

To Be or Not to Be:
On the Ontology and Morality of
Metafictional Characters in *The Dirge City*
Story

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of MA (by
Research) at the University of Central Lancashire

September 2013

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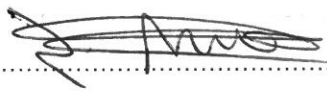
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Abstract

The Dirge City Story is a speculative metafiction about a character that learns of his own fictionality, and the fictionality of his world, the way he comes to terms with this knowledge and how his newfound understanding affects the choices he makes. The story is set in the mind of the author; it examines the relationship between protagonists, antagonists and conflict in story-creation, and attempts to subvert stereotypes within the fantasy genre and comment on storytelling within the genre.

This thesis is also a critical exploration of the ontology of self-aware fictional characters and the effect of self-awareness on morality. By examining the second act from *The Dirge City Story*, it investigates the context in which metafictional characters can be said to exist, how they come to terms with the awareness of their fictional existence and under what conditions can morality be sustained in a metafictional world. Throughout the thesis, the relationship between the author, the reader and the characters is scrutinised, with a focus on how their relations affects the characters' ontologies and the consequences for their attitudes towards morality.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Director of Studies, Dr Robin Purves, for his constant support and honest advice throughout the time I spent researching and writing this thesis. His help was invaluable, and I am very grateful for having someone with such a wealth of knowledge to supervise my research, and for that knowledge to be so readily available. I would also like to thank my Second Supervisors, Dr Catharine Frances and Dr Helen Day. Catharine's unflinching support, confidence in my abilities and sound advice kept me going on many occasions when I felt like sitting down and giving up, and her input was always enlightening. Helen's affinity for, and understanding of, the fantasy genre was of great assistance to me during the creative aspect of this thesis, and her friendly demeanour made coming in for progress updates and meetings an enjoyable experience rather than a necessary chore.

My proof readers, Shazmin Bahadur and Noor A Jahangir, also deserve thanks, for slogging through my thesis on such short notice and providing two very different perspectives on my work – that of the non-academic fantasy novice and the very academic fantasy author, respectively.

I am grateful to the University of Central Lancashire for the use of its facilities and resources, for becoming a second (or third) home to me, and for financing my degree through the Gilbertson Scholarship, as I would not have been able to venture into postgraduate education on my own finances. I also extend my gratitude to the staff at the Graduate Research School for their understanding and help throughout my time on this course, some of whom went above and beyond the call of duty for me.

Finally, as ever, I wish to say 'thank you' to my friends and family. They supported me throughout my research and believed in me when I doubted myself.

Writing Metaphyction: An Introduction

How do metafictional characters come to terms with the knowledge they have been given about their own fictionality, and what effect does a metafictional status have on morality? Before I begin to unpack these questions, examine their implications and attempt to answer them, it is important to define the terms within the questions and clarify what is meant by them in this context. Ontology is 'the science or study of being; that branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence' (*OED*), it is the way one looks at the nature of the existence of entities and events, and categorises them, an inquiry into what it means to exist. Metafiction is a term in literary theory that is used to describe 'fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions (especially naturalism) and narrative techniques' (*OED*). A metafictional character, then, is a character in a fiction that exhibits metafictional qualities – a character aware of his/her own fictionality. Morality is 'the branch of knowledge concerned with right and wrong conduct' (*OED*) and, in this context, it is meant in those general terms. Therefore, an examination of 'morality' here means the inquiry into what is right and wrong in a fictional world.

The first of the two investigations that I seek to carry out concerns the proposed Being or non-Being of self-aware fictional characters. In which context, if any, can we say that metafictional characters exist? And, assuming they do exist, how do the characters deal with their awareness of their fictional existence? As a consequence of the results of the first investigation, I will inquire into whether morality should still inhere in a metafictional world. If nothing is *real*, can one even carry out a moral or immoral action? If so, does the morality in question pertain to the characters, the author or the reader? Who decides what is right or

wrong? Both investigations will be carried out through creative practice by writing *The Dirge City Story* (TDCS) and then unpacked in my exegesis.

My interest in this area of research grew out of an observation made whilst playing *Fallout 3*, a role-playing video game set in a post-nuclear dystopia in which the gamer is given *carte blanche* to control the actions of the protagonist at all times. I observed that I was susceptible to committing actions in the game that would be morally questionable in 'real life', based on the assumption that in a virtual world there are no actual victims and thus no consequences of the gamer's actions. For example, I would break into another person's home to steal valuables, or wipe out a family of NPCs (Non-Playable Characters) on a whim and then loot their corpses. When I mentioned this to another gamer, he suggested that this was morally wrong and that whenever he played the game, he always behaved as he would normally. This statement intrigued me and led me to wonder if there was such a thing as morality in a world in which everything, including the characters, is made entirely of programming code and virtual polygons, and nothing is 'real'. My creative medium of choice being prose fiction, my thoughts then turned to literary theory and philosophy to discover if I could answer the question in another context with certain core similarities. Virtual worlds are fictional worlds, character choices in video games and prose fiction are decided to some extent by the choices made by an individual in our own reality (the gamer in the former and the writer in the latter), and thus morality and ontology can both be explored in much the same way in either kind of fictional reality. In regard to this, I decided to create an imaginary world that is almost entirely aware of its own fictionality, with the intention of discovering the possibilities and limitations of the relations between metafiction and morality, and if a fictional crime in a fictional world was truly a victimless one. Having some elements within

the work that are not self-aware allows me to contrast the morality of fictional characters with that of metafictional characters.

The submission is composed of two sections: a practice-based research component and an exegesis. The practice-based research will provide a platform, in the form of a body of fiction, to examine the ontology of metafictional characters and to see what effect self-awareness has on the morality of the characters. The thesis will further examine the implications of the practice-based component by utilising several theories concerning the ontology of metafiction, and contrasting some of Plato's theories with my own text, due to several similarities that became apparent as the work was produced. Using Nicol and Currie's comments (Rowe & Horner 26) on the functions of self-consciousness in metafictional characters will provide insight with regard to how meta-fictional metafiction can actually be. Waugh's view on the purpose of metafiction, 'to bridge the gap between fiction and reality' (Waugh 33), will be explored to shed some light on the theories of Nicol and Currie. I will then look at Mercer's (2) and Todorov's (10) ideas in relation to how truth and falsehood in fictional worlds, and by extension everything else, should be regarded in the context of the fictional worlds rather than in relation to reality. I will then turn to Watt's (Fludernik 53) theory on the indispensability of realism in the creation of fictional worlds and characters, and how the knowledge and experience of the readership has a positive influence, according to Watt (53), or a negative influence, according to Sarraute (55), on the believability of the story in question. Finally, the work will also be contrasted with Plato's theory of Forms (Kraut 8), the theory that there are two levels of reality, the sensible object (Kraut 10), or what seems 'real' to us, and the abstract Form (Kraut 8), the perfect idea that is imperfectly mimicked whenever it is created. His views on the world of art as a lower form

of reality to our own, which is in turn less real in relation to the realm of Forms (Kraut 11), will be investigated from the point of view of the metafictional world of Dirge City. Throughout the exegesis, aspects of Plato's allegory of the cave will be contrasted with the idea of fictional characters gaining self-awareness to explore how the characters come to terms with their fictionality.

Looking into each of these theories will then allow me to answer the second question that was posed with regard to whether there is a need for morality in a metafictional world, a world of signifiers that signify one another (Baudrillard 6), and if morality serves any purpose in a world where one's actions, being fictional and *known as such*, have no *real* adverse consequences. I will also look at the theories of Weatherson (2), Dadlez (147), and Walton & Tanner (37) on the impossibility of creating a world in which right is wrong, or vice versa, and how this corresponds with the question of how self-awareness affects morality in metafiction.

I will examine both parts of my question through my writing by focusing on the central protagonist's internal dilemmas throughout the telling of the story and his gradual realisation of his own fictionality, and looking at the moral choices he makes, which are intrinsically linked to and informed by how he understands his own ontology. Initially, he convinces himself that he is 'real, but later he discovers the 'truth' of his fictional existence and begins to ask questions of himself and what he once thought of as right and wrong. The effect that his continuing belief in the 'real' has on the answers he settles upon, the belief in a metaphysical reality above and more 'true' than his own, and the different effects that his fictional and metafictional states have upon his sense of morality, will also be explored.

The methodology employed in this thesis takes the form of creative, practice-based research, which involves the processes of creating, drafting and redrafting a work of fiction that will explore the themes set out in the proposed questions. The reason for employing practice-based research is that knowledge in the field of creative writing can be advanced or improved upon through the act of writing creatively itself, and that is essentially what practice-based research is (*Practice Based Research: A Guide* 1). With that said, there were certain pitfalls that I needed to be aware of when undertaking my practice-based research. These included the general pitfalls that come with most theses, such as the findings being unknowable until the research was completed, making the possibility of them being inconclusive pose great risks in terms of time spent carrying out the research. But they also included more specific pitfalls, such as the difficulty of ensuring objectivity in a form of research that has taken place almost exclusively in an environment which I as the researcher have created. Overall, the entire thesis will run the length of 30,000 words, with 3,000 words dedicated to this introductory section, 20,000 words to the practice-based research element and the final 7,000 words to explore the theoretical basis of the thesis and the results of my findings.

