a familiar sight around the Infirmary, something Ian wasn’t sure how he felt about. He raised a hand in greeting, watching as the man pushed off the wall and slipped his notebook into the side pocket on his belt where it usually lived.

“I wouldn’t quit unless I was sure whoever would replace me could do a half-decent job,” he commented, pulling the thick wooden door to the Infirmary open and holding it until Kesper followed him. “What are you doing here, anyway? Time off?” The question was only half-serious; Kesper was in his Advocate’s uniform, and there was no reason Kesper would *actually* spend whatever dregs of free time he got visiting *Ian*.

“I wish,” Kesper snorted, confirming Ian’s suspicions. As always, his tone was more wry than his expressions and generally flamboyant method of acting would suggest. Ian collapsed into the main chair at his desk; Kesper remained standing, leaning against the desk just close enough to be encroaching on Ian’s space, which was—pretty normal, for Kesper. “No, I’ve got a message for Vana—” Kesper, these days, was the only person who called Tyraine Vanessa *Vana* out loud— “and I thought I’d drop by in the meantime. Can’t miss a chance to annoy my favorite medic.”

“And to see what I might know about what House Endriet is planning for the next year,” Ian pointed out, raising an eyebrow. Kesper had the common decency to duck his head, avoiding Ian’s eyes at being caught in such an obvious ploy.

“Suspecting my motives? Really? You wound me, Medic Endriet—”

“And you’re lying to me, so I don’t think you can complain,” Ian pointed out. There was no real venom in it—they both knew how this worked. Kesper was the Chief Advocate for House Tyraine—his job and, to a very real extent, his *life* were devoted to improving his house. When he’d first shown up a half-year ago, he hadn’t learned to be subtle, yet, asking prying questions about Ian’s past and his House.

Now, though, it had turned into a game. Ian wouldn’t give him information, and Kesper, jokes aside, didn’t really expect him too—but the conversations were, for whatever reason, fun, and so Ian saw no problem continuing them. You couldn’t trust Advocates, but that didn’t mean you couldn’t enjoy being around them, so long as you knew what you were doing.

Ian leaned back in his chair, registering again how tired he was from the healing earlier in the day. It was tempting to start drawing in from the people around him—the hardest part of Medic training was learning to resist that urge. You couldn’t pull from your patients, without risking their lives. Running a hand through his hair, he looked up to see that Kesper was looking at him, glass-orange eyes curious.

“You alright, though? I mean this in the best way possible, but you look like you haven’t slept.”

Ian raised an eyebrow instantly, slipping into lifestense. He was tired—that much was obvious—but Kesper himself looked exhausted, despite his outward attempts to mask it.

“And yet, I’m better off than you. You *haven’t* slept in...” he paused, estimating. “Five days?”

“Six,” Kesper confided, “if you really have to know.” For a moment, the smile he wore slipped, a crease forming between his eyes—as soon as it appeared, though, it was gone. “It should get better once the Court has opened. The preparation is always the hardest—once it starts, I can relax while everyone else scrambles to catch up.”

“So you’re planning something big this year,” Ian guessed, smiling when Kesper’s eyes widened slightly. *He didn’t mean to let that slip. Channels, he must really be tired.*

“You know I can’t confirm that,” Kesper said, looking rueful at his mistake. As always, though, he bounced back. “If you’re that interested, come watch the day Court opens—it’ll be a fun show, always is. I’d love to see you there.”

Ian sighed. “That’d be nice, but I actually do work here, not just talk to people—and that day is the single day most likely to cause two of these kids to knife each other.” That reminded him—he did, actually, have work to do. “And you have a job to do too, I think, so unless there’s anything you need to ask, I’m afraid I’ll have to kick you out.”

He wasn’t feigning the regret—he *liked* talking to Kesper, who opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it, pushing himself away from the desk.

“Well, since you’ve asked, Lord Tyraine does want to know if there’s been any sign of change in Lord Endriet’s neutrality policy—”

“No,” Ian said, without even looking up. *That’s the information he’s been after.* It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, though. House Endriet had remained staunchly neutral for longer than Ian had been alive, only taking a stance if there was a direct threat either to all the Isles or to the House in particular. Honestly, it was a policy Ian was grateful for.

“Well, I had to try,” Kesper said, not too ruffled by Ian’s swift dismissal of the idea. “I’ll see you around, alright, Medic Endriet? If I’m ever dropping a message off with Vana again.”

“If you feel the need to bother me while I’m working, the Infirmary door is always open,” Ian said, and got an almost-genuine smile from Kesper again. Most advocates were secretive, but Kesper—he never seemed to be being genuine even when he looked at you. It was strange, since he didn’t seem like a duplicitous person.

Still, he had more important things to do than think about Kesper. Kesper, or Leo, or the Order or the Killer—he shoved all those thoughts to the back of his mind. He was a Medic, and he had a job to do.

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