Having a prior interest in metafiction and its possibilities, I had already begun writing a metafictional novel and had completed the first act of the work as part of my undergraduate dissertation. Intrigued by the world I had created, and wishing to explore it more, I chose to continue the story from the moment after the final scenes of my undergraduate dissertation. However, in terms of story structure and the creative component's place in an overall plot, I had to make certain concessions, influenced by the necessities of various unavoidable factors such as the word count. In the space of 20,000 words, it was not

possible to tell a complete story and explore questions around ontology and morality without making the treatment of either feel rushed or superficial. Therefore, a choice had to be made with regard to how many issues I would deal with in terms of research, and how much of a story I would tell. In the end, I chose to use the second 'act' of the three act structure of a novel as the canvas upon which I would study the ontology and morality of metafiction. Using the second act of the story allowed me the opportunity to use the most important period of change in a hero's arc, where the hero asks questions of himself and discovers his role in the world (David 94). However, this choice would create two very real and potent problems from a story-telling standpoint. The lack of an opening act would mean that the reader would be thrown head-first into a narrative that was already 'happening' when the reading began, meaning that I would have to weave additional exposition into the story to allow the reader to 'catch up' on what happened previously, but would need to do so in a way that both highlighted exactly what I was doing and did not feel like it was bolted on specifically to provide exposition. The second problem was the lack of a satisfying, complete ending, as the creative component would end before the climactic scenes usually reserved for the end of a story. This meant that I would have to use the epiphany moment that my central protagonist would go through at the end of the second act as the climax of the extract I would be using for my practice-based research.

Notably, the world-building, the creation of a fictional universe with its own internal logic, the editing and redrafting aspects of my practice-based research element, all redefine one another constantly, with the former shaping what can and can't be done in the latter, and the latter moulding the former through the necessity of cohesive storytelling in a successful work of fiction. All three of the above aspects of the creative component have a similar

symbiotic relationship with the introduction and concluding exegesis, which in turn is informed by, and comments upon, the practice-based research.

There is a long history and tradition of metafiction in speculative fiction and all of its sub-genres. Many of these texts influenced my work in *TDCS*, but a select few influenced it more than others. Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* looks at the psychological and philosophical aspects of character-creation and myth-creation, and the relationship between the author and the authored, positing the theory that each reader creates an entirely unique version of each character and explores the creative influence of the reader over the characters about which he or she is reading. The journey of the central protagonist into the centre of the wood named in the title is an analogy for a deepening exploration of the character's psyche, and a more complex understanding of the relationships between the reader's subconscious and the creation of 'mythagos', or myth-images. His theory of the uniqueness of each reader's reading of a character is built upon by my own idea of author-reader co-creation, that a fictional character is moulded by the words of the author, as perceived by the imagination of the reader, in a process which has a fundamental influence on the extent to which a fictional character can *be*. The relationship is similar to that of the writer and director in cinema, and the writer and the artist in sequential art, although the cinema and sequential art models of co-creation concern relations between co-creators in a more direct sense, and obscure the role of an audience.

Neil Gaiman dealt with the relationship between mankind and mythology and the influence that belief has on the existence of mythological beings in *American Gods*, in which the powers of older mythological beings wane as mankind's belief in them wanes, because their existence, their *being*, relies upon the extent to which mortals believe in them. These gods

have been brought over to America by immigrants to the land throughout the ages, but their followers' belief in them is no longer as strong, leaving them as shadows of their former selves. At the same time, newer 'American Gods', such as Media, the Goddess of Television, and the Technical Boy, God of Computers and the Internet, are created and grow more powerful as mankind's belief in them grows. The old gods and the American gods are driven to war because of their struggle to occupy the hearts and minds of the people. The influence of belief on the being of fictional characters features strongly in my theoretical writing on *TDCS*, with a very similar situation arising in terms of the extent to which characters exist depending on the belief imbued in them by the reader.

Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series is a hybridization of Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns and the dark fantasy genre. The central protagonist, Roland, is equally based on an Arthurian knight and the anti-heroes that Clint Eastwood is well known for playing, a fact that is pointed out at several points by characters from the 'real' world. The books are charged with metafictional elements throughout and posit the idea of fictional worlds being parallel to our own, to the point where what is 'real' and what is 'fictional' blur, leaving us without a clear border between the two. The tale twists through alternate versions of the real world and the fictional world, until the fates of them all become threatened by the same antagonistic force that threatens the protagonist's world. At one point in the story, King himself appears in the story and is hypnotized by the protagonist to finish writing his series of books, because the fate of the world depends upon it. This aspect of the relationship between reality and fiction is also explored in *TDCS*, though the 'real' in King's creative work is still *literary*, it is still a fictional representation of the 'real' world, whereas in my own work the 'real' is meant in the *literal* sense, as in the actual 'real' world. *TDCS* looks at what the

fictional world of *Dirge City* means to the 'real' world, but also looks at what the 'real' world means to the fictional world, and the influence that fiction has on other fiction, in terms of how knowledge and experiences gained from one work of fiction can help to shape the world of another work.

China Miéville explored the impact and power of language, storytelling and 'falsehood' in *Embassytown*, in which an alien culture, known as the Ariaki, can only speak of what 'is' and cannot lie. Some of them crave for the ability to speak of what 'isn't' or 'could be', and seek to learn the art of lying so they can advance their own knowledge by exploring possibilities. When an ambassador to their world starts to do just that, the local population becomes addicted to the ambassador's words and their society begins to break down. During these events, the protagonist must also come to terms with her being made into a simile in the alien language before she has begun to speak it, since someone must carry out an action for it to be a truthful representation, and thus a useable comparison. *TDCS* explores the opposite of Miéville's world, a world in which the residents can only speak lies, and the protagonist in *TDCS* must come to terms with realising that he also is one of those lies. The works of speculative fiction set out above have pushed the boundaries of what fiction in general and metafiction in particular can do and it is in the tradition of these works that I seek to write *TDCS*, exploring the creative influence of the writer and the reader on the fictional world, and examining the relationships between the reader, writer and character.

To conclude, the way in which metafictional characters in *TDCS* come to terms with their fictional existence is the salient issue at the heart of this thesis, as is the impact on morality that occurs as a result of a character's metafictionality. The tools I employed as a writer were fundamental in finding answers to the questions posed.

The Dirge City Story: Act II

By

Zakarya Anwar

I.

Enter Nemesis

Nemesis sat facing a vanity table on the tallest tower in the Rafters.

A dark-skinned goddess wrapped in a pure white dress held up by a pair of golden brooches at her shoulders, her bare arms decorated with golden clasps and bangles, she was beautiful, but like most things in Dirge, it was a false beauty. A sword and scourge hung at her hips and she had a saxophone in her hands. She played a mournful tune, one both slow and reflective.

The rickety wooden tower – held together by naught but ropes, nails and glue – swayed violently in the high winds. All around her the unstable Rafters moved like a living thing, its many towers leaning one way and then another, its bridges and walk-ways and rope ladders constantly rocked by the cold gales, its floorboards rising and falling like the chest of a sleeping giant. The Rafters sat upon the Industrial District like a broken laurel, a sprawling tree-house town built on the District's tallest spires.

The winds never touched the top of her high tower, they slunk around it.

The vanity table was bare of adornments save for a tall, three panel mirror. The panels themselves were unremarkable but for one thing. They did not reflect the woman facing them. They reflected *others*. Other people, other places, other times, all played across the silvery faces of her mirror.

A man had fallen on his knees, drenched in seawater and coughing it from his lungs. Him. Upon his back was a sword of light. Behind him was a massive doorway, too large to comprehend. This was all wrong. She could feel it. The people were aware. The City was

aware. But he was not, there was that. The game would be different, more truthful. But the rules would be the same.

Nemesis played on, her music slowing.

The man stumbled through a wasteland... lost, alone, delusional. He collapsed. She wanted nothing more than to let him die. But that was not what happened. She could not allow it. Her arms gathered him up.

The music grew impassioned, angry at having to save this creature.

The man was in an Office without doors or windows, only white washed walls with a large moving map on one of them. He did not know what was happening. Tales were told to give him hope. He needed to hope. He was given a quest. He needed that too. He set out with both hope and quest, the story went on and all was well.

The tune slowed once more, went from angry to worried, her fingers felt suddenly unsure on the saxophone.

The man sat cross-legged, opposite Old Man Coyote's lupine form. Coyote told him truths even as he lied to him. The man did not believe. But the seed was there.

The music began to quicken.

He travelled through near-endless woodlands and skyscrapers of cards, through a scrapyard that spanned hundreds of miles, and places stranger still. At last he arrived at a weary cityscape, its skies choked with a wall of smog, its borders bound in a wall of fire, its belly filled with a cancerous man-made Hell. Here he met Hela, whom some called Mister Black, a girl called Kitsune, and the one called Black Hat. More lies were exchanged, more tales were

told, all to fill his mind with more smog than the Furnaces could spew. But the seed of knowledge was still there. She gave him an enemy in Nature, and he took the bait.

Nemesis played faster, and faster still, and the music began to rise.

The man joined forces with another, called Songspeaker. They journeyed to the Heart of Nature, battled with her... and lost. More lies were told. Pacts were being made and the men would soon be released... But now they would be on opposite sides.

The music stopped. What was the next note? She needed to keep playing. She looked to the mirrors, but they had stopped telling the story. They had recounted what had gone before, but past victories were ever empty. That was the nature of the game. Now they merely reflected the silhouettes of *others*, each mirror cycling through endless shapes and forms, as if they could not decide what to show her.

Nemesis crossed one leg over the other and rested the saxophone on her lap. She tapped her chin with an index finger and pouted as she looked from mirror to mirror.

“Hmmm...” she sighed, her words were not said as much as they were sung. “What to wear? What to wear?”

The reflections shifted and changed until one mirror settled on the unstable silhouette of a woman.

“The deal’s been done, honey,” said the reflection that was not a reflection, in Nemesis’s own voice. “He’s going back for the girl.”

“Cool,” said Nemesis.

“How long am I going to keep this up?” said the woman in the mirror.

“How long can I?” another reflection chimed in from the mirror to the left, again in Nemesis’s voice. The silhouette in this mirror was that of a man with bright eyes.

“As long as I have to,” replied Nemesis. “Until he wins, until I break.”

“Do I struggle needlessly?” offered the silhouette in the third mirror – a man in a mask, speaking in the same melodic tones as the others. “Why do I struggle at all? Why should I struggle, when it’s all for naught - when all I can do is lose?”

Nemesis sat quietly for a while, contemplating what her reflection had said. When she spoke at last, her words resonated with the pain and loss and anger that she had tempered over countless lifetimes. She spoke the bluest of Blues.

“Because life is all about the struggle, honey, life was made to be struggled through. Without it we have nothing. Every story needs someone like *him*, someone who struggles for victory despite the odds, because it has to be. And every story needs someone like me, someone who struggles despite knowing she’ll fail, because someone has to struggle. Without the struggle, we are nothing. Without the struggle, there’s nothing to say. So when he stumbles, I’ll pick him up. When he’s running, I’ll kick him down. We have to struggle. The struggle is all there is.”

She nodded her head, and the reflections could do nothing but nod back.

“Have I decided what to wear?” asked the female reflection.

Nemesis laughed and they all laughed with her. “Honey, when I look this good, I could go to the ball naked, and still be the best dressed gal in the building. I think I’ll just go like this.”

The silhouettes vanished. Nemesis took up her saxophone and continued playing her tune, all the while staring at the mirrors that could not reflect what was not there.

Keep playing, girl, she told herself. You only got one tune in you, but the show only runs cos you play it so well. And your fellow acts got bills to pay.

II.

The Siren's Cry

The Fire Engine lay on its side, its windows shattered or cracked.

It was not the one he had sailed in on. Most of its bright red paint had been ground from its chassis, leaving a battered and rusted dull metal shell criss-crossed with scarlet scars of paint. Laith could not see how he could get it upright, let alone helm it. Songspeaker's Engines had seemed unstoppable once, machines of fire and death that had cut a swath through Nature's defences so easily. That was hours ago, lifetimes ago. Now he found himself becoming an agent of the enemy he had once sought to slay. She was close – in all the wildlife around him she could not be anything but. Unconsciously, he found himself reaching for the sword on his back. He did not trust her. His fingers passed through the hilt, as if clutching at light. Old Man Coyote had called it the *Hero's Arc*, a sword that chose not to be drawn.

He circled the Engine, running a hand along its surface. It was a sturdy vessel, and he could still feel the slow thrums of life within. *Maybe the sirens survived.* The Engines ran on the screams of sirens. If he could start it, and steer it, the Engine would move.

All the glass cells that held the sirens were broken, save one. Laith looked within and his eyes met a tortured gaze, blue tears burning into the siren's skin. Laith raised the hand that had trailed along the Engine's chassis and touched the cell that caged her severed head. *Such pain*, he thought, *more than anyone should have to bear.*

Kill me, her expression said. *Please, kill me.*

"I am sorry," whispered Laith, tears welling in his own eyes, "truly, I am. But I cannot help. Not yet. The one who first enslaved you means to harm a child. Help me stop Songspeaker and I will set you free."

She had no choice, Laith knew. And it broke his heart to see the fear in those tired eyes. She would be forced to scream again, and this time it would be Laith who tortured her. He turned away in shame.

"Nature," he called, his voice thick with emotion, "can you put this thing on its wheels?"

In reply, a great groaning began from below. Mighty roots as wide as the span of his arms burst from the ground, crashing into the engine and straining against its weight. Slowly, steadily, the contraption was pushed back into an upright position, until its wheels slammed on the mossy earth. Laith leapt onto a ladder and clambered aboard, crossing the deck to the hatch that led to the bridge. He avoided looking at the siren.

The hatch opened on his third attempt. Laith dropped inside. He was not prepared for what greeted him within. He had expected corpses, the stench of death. What he found was luscious plant life growing between the nooks and crannies of the great machine, flooding the bridge with green. At first it looked like chaotic growth, but close inspection revealed that each wheel and lever, every switch and button, had been accounted for.

Nature's body of butterflies fluttered inside from the open hatch. The butterflies converged together until they shaped themselves into an unstable female form, a living swarm of colour with two will-o'-the-wisps for eyes.

-I will be your crew-

“Am I to trust you now?” replied Laith, his eyes narrowing. “You will accompany me into the stronghold of your greatest enemy, help me to save some child and then simply leave?”

-Mister Black is not my enemy Hela is not my enemy I seek only to survive I will harm only Songspeaker-

Laith did not like it. He liked none of this. Everyone was telling him a different story. The Registrar had said that Mister Black was the Enemy, that he was destroying Dirge. Hela said that Mister Black was long dead and that his slayer, Nature, was the Enemy. The man named Black Hat had said Laith was somehow connected to the Enemy and he needed only to take his own life to kill Nature. Nature said she did not want to destroy anything and that Black Hat was lying to Laith about their connection. According to her, the child that Laith had met briefly in the Furnaces was connected to Dirge City. If the child died, they would all die. And Songspeaker meant to kill the child. Then there was Old Man Coyote, who claimed that all of Dirge City was some sort of fiction, an imaginary stage upon which tales were told. But that was the weakest lie. It had to be.

“I have your word on this?” said Laith, more to pull himself away from such thoughts than any weight he put into Nature’s words. “Hela, the Furnace-Dwellers, the child – you will not harm any of them?”

-I will not but Songspeaker must be stopped-

Laith walked to the helm. He grasped the brass wheel in both hands, breathed deeply, and slowly exhaled. Amidst a cyclone of conflicting thoughts, one above all was prevalent. He thought of the siren on the deck above. He thought of the pain he would inflict on her. Worst of all, he thought it necessary.

“Yes, he must be stopped,” Laith paused to still his beating heart. “Allah forgive me... start the Engine.”

Her screams put all hopes of forgiveness from his mind.

III.

The Babykillers

He stumbled across a broken land, a lonely soul garbed in black and gold. His head was bowed low, chin against chest, his body bone-weary and his heart wearier still. A brigade of six hundred men had set out, yet none besides him remained. Pain and thoughts of murder, these were his companions now. It was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. All he could do was rage against the dying of Dirge.

His fireman's coat was a mess, torn and tattered where the vines had taken hold of him. The flesh beneath was bloodied and equally torn, a reminder of what would happen to Dirge if he failed. And so wounds, be they of the body or the heart, were of little concern to Songspeaker. Dirge City was at stake, and it was for men such as him to defend her.

He trudged on over the graves of those that had fallen on the road. Behind him, the buildings and roads had fallen to jungles, mountains and rivers; before him, they rose tall and proud, their dark shapes seeming to hold up a canopy of smog; but here, where he walked, the crooked corpses of buildings that had once scraped the sky now clawed feebly at it. Nature had done much to the Industrial District before the Furnaces had been manned and worked, before he had erected the Firewall – the wall of fire they had built to keep her creepers out of the District. The tarmac beneath his feet was a churned mess, split apart by Nature's creepers mere chapters before. So much had changed. Songspeaker had gone from leading hundreds of brave warriors against a terrible Enemy, to hunting the child of his former commander. It mattered not, the goal was the same. The dark-skinned angel had

promised him as she released him from Nature's grasp – the girl was the key. The child had to be struck down. She was Nature's anchor in Dirge, her familiar.

He tripped over a jutting rock, falling to his hands and knees. For a moment he lacked the strength to rise. His arms trembled with the strain. Nature had done good work on him. He was frail from her tortures. Songspeaker growled at his weakness. How would he save Dirge if he could not even walk? He tried again, failed. Again...

Suddenly, he sensed shadows – great shadows, winged and horned, darting over his stooped, defeated figure. At first there were three, wheeling and circling like crows around a carcass. In moments they were a dozen, then more. Then *more*. He became aware of a great rumble, as if the Furnaces had been raised by some unseen hand and held above his head. A colossal darkness slowly flowed over him like a death-shroud, suffocating him, and with it came an ill feeling of something alien yet inevitable, like night finally falling on a world of endless twilight. And then came the soft and steady pitter-patter of rainfall. It pooled on the floor, spattered on his back – a red rainfall, a harbinger of things to come.

A winged spectre dropped from its vantage and raced towards him. Songspeaker had enough time to see a hideous visage of ghostly scales, horns and teeth, baring twin scarlet slit eyes that glowed with unearthly malevolence. The vision swallowed him in an instant and swept back up into the air. Through its eerie form Songspeaker gazed down at Dirge as it dropped away. The beast that had cast the shroud of darkness over him hung in the air above, yet he felt no fear as his captor raced towards it. It was not within him to fear. It grew larger as the ghostly being that bore him drew near, its size making a mockery of gravity. There were no chains that kept it aloft, no pillars that held it high, no beating wings

to help it hover. It hung there in the sky, a terrible wonder that filled all hearts with dread. All hearts, that was, save his.

His captor levelled out and ran along the titan's underbelly, amidst a writhing mass of similar shadow-demons, the red droplets falling through its vaporous form to drench Songspeaker further. The smell of iron filled his nostrils. He could taste it on his lips as it streamed off his face and out into the darkness behind him. All around him other wraiths sped, red-eyed bullets that passed through one another. And then, of a sudden, he was hurtling through the twilight of Dirge's wan sky. Up again they flew, up, past more ghastly grey things and red eyes, up along the leviathan's fleshy flanks.

The first he was aware of being released by his carrier was as he hit the jagged surface of the giant in the sky. He bounced and tumbled, then came to a sudden stop, face-down on the bloody floor. Songspeaker took a moment to regain his bearings, then pushed himself up onto his knees and raised his head. On a floor made of fingernails, bones and flesh, inches from his face, were two steel sabatons, rimmed in blood. They alone were enough to tell him where he was. *Naglfar*.

"What have we here?" rasped a voice. Laughter blasted out from all directions. There must have been ten thousand men up here with him. Men he could use.

Songspeaker chose his next words carefully.

"Hail to the King, baby," replied Songspeaker. He met the man's single glowering eye without flinching. "I ask for the life of thine enemies. I'll be revenged on the weeds and wilderness yet. Why don't you do right, like some other men do? Ge'outta here'n kill me a baby too."

“That’s what we’re here to do,” grated King Death. “It appears we serve the same... cause.”

Though the one-eyed silver skull beneath the hood and crown of King Death remained without expression, Songspeaker heard a smile in the King’s words. And he smiled back.

IV.

And Hades Followed

There was only the scream.

Was it his scream, or the siren's? It clawed at his ears, it wrenched his soul. The pain in his head was excruciating, worse than any he had ever felt. He no longer knew where his pain ended and hers began.

The world rushed at him at speeds he could not fathom, the ruins of the buildings to either side of him whipped by in a blur. Gale-force winds punched through the windshield and tore at his robes and tattered coat, which whipped and snapped about him like slavers spurring him on. Nature's butterflies lay dead, pinned to the wall behind him, and all her minions, those meant to help him steer the craft, had been ripped from their roots.

There was a long moment when the wan light of Dirge went out, then returned, as if the Engine passed under something vast. Somehow he had managed to get blood on his face, blood that was not his. It hardly registered. He knew he should be scared, but the pain made it hard to think. The Industrial District hurtled towards him; its dark towers grew larger, its Firewall rising hotter and higher. Why did he need to fear the District? What did it matter? What could be worse than travelling in this hellish thing?

And then he knew. It was *stopping* this hellish thing. If he had not been screaming before, he was now.

The Firewall filled the entirety of his vision before he could think another thought. The Engine was engulfed. Fire flooded through the broken windshield, setting all Nature's flailing

flotsam and jetsam alight as it came. Laith released his hold on the wheel and fell back behind the console that held it, the District's fires gorging themselves on the air around him. All was swirling deadly flames, coiling through the air like fiery serpents. The fire sucked the air from his lungs and he strained for breath. Then the Engine was through, and only stray flames crawled and slithered on the walls of the bridge. He could breathe again.

Laith took the helm once more. The Engine now sped amongst the tall towers of the District. He had to stop it. Laith grabbed the emergency brake lever and pulled. It jammed. The screaming continued. Laith released the helm and strained with both arms. The Engine smashed through a wall. Laith fell, stood and pulled again. The vehicle grated against a building. The bridge shuddered. The siren screamed. Laith roared and heaved. A tower rose ahead of him. He tried harder, putting a foot on the console for leverage. The scream went on. The lever moved an inch. He was running out of time. Laith heaved with all his strength, throwing everything into the effort. Slowly, it began to move. The siren screamed still. Laith felt the muscles of his back tearing. The lever thudded into place. The siren fell silent. The Engine's wheels screeched as they locked up. It would not stop. He was moving too fast.

Laith grasped the helm, wheeling it to the right as quickly as he could.

The deck pitched larboard and Laith fell. The Engine span out of control, a whirling thousand-ton dervish, and its wheels wailed like the siren.

Impact.

#

The hatch shrieked open.

Laith dragged himself out of the opening and rolled onto his back. His entire body ached. He sat up with a groan, raised his hands to brush his dark hair from his eyes and then touched his ringing ears. They were bleeding. Laith rolled onto his front and crawled away from the hatch. Every inch was a chore, but one thought drove him on. The promise. Reaching his goal, he climbed to his feet using a handrail for support. The siren looked at him with undisguised hatred.

Laith spat a mouthful of blood and coughed. "I promised, siren," his voice rattled, "promised I would end this." He vaguely gestured with his hand to encompass the Engine. "I keep my promises. I know better than to ask for forgiveness. But it was necessary. And I am sorry that the necessity cost so much."

He reached over his shoulder and drew the *Hero's Arc*. It became real as he touched the hilt. Power flooded through him, power the likes of which he had never experienced. Light burst from the scabbard as the blade slid clear – the kind of light that made one smile when it skewered the rainclouds, lanced through shadows and beat back nightmares. All was calm. The *Arc* shone like a sun.

"Peace," he sighed. The sword swept down.

It cut neither air nor cell nor hull, passed through all harmlessly. *Did I miss?* Within the cell, the siren split in two.

He did not remember leaving the wreck nor sheathing the *Arc*. But he felt stronger now. Everything seemed so much more *possible*. And so, when Hela's men surrounded him, their laser-sights settling on his chest and bearded face, he smiled.

“Where is Mister Black?”

#

The hall had not changed, though he suspected that he himself had.

The same silver and black furniture decked the hall, the same high ceiling, the same velvet curtains thrown wide open. Sat upon the plain throne at the far end of the fifty-seat conference table was Hela, dressed in a black suit, a cigarette held to the corner of her mouth. Her face was marked with soot, her hair tied back in a haphazard way that told Laith she had allowed him into the throne room far more quickly than he should have been. And Laith had thought she had taken too long.

“Leave us,” she said. The guards flanking Laith bowed and left. “You made quite an entrance in that Engine. Yet you came alone. Where is the Brigade? Where is Songspeaker?”

“The Brigade fell. Songspeaker is dangerous. My Lady, I need to find that girl – Kitsune – now.”

Hela sat up straight and locked eyes with him, “Lies. Songspeaker has always been loyal. *A/ways*. He helped me escape Underworld. He would not betray me to Nature.”

“He has not. But things have changed, Hela. He is on his way here, may already be here. He seeks to kill the girl.”

“Kitsune? I-”

“Damn it, listen! Every second counts. Songspeaker thinks killing this girl will save the world, but the truth is that she doesn’t have to die. You have to-”

“I do not *have* to do anything,” said Hela, her voice suddenly cold. She leaned back in her chair. “Explain yourself, or it is the Furnaces for you.”

“I have no time for this. Songspeaker wants her dead. *Everything* depends on her. If she dies, we all die. Give her to me, now, or I will take her. I will not ask again.”

“How *dare* you,” Hela snarled, rising to her feet and drawing a gun from beneath the table in front of her. Her eyes blazed with such fury, such anger, that Laith thought she would bore holes into him with rage alone. “How dare you threaten me, here, in my seat of power? How dare you speak so lowly of my most trusted friend? You, who once held a gun to my head. It was folly to come here, to think me weak. A woman alone.”

She sneered the last words, pulling the hammer of her gun back with her thumb.

“Hela, I’m not... I... I’m... O Allah, it is too late. He is here.”

The room grew suddenly dark. Fear crawled up his spine. Hela looked over her shoulder to the window behind her. Her gun hand fell to her side. What they saw outside filled Laith with terror. Hela turned fully towards it, unable to do anything but watch it draw closer. A symphony of screams sounded from below.

“*All fall beneath the banners of dread King Death,*” she breathed.

“My Lady?” Laith’s eyes were as ensnared by the approaching doom as hers.

“Go,” she said, waving her gun at the door. “Get to her first. Save this Kitsune. I am betrayed.”

“Come with me! Please, Hela – live!”

She did not seem to hear.

Through the window, a winged shadow with scarlet eyes swept towards them. He made out at least a dozen silhouettes in its belly. Laith's hand itched for the *Arc*. Or did it itch for him?

"Hela!" he screamed. There was no reaction. He cursed and began to back away from the table, still calling her name. The ghostly horror passed through the glass, leaving its cargo arrayed in front of Hela as it swerved up into the ceiling, disappearing from view as quickly as it had come.

Laith cursed again... and ran.

V.

Treacherous Bastards

She was brave.

Long before the Fall of Underworld, Songspeaker had known this. Yet despite the knowledge, despite seeing her fight her way to a world roofed only by a dead sky, seeing her make the hardest of choices when it would have been so much easier to give up, Songspeaker was surprised by the steadiness of her gaze as she stood in front of King Death and the 666th Sharpshooters. It made him proud to have served under her, and weep for what was to come.

Known as ‘the Sixes’, the 666th Sharpshooters were an elite unit of soldiers, made up of six groups of six men. The greatest snipers in all of Dirge, their uniform was uniform only in its grey hue and the triangular badge they each wore on their shoulders, a three-pronged grouping of their platoon number set upon three crossed rifles. They stood in a semi-circle with King Death at the centre, caped and cowed and robed in thick white cloth, armoured in dull steel breastplate, gauntlets, pauldrons, sabatons and mail, sporting a spiked and bladed steel circlet on his hooded brow like a killer’s crown. Songspeaker wondered if his heart was made of the same cold metal as his one-eyed skull. The grey-garbed Sixes that flanked him bore scoped rifles, as mismatched as their uniforms.

“Mister Black,” rasped King Death, towering three feet above everyone else in the room, “you are... prettier than when last we met. Either that, or you are not Mister Black.”

Hela did not answer. She cast her eyes briefly over the group, pausing a moment on Songspeaker. He met her gaze steadily, though his heart wavered. She looked away.

King Death chuckled. His gauntleted hand closed on the hilt of the shadowy blade on his hip and almost drew it.

King Death continued, "Far too pretty to waste on the edge of my Arc. Still, I can use someone like you." He chuckled again. "Erwin, Heinz, take her to *The Castle*. I will entertain her once the child is dead."

"Bastard!" she screamed, raising her gun. A sniper shot the gun from her hand before it was halfway up. Heinz and Erwin did not miss a beat as they stalked towards her. She threw a fist at Erwin, who parried the blow with the length of his rifle, then rammed its butt into her midriff, buckling her. They grabbed her arms and held her in place.

"No, please," she begged between laboured gasps, "You can't do this... my people, my District..."

King Death ignored her pleas and walked away.

"You bastard!" she spat, "You fucking bastard, I'll-"

Another great ghost emerged from the ground beneath them and carried her away, leaving Erwin and Heinz empty-handed. The Sixes followed King Death out of the room. Songspeaker's eyes lingered over the place he had last seen Hela. After all they had been through, all they had fought through, he had betrayed her. Her most loyal friend, her most trusted advisor...

Songspeaker followed the others out.

As they left the hall and stepped into the passage, they were met by a jester leaning on the wall, his arms folded across his chest. His long coat and motley were red and black. Yellow eyes shone from a smiling black mask. His clothes were decorated with tiny bells that tinkled at the slightest movement.

“That wasn’t very nice, was it?” said the jester, cocking his head. The bells on his hood jingled. The rifles of the Sixes were already aimed at him. “A bit of a dick-move, that. Still, quite a performance, it was. Very dramatic.”

“That’s a new one,” said King Death, looking the jester up and down. “Who are you now? What’s the next move?”

The jester moved away from the wall and strolled lazily towards King Death as he spoke, his bells jingling merrily. “I’m the Harlequin. I know you came here to sort some silly kid out, but we can’t have that. Not yet. I mean, I’m all for after-school activities for children – football, dance, dying, Brownies, fucking *art classes* – it keeps them busy and off the streets. Better than having them mucking about on my doorstep. Judging by all the screaming downstairs, you’ve got most of the kids down there covered. But that one kid you came here for? Not in your remit.”

“Why not?” said King Death. The Sixes had not lowered their guns.

Harlequin laughed. “Because we need to make sure Laith finds the girl, silly. Then we can chase him. It’ll be fun. Probably take a while too...”

Songspeaker found it difficult to follow the jester's logic, but King Death was nodding as if he understood. Why had King Death not killed this clown yet? They needed to kill the girl too. It was the only way to-

"Sounds like a plan," said King Death.

"Trust me, it's not," the Harlequin replied. "I'm absolutely winging it."

It was now King Death's turn to laugh. The sound left a sick feeling in Songspeaker's stomach. King Death motioned for the Sixes to lower their rifles.

"Anyhoo, can't tarry long," continued the Harlequin. "Being in two Faces at once isn't my thing. Besides, I have to go help a brother out – can't betray the guy if he dies down there, can I?"

They walked to the lift side by side, Songspeaker and the Sixes following closely. The Sixes, Songspeaker noted, were still on edge. There was something *wrong* about this clown.

"You wouldn't be the first treacherous bastard I've worked with," said King Death as Harlequin pressed the button to call the lift back up.

"No..." Harlequin replied, looking at Songspeaker, "I can see that."

The lift was still heading down.

Songspeaker decided that when the time came, he would be every bit the treacherous bastard. The girl would die by his hands – even if King Death and this jester wished to keep her alive for a mere moment longer, even if he was slain in the process.

VI.

The Battle of the Furnaces

Laith sat huddled in a corner of the lift as it descended into the bowels of the Furnaces.

He played the scene over and over in his mind. Songspeaker alone he could have killed, but with a dozen gunmen and that demon by his side... What else could he have done, but run? It would have meant certain death to face them, and every life in Dirge depended on the girl's survival. He had no other choice. Besides, Hela deserved to die for enslaving her people. *You idiot, do you think they will simply kill her? Men like them do far worse to women.* He snarled in rage and drove his fist into the wall. *I had to make a decision. I had to. It was the only option.* It did not make it right.

The numbers above the door had fallen below zero. He was nearly there. Laith picked himself up and checked his weapons. He had a single pistol left, with one charge. The sword at his hip was broken, but could still be used to open throats, if nothing else. The *Hero's Arc*, still scabbarded on his back, could not be depended upon. Laith had no idea how to find the child in so large a Setting. But he had allowed those men to take Hela. He would die before he let them take the child. He would die if they did, or so the current story went.

The door 'pinged' and slid aside. Laith gaped.

The sounds of battle polluted the ever-present rumble of machinery in the endless hall. Hela's men fought side by side with their sweaty, grime-scarred slave workers against a sea of foreign invaders, the air around them shimmering with the red heat of countless blast furnaces. Pirates and skeleton-men, harpies and scaled serpent-wolves and indescribable

monsters, there was no other word for them but 'foreign'. The massive winged spirits he had seen upstairs swept through the crowds, swallowing Furnace-dwellers and disappearing into the dark heights of the cavern. Hela's men fought with cudgel, whip and gun; the slaves with shovels. They had no chance. Without the wheels, levers and pumps being operated, and guns being fired with reckless abandon, the pipes cracked and burst, shooting lances of blistering steam in all directions, melting the flesh off all they touched. Too many corpses littered the ground.

However impossible Laith thought his task had been before the door had opened, it seemed less likely now.

A man walked across the doorway at a leisurely pace, his hands clasped behind his back. He wore a long, tightly-buttoned grey coat and a black hat with an improbably wide brim. Aside from a thin moustache, his lupine face was all but hidden in the shadows cast by the hat. He posed mid-stride, and peered into the lift. His cold eyes glinted in the red glow of the furnaces. A wolf's eyes.

"I was wondering when you'd show, Protagonist," he said, almost casually. He stepped into the lift.

"Black Hat, what's going on?"

"Same thing that always goes on in Dirge City. The strong kill, the weak die and us smart folk just sit back and enjoy. King Death is here. Don't know why, don't care. What I do know is that we need to get to that girl before she escapes in the confusion. If we don't kill her now, she'll be impossible to find out there in the wider world. Good thing you came when you

did, nearly found her. Got a nose on me – I can track her, as long as she's not too far away. She's close."

The lift doors tried to close. Black Hat put his foot between them and they slid back open.

"Which girl are you talking about?" asked Laith, slowly raising his pistol to waist height.

"I made my way to the throne room as soon as I heard you'd returned. Figured a man like you would do it all by the book, speak to the woman in charge first and all that. Wasn't easy, took a bit of time, but an old wolf like me can get just about anywhere unnoticed when I need to. No one even knows I'm here but you. Anyways, imagine my surprise when I arrive to find Songspeaker and few other unsavoury types talking plans. Then imagine my surprise when I see King Death. Soon as I saw him, I took the express route down."

"Express route?" asked Laith, his face betraying nothing of what he was thinking.

"Out the window."

"And you survived the fall?" said Laith. The sounds of battle outside the lift receded into background noise. Laith's heart sounded like a war drum. Alarm bells rang in his head.

"Yep."

"Ah, old wolves and their tricks, right?"

"Right."

Laith didn't believe a word of it. There was something... larger going on here. Too many stories... too many *elaborate* stories told by too many people. None of them added up.

“Way I figure it,” continued Hat, apparently unaware of Laith’s suspicions, “the plan ain’t changed much. Now I know for a fact that the girl is the familiar, it’s easy. We just gotta kill the girl. Bye-bye, Nature. Much easier than asking you to kill yourself on a hunch.”

“The plan *has* changed,” said Laith, looking at the flashing arrow symbol next to the doors. “We need her alive now.”

“What? Why?”

“I spoke with Nature. She said the girl was the soul of Dirge City. If she dies, we die.”

“You did *what*? It doesn’t matter. She’s just lying to save her fragrant ass. We kill the girl, Nature leaves. I don’t see how things have changed.”

“I’m not killing any children, Hat,” said Laith, his voice turning cold. He pushed his pistol against Hat’s belly. “Neither are you.”

“It’s like that, is it? You won’t kill a kid, but you’ll shoot a friend?”

“It’s like that. And you don’t know me. Now, use that ‘nose’ of yours and take me to her.”

Hat fixed Laith with a cold, hard stare. Then he turned, keeping his hands in view the entire time. “It’s war out there. I’ll be moving fast. Keep up. Fall behind, you’ll be looking to gun me down next time we meet.”

Laith said nothing.

Black Hat set off at a run. Laith took a deep breath, drew his broken sword and followed, into the midst of the Battle of the Furnaces.

Keeping his eyes on Hat's back, Laith sprinted through the warzone with his heart pounding in his throat. The Furnaces fell apart around him. People fought, people died. Some even laughed. This was the Dirge he did not want to save. He hurdled bodies that fell in his path, dived under the wild swings of combatants, ducked as pipes burst and shot steam into the air. A goblin stepped between Laith and Black Hat, swiping at Laith with a cutlass. Laith batted the sword aside without slowing. His sword slid into the goblin's chest. He wrenched it free and ran on.

Black Hat slowed, looking about and sniffing loudly. "She's close," he muttered again as Laith caught up. "She's... there." He pointed to a blast furnace that lay on its side, disconnected from all the others, in a quiet corner that had escaped the invaders' notice. It looked as though it had lain there for some time. The hatch was slightly ajar.

"How do you know, Hat?" said Laith, sliding to cover behind the body of a fallen giant. There was a pipe in its chest that fountained a thin spray of blood. The giant was still breathing. It watched Laith and Hat with its bloodshot eyes, too weak to do anything else. "There's no way you could have smelled her in all of this."

"It's written, Protagonist," said Hat, not bothering with cover. A thin smile spread beneath his moustache, revealing filed teeth. "The plot weaves the path. We just follow it."

He walked towards the furnace and reached down to open the hatch.

"Slowly," warned Laith. It was all wrong. The fighting had moved away from them. Everything felt... convenient.

As Hat opened the hatch, there was a whimper from inside. Laith pressed his pistol to the back of Hat's skull.

"Move."

Hat cocked his head, nodded, and stepped away. Laith crouched and peered inside. Two eyes stared back from the shadows. He smiled as warmly as he could and held out his hand. She backed further into the shadows, growling softly.

"It's okay, Kit," said Laith, 'I am a friend. Do you remember me? You dropped your doll, and I gave it back."

She was silent.

"It's not safe here. We need to get you to someplace safe."

"It's going to be sad."

"I..." Laith did not understand what she meant. "It won't be sad, Kitsune, we'll make sure it's happy." The lie did not sit well, but he had no time to ask what she meant. "Give me your hand, Kit. There's a good girl."

Kitsune flinched and pulled away from his hand. He waited. After a moment, she reached out and took it. Laith helped her out. She was covered in soot, her hair a matted mess of charcoal and grime that clung to her skull. Her clothes were torn and her arms and legs were maps of cuts and bruises. She was trembling. Laith held her against his chest and kissed her brow, keeping his pistol trained on Black Hat, who stood watching them.

There was an explosion nearby, followed closely by the screams of the dying. *Right on cue.*

“We’ve got to go,” said Hat.

Laith stood, carrying the girl in one arm. “Then let’s go.”

VII.

All the World's a Stage

The motorcycle was a simple contraption to Laith, who had sailed on an Engine twice.

It sat in a narrow and damp alleyway, hidden between herds of overfilled dumpsters. Its hue was monotonous, grey where it was not chrome; its single headlight was hooded almost sleepily, its sidecar wide and pot-bellied. It did not look very fast, but Black Hat was adamant that it could outrun most things on wheels. Above, the great shadows circled. Hat had not been so sure about outrunning those.

The screams were no longer a constant noise. They were fewer and further between. Hela's people would soon be extinct.

"You're worried about those folks dying," said Black Hat, saddling up on the bike. "Don't be. Folks're like rocks and trees. Furniture. Truth is, only people that matter are those with places to go, things to do. Named people, like you and me. Like this girl. Our deaths matter. They change things, mean things. That's why you saved her, but not-"

"Get off the bike," interrupted Laith. Kit did not need to hear about that part of the escape. Perhaps she never would. Hat looked at him for a moment, nodded and reached for the key he had just inserted into the motorcycle.

"Leave the keys," warned Laith.

Hat dismounted and stepped away from the bike. Laith motioned to Kit to sit in the sidecar.

As she climbed in, Hat asked, "Where you taking the girl?"

"Hunter's Den. She'll be safe with Nature until I can deal with Songspeaker and this King Death."

"I don't think that's wise," there was an edge to Hat's voice.

"I know what you would suggest."

"And I'd be right. But that's not what I mean. Look."

Hat nodded his head in the direction of Hunter's Den. The roiling sea of wraiths in the sky was beginning to move, parting the smog as a ship parted the sea. They were positioning themselves between the District and the Den.

"Damn."

"'Damn' would be right. I think it goes without saying that Hunter's Den is no longer 'the plan'." Hat paused to spit. "Way I see it, you got two choices and only one of them's an option. You could do it my way and just leave. Do it that way, and they won't chase you down. Or you can pick a new destination and see how far you can go before *Naglfar* gets you. And it will get you. You got the pistol out. You got it primed. You ask me, it's an easy decision."

Beads of sweat had started to trickle down Black Hat's face. He blinked them out of his eyes. Why was he sweating? Laith did not think it was the pistol aimed at him. Black Hat didn't seem the sort to get flustered around the barrel of a gun.

Laith glanced at Kitsune. She looked somehow older than she had when he had first seen her in the Furnaces. It had not been that long ago. Kitsune stared back at him in silence. Her

eyes told him that she knew her life depended on his decision. He transferred his gaze back to Hat. The man seemed desperate for him to decide.

“Underworld,” Laith said.

“What?”

“We’re heading for Underworld. Nature will be there too. It’s where her roots are.”

“To *her* again? Goddamnit, Protagonist, that bitch is bad news. Bad news!”

“That bitch is the only person I’ve met that’s told me the truth since I got here,” replied Laith. He was starting to get used to telling tales too.

“Listen to me, Laith, listen good. You think she’s been telling the truth? She hasn’t. She’s been telling you lies that you needed to hear, so you’d do her will. Same as Hela, the Registrar and me.”

I never told him about the Registrar. And he just admitted to using me.

Hat continued, “This is a goddamn pantomime. We’re all liars here. I’m lying when I say that the sky’s above and the ground’s beneath, lying when I call you Laith, lying when I say I’m lying. This is a world of lies. I lie to you, you to me, and we all of us lie to the third person. Don’t you get it? In here, even the truth is a lie. So don’t tell me how honest Nature’s been, because everything you see in Dirge is just so many fallacies and fictions.”

Fiction. There was that word again. The word Old Man Coyote had used to describe Dirge City and all its inhabitants.

“That means I can’t trust you,” said Laith.

“Bingo.”

Laith sat on the motorcycle, keeping his eyes on Hat. He turned the key with his free hand and the motorcycle growled into life. “We’re taking the bike. You’re staying. Which way is Underworld? How far?”

“Underworld?” Hat pointed down the road toward Hunter’s Den, and then moved his hand slightly to the left. “About forty Settings that way. *Hell* of a journey. That way lies the Chair of Idris, Crossover, Noir, the Mall, the Junkyard and the Madhouse. Dangerous places, especially for the girl. No, you can’t go that way... But *that* way?” He slowly moved his arm further to the left. “The long way around? It’s safer, quicker. You only have to ride two Settings before it all becomes clear – Info Dump and No Man’s Land.”

“And these places are... less dangerous?”

“Ain’t no such thing. But there’s only two of them, and not forty. I’ll tell you this much ‘truth’ about them, if it pleases you to listen – whatever is said in Info Dump ain’t meant for your ears, so just keep riding and don’t slow down when they try to keep you around. And you’ll either find deliverance at the edge of No Man’s Land, or death.”

Laith said nothing as he rode away. Lies in the shape of riddles were just lies that took more of his time. When he turned the corner at the end of the alley, he thought he heard Black Hat laughing.

VIII.

The Many Faces of Antagonism

The man in the black, wide-brimmed hat entered King Death's hall as if he owned it, without a bow or a 'My King'. He was dressed in a fine grey coat and the eyes above his thin moustache glinted constantly. The massive doors of carved bone slammed shut behind him. He strode across the long hall to King Death's dais with quiet purpose, his boots sloshing and squelching on the bloody floor. Even in King Death's hall, *Naglfar's* floor was flooded with half an inch of blood – though at least, mused Songspeaker, there were flagstones beneath their feet and not... tissue.

The newcomer walked right to the foot of King Death's dais of piled bones, looked at the giant that sat on the throne of skulls at its summit and *still* did not bow. Songspeaker watched the exchange with silent interest, leaning on one of the many pillars that ran along the length of the hall.

"Black Hat," said King Death, his words echoing loudly.

"Yeah," the man called Black Hat drawled, "it's a little on the nose, but I figured I'd turn up again for consistency's sake. Still," he stretched his arms, then placed his hands on the small of his back and arched it until there was an audible crack, "this skin is getting old and its age is seeping into my damn bones. I reckon it's time I retired my trusty Hat."

He removed his hat and dusted it off on his leg, inspected it, nodded in approval and threw it away. Somehow, even without his hat, the upper half of his face remained in shadow. Black Hat reached up and ran his hands over the short hair of his sharp widow's peak. As his

hands reached the back of his head, they dug into the base of his skull. He ripped his hands forward violently and Black Hat – the shadowed face, the widow’s peak, the wolf’s eyes, the thin moustache, the grey suit, all of him – came *off*.

Where Black Hat once stood there was only Harlequin, the jester from Hela’s throne room, holding all that had once been Black Hat in his hands. He dropped the visage on the floor.

“I thought he’d never leave,” said Harlequin. “I hate moustaches almost as much as the blokes that wear them.” He walked to one of the chairs that lined either flank of the hall and sat down, stretching his legs out in front of him. “I’ve sent him out across Info Dump. Don’t worry – he has a bike, so he should be fine. No Man’s Land will take him some time too, so that gives us some breathing space. I may even take a nap. Then again, maybe not. Hare and tortoise and all that. I wonder what they’re up to these days...”

“Excellent,” said King Death, leaning back on his throne. “Where are they planning on going?”

“Who? The hare and the tortoise, or Laith and the girl?”

King Death did not reply.

“Right. Underworld, of all places,” Harlequin sighed. “I know. It was his choice, not mine. It’s probably going to be cold. Still, the chase should be fun.”

Harlequin seemed to notice Songspeaker for the first time. He sat up, cocked his head to one side as if in thought, and stood. “There are two things that have been bothering me, though,” he said as he began to pace across the hall towards Songspeaker. “Firstly, who on Dirge is that girl anyway? ‘Kitsune’ – interesting choice of name, for sure, but what’s she

doing here? She's got a name, but no story. She could be a magic potion or a pet gerbil or a letter to some king – why is she so important? And what's with all the bullshit about her being the soul of Dirge? I mean, it's bullshit, but it's pretty accurate bullshit. How does that work?"

King Death rested his silver skull on a fist and drummed the fingers of his other hand on the armrest of his throne. "It is worrying."

"Yes, so is my second question. Why is *he* here?" Harlequin pointed at Songspeaker.

Songspeaker took an involuntary step back. King Death turned his head to face him.

"I... don't know," replied King Death. "*You* told me to pick him up between the District and the Den."

"That's not the point. I'm not asking *why* he's here, but why *he's* here."

"Damned if I know," replied King Death, his single eye still fixed on Songspeaker.

"So, why are you here? Why haven't I killed you yet? What's up with that?" Harlequin asked Songspeaker directly. Songspeaker did not understand the question. In fact, he had understood very little of what had been said at all. "Are you Laith's once loyal companion, turned traitor? No, you hardly knew the self-righteous bastard, so that can't be it. Are you one of the bad guys? I would have thought so, if I hadn't known all of the baddies on a personal level. You can't be furniture, you have too much backstory and some cool character gimmicks."

"He *has* helped give Laith a purpose," said King Death. "Had we killed him at the first opportunity, Laith would now be dead."

“Then we’d all be fucked. True,” said Harlequin, now standing right in front of Songspeaker, his black-masked face inches away from Songspeaker’s own, his yellow eyes gleaming with malicious intelligence. “Let’s keep him around for now. I don’t like stray pieces on the board, though... Say, you’ve been awful quiet recently. Aren’t you known for talking shit?”

Songspeaker said nothing. He would speak when the time was right. He would kill the girl and save Dirge. For now he would wait and let them take him to her. For now he would play soldier and follow orders and be the silent servant. But when he did finally speak, they would hear him. They called him a treacherous bastard. And so he was.

So he was.

IX.

Info Dump¹

Laith took to riding the motorcycle like a man that had spent a lifetime riding them.

It worried him². How could he possibly know what a throttle was, what gears and tachometers were? Kit³ sat in the sidecar, her knees clutched to her chest. He had no idea how she was feeling. She had not spoken since the exchange with Hat. Laith could only hope she would recover from what she had been through – her slavery, the Battle of the Furnaces, the extinction of her people, and having her right to live weighed by a pair of men she did not even know... one of whom was still with her now, carrying her away to some unknown fate.

I am not who I think I am.

Info Dump had sprung up almost at once after they left the Industrial District. It was an odd thing, travelling between Settings. Laith was still not used to it. One moment they were riding through a phantasmagorical cityscape burdened with black smog, the next they were riding on a pathway that was plastered with thousands of damp sheets of paper, all of them covered in writing, detailed drawings, pictures and strange diagrams. It was not unlike the desert roads Laith was used to⁴, though there were dunes of loose papers that stretched out

¹ Info Dump is a Setting that shares its borders with the Industrial District, No Man's Land, the dead cityscape that Laith and Songspeaker were both travelling through at the beginning of Act II, Noontown, and (only slightly) with Vatican't and Ever Aft-

² As well it should. You see, Laith's role in this story, indeed in every-

³ Kit is a nickname that Laith has already taken to using for Kitsune, partly because it takes less time to-

⁴ 'Used to' is a term used for lack of a better term. The truth is, Laith is not entirely sure that he has a history prior to his apparent arrival on Dirge, after all-

in all directions and large television screens⁵ jutting from the yellowing, ink-stained ground instead of rocks. The winds too were similar, though the dust devils that danced here swirled with writings and not with dirt.

There have been plenty of stories told in Dirge City, but only one Dirge City Story and that's being told.

It was getting harder to shut the voices out. Laith had torn a large strip of cloth from the hem of his robe and wrapped it around Kit's eyes and ears to block them off⁶. But he needed his own eyes and ears alert. The motorcycle goggles they had found in the sidecar were no real help, but he had chosen to wear them all the same. When they had first arrived in Info Dump, Laith had stopped the motorcycle and dismounted to inspect the papers littering the floor. Most of it made little sense – something about a Dirge City Bible and someone called the Pigeon that lived in 'the Rafters' in some bygone age that the document called Draft One. After looking at a few more pages – some documenting Laith's past as an Ottoman Janissary, others speaking of the return of Scheherazade and Shayr Khan, or telling how Erik Ironspear had slain the Junkyard God, or explaining that even travelling through time was possible in Dirge City but only if the traveller was not in Dirge City⁷ – it almost began to make sense. And he had started to get scared.

Nature attacked Underworld well before I even knew what Dirge City was. Hela, Queen of Underworld at the time, and her lover, the original Mister Black, were forced to flee as Underworld's defences were overrun. Mister Black never made it out alive. Songspeaker, the

⁵ The television screens show events in other Settings in Dirge City, Laith's apparent backstory – which he is now beginning to question – and his past-

⁶ Despite his best efforts, this clearly doesn't seem to be working – at least not as much as he'd like.

⁷ This sentence actually makes a lot of sense, if you think about Dirge as it-

Captain of Hela's Elite Guard, helped her to escape and escorted her through many terrible Settings, losing his sanity on the Chair of Idris in the process. Hela took Mister Black's place as ruler of the Industrial District, bent on revenge. Songspeaker stood by her side, his apparent unflinching loyalty to her born of secret love. So why has he betrayed her now?

Laith shook his head and the motorcycle wavered momentarily before he regained control. The voices had followed soon after he had set off again. First they had whispered in his mind's ear, masquerading as his own thoughts, like poison trickling into a stream. They told him things, 'truths' he would call them if there was such a thing in Dirge, until they let slip their own secret in a desperate attempt to feed him more and more information... because that was what Info Dump did – the pages, the screens, the voices, the thoughts – they fed you information, letting your mind gorge itself on it. Those that tarried in Info Dump for too long found that they could go no further and that was where their stories ended. Laith was trying to fight the voices⁸ by cutting them off before they said too much, but he had already been here too long.

Does it all even matter? Do I need to do any of this? Am I doing this? Am I? No... Concentrate. I am nearly out of here, not long now. The border is over the next rise.

Something stirred just beyond the rise in question. The paper dunes were starting to lose shape as if being moved by strong winds. As the motorcycle hurtled towards the dunes and the Setting beyond, the papers swirled and were lifted higher. Black Hat's words came back to him through the fog of information that battled for space in his mind. *Just keep riding and don't slow down when they try to keep you around.* The wind seemed to gather under them,

⁸ Laith has also discovered what Black Hat meant when he said the voices were not meant for him. The voices of Info Dump are obviously meant for-

throwing the paper high up into the air, and then, for the briefest moment, allowing the paper to begin to float back to the ground. Suddenly, the wind gathered behind the raining paper and blasted forth. The paper stormed forward, a wall of black and white gathering momentum and mass as it lifted all the paper beneath it on its rampage towards the motorcycle. *Keep riding. Don't slow down.* Laith fully engaged the throttle. Kitsune began to scream. Laith nearly lost control of the bike as memories of what he had done to the siren flooded back.

The paperstorm rushed towards him. Laith snarled and ducked his head. Then the paper hit.

All things are guided by the Archplot⁹ – there are an infinite number of Settings¹⁰ – Ripper Jack¹¹ of Ever After has 'daddy issues' that need to be addressed if – stories cannot be told without – the Trope Cycle¹² ensures that archetypes are immortal, but characters do die – Kitsune has an important role to play in – Songspeaker's ability to 'Make New' allowed him to forge the Fire Brigade¹³ – every Protagonist requires an – The Mesnee d'Hellequin¹⁴ consisted of Ghost Riders¹⁵, Hellhounds and the Estantiga¹⁶, but was blown away in a subsequent draft – The Dramatis Personae is a book that lists everyone in Dirge City at any given time, it is located in the Office of the Dead – on Cadair Idris¹⁷ one goes insane or becomes a poet – Yusuf Reis¹⁸ and Juba¹⁹ were originally supposed to be introduced in –

⁹ The Archplot is the guiding-

¹⁰ A Setting is the name for places-

¹¹ A man born of fear and-

¹² The process in which people in Dirge City-

¹³ A battalion of Firemen that used fire to-

¹⁴ Often referred to as the Wild Hunt, The Household of the Harlequin was-

¹⁵ In North American-

¹⁶ A Galician term, meaning 'old army', the Estantiga-

¹⁷ The Chair of Idris is the titanic throne of poetry upon which Songspeaker-

¹⁸ The Muslim name of Captain John Ward, an English corsair who defected to-

¹⁹ An infamous sniper from the war in Iraq in-

X.

The Would-Be Kings of Ithaca

There was a voice in the distance. Familiar, like the voice he heard in his head when he would sit down to read. Only, he did not recall ever having read anything. *Strange*. The voice persisted. He wanted it to leave him be, he was tired of all the voices. There had been too many voices of late, all telling tales.

“Laith... Laith...”

Laith became aware that his eyes were closed. He opened them slowly and lifted his head from where it was resting. The silhouette of a great monolith blearily began to take shape in the distance. At first, it looked to Laith’s confused mind like a massive triangular rock, jutting out of the earth at an angle. More details began to emerge as his eyes grew clearer. Long fingers reaching out from its top, one of them from the triangle’s point, linked together by cobwebs in all-too-familiar patterns. Other shapes hung from the webbing: squares, rectangles and triangles. One of the fingers was topped with a circular crown.

Laith realised he was still wearing the dust-blanketed motorcycle goggles and lifted them up to his brow. The monolith in the distance was no rock, but a ship – the most beautiful ship. Or she had been once. Her stern was buried deep within the earth; her hull breached in several places, scarred by what seemed to be thousands of words, all crossed out; only three of her masts now stood tall, whilst two others had been broken, humbled; rope and rigging hung like unkempt hair and her bowsprit pointed to the heavens like a hand held up to God. Tiny figures, maggot-like at this distance, crawled all over her, the sounds of death-

cries and gunfire carrying across to Laith. The ship reminded him of the siren – lonely, tortured and broken. Most things reminded Laith of the siren. She was hard to forget.

They were in a desert – dirt shifting in razor winds, sharp rocks littering the cracked earth, and the stifling heat cooking everything for miles around.

“What...” began Laith, his voice sounding hoarse and dry.

“I don’t know,” replied Kit. Laith turned to look at her. She was covered in soot from her years in the Furnaces, and dust from the desert winds. She was not as young as he had first thought. “When I asked you what it was doing there, you didn’t answer... So I stopped the bike.”

Laith did not reply at first. He was still finding his bearings. He looked back over his shoulder and saw a wall of dust stretching up into the colourless sky, stray pieces of paper fluttered at its edges. Words he could not quite hear whispered in the back of his mind. Info Dump. They had survived.

“Laith?” said Kitsune, her voice touched with a hint of worry.

“Sorry,” said Laith, turning back to her. He put a hand on her shoulder and smiled at her in what he hoped was a reassuring way. “You stopped the bike whilst it was moving? That’s amazing. You’re a strong and brave girl. I could never have done that at your age.”

“... Were you?” asked Kitsune.

“Was I what?”

“Were you ever my age?”

The question took him aback. It was an innocent question, one that a child would ask, but it made Laith think. He thought back to before he arrived in Dirge City, but could not recall anything prior to waking up outside the City Gates. He had hazy visions of himself standing on the deck of a dhow at night, the wind whipping his wet hair about him and hailstones falling down like cannon-fire from the heavens. But it was not a memory. There was something in the corner of his mind about janissaries, corsairs, Captain Danseker and Yusuf Reis, but they were just names. Not memories.

“Perhaps not.”

“Oh,” said Kit, sounding confused.

Laith said no more on the subject. He looked back at the grounded ship, his hand resting on her shoulder. “As to why a ship is lying buried in the sands, I don’t know,” he said. “But here she is, with no sea in sight and still men fight over her. She is beautiful, a rose growing in the desert, but not so much that men would die to straddle her corpse and say, ‘She is mine’.”

“Then *why*?” said Kit, grabbing hold of Laith’s sleeve.

Laith sighed. “I don’t know. Black Hat said that we would find deliverance or death at the edge of No Man’s Land. We must be at that place, and we may have found both. There *is* something about that ship, and there’s a reason that Hat sent us this way. She’s a long way from the seas where she must have been a queen, but she’s a long way from being a harlot to be fought over by pirates. I don’t know why, but I think she’ll yet sail. Like Noah’s Ark. She must, for King Death is coming and he brings all Hell with him...”

He gave her shoulder a squeeze and eased the bike into motion. They rode slowly, trying to draw as little attention to themselves as possible. They did not need to – the men aboard the ship were busy killing and dying. More and more people joined the struggle. They came on foot, on horseback, by car or bike – some had hired coaches. There was, it seemed, an unspoken rule to not start shooting until one laid a hand on the prize. Thousands of men fighting over a desert shipwreck, struggling to reach her helm, none strong enough to claim her... Laith no longer found such things odd. It was a worrying thought.

“Is it true what Hat said about you?” said Kit, her voice barely above a whisper, as if she feared the men would hear her.

“What did he say about me?” said Laith in a distracted way, all of his attention focused on the battle raging on the ship.

“When he called you ‘Protagonist’... Are you?”

Laith tore his eyes away from the ship and looked back at Kitsune. She was not paying attention to him, but staring at the ship as he had been. She was trembling.

“I don’t know, Kit,” he said, deciding to speak if only to keep her mind occupied. She had already seen a lot more than a child should have to. ‘I honestly don’t. Had you asked me the first time we met, I would have known I wasn’t. But now? I just don’t know. Protagonist or not, Kit, I will not let any harm come to you. Not from Nature, not from Black Hat, King Death, Songspeaker, or those men up there. I will keep you safe.”

“Do you promise?”

“I do.”

Laith stopped the bike a safe distance away and crouched behind it. Kit did the same. They paused to watch the fighting. A group of knights clambered up the side of the ship, only to be gunned down by a pair of soldiers in a machine-gun nest they had set up on the upper deck. An axe-wielding horseman rode by and lopped a soldier's head off, before taking a spear in the throat and falling over the guardrail to the desert floor. Scenes like this were played out a hundred times, all over the ship. At first it seemed they battled mindlessly, every man for himself until one stood alone to claim his bride. But Laith soon saw that this was not the case. Alliances were formed. Some fought back to back. At least two of the three coaches had made some sort of pact to take the ship.

This close to the battleground, Laith could read the words that had been written on the side of the ship. By the look of them, they had been added to the ship during the battle. *Skithblathnir, Penelope, The Flying Dutchman, Argo, The Lady Lovibond, The Eliza Battle, HMS Friday, Hringhorni, The Tuscarora...* names, all crossed out. The only name that remained untouched was written in blood, in large, ugly scrawl. *The Royal Bitch*. It fit.

Laith removed the strip of cloth he had used to blindfold Kit, which she was now wearing around her neck, and looped it over his own head so it covered his right eye. What was it that made him think *The Royal Bitch* would sail? Intuition? Hope? No. Experience, he decided. It was experience that told him this place was waiting for the impossible to happen. It happened a lot in Dirge City.

He turned to Kit, holding her shoulders firmly. There was no time to be soft with her. She needed to be absolutely clear about what was going to happen. "Listen to me, Kit," he said. "We are getting on that ship and we are sailing her out of here-"

“But-”

“Listen! We *are* taking this ship and I don’t give a damn if I have to make these bastards push the thing across the wasteland, she will sail. *You* will do exactly as I say. You will stay near me at all times. If I tell you to hide, you will hide where I say until I come and get you. People will try and take you from me, and if they do you may pray for King Death before the end. I will not let any harm come to you while I live. But you must do exactly as I say. Understood?”

The girl nodded. She was afraid, but tried her best to hide it. He hugged her briefly, and then primed his pistol. “On my back.”

Kit did as she was told, and Laith was not surprised to note that the *Hero’s Arc* on his back passed through her as if it was not there. The sword would never harm a child. Laith stood and set off to the left, towards *The Royal Bitch’s* buried stern. If he was going to take control of the ship, he would need to start somewhere. The captain’s cabin was a good place. All the true pirates would be there.

They circled towards the back of the ship until they came upon a small opening in her side, barely large enough for Laith to belly-crawl through if he dug some of the earth out underneath. He looked around and was relieved to see that his fellow buccaneers were concentrating on the prize, not the competition. He got down on his belly and peered inside. The room was dark, but the little light that the breach provided showed it to be an empty guest cabin. The floor was slanted at a crazy angle, and they would have to scramble uphill to get to the doorway. “Help me dig,” he said, holstering his pistol and shifting dirt from the gap with his hands. Kit joined him.

Satisfied, he motioned for Kit to crawl though as he took another look around. No one had noticed them yet. He followed her inside. As he squeezed through the gap, Kit screamed. Laith looked up to see a man grabbing her by the hair. He struggled to drag himself though the gap.

“Come here, me likkle cutie, me likkle luvorly girly,” the fat man gasped, pinning her to the wall.

Kit kicked and screamed and scratched.

“Uncle Crowe gots somat fer ya,” he cackled, “somat naahs!”

Laith pulled himself through the gap and got to his feet.

“Crowe,” he said, his voice low.

Kit and Crowe stopped struggling. Kitsune stared at him with wide eyes. She had never heard him use this tone. She had never seen him angry. Crowe slowly looked over his shoulder. He threw Kit aside and turned to face Laith.

“Ya wants a shot at old Crowe, do ya?” said Crowe, rolling his shoulders loose. “I’ll beat yer bloody. *Thens* I’ll beat her bloody. *Thens* I’ll have me fun. *Thens* I’ll kill yer both.”

Crowe rushed forward before he finished the last sentence. Laith drew his pistol and shot the man in his belly. Crowe stumbled and fell forward, screaming in pain. Laith stepped aside and let him hit the floor. He reversed the pistol, took hold of the barrel and laid into the back of Crowe’s head with the butt until Crowe stopped screaming. The smell of urine seeped into the air.

Laith straightened up, looked at the bits of skull and brain that had stuck themselves to the butt of his pistol and let the weapon fall. He transferred his makeshift eye-patch to his left eye. His right eye was now accustomed to the dark. Satisfied with his night vision, he looked for Kit. He found her in a corner of the room, her legs drawn up to her chest. He reached a hand out to her, and she took it hesitantly, and then threw herself into his arms.

“He, he was...” she sobbed.

“I know, Kit,” said Laith, gently pulling away, “but not while I live.”

She nodded, brushing tears from her eyes.

She is older.

“Stay close,” warned Laith, and half-scrambled up the slanted floor to the open door. Kit followed as silently as she could. He gazed out into the corridor. It seemed empty, but he would not make the same mistake twice. He signalled Kit to follow and crept out into the lopsided corridor.

The sounds of fighting were all around them – the wails of the dying, the screams of gunfire and the clash of steel meeting steel – but it seemed they had found a pocket of peace, here in the belly of *The Royal Bitch*. They moved along the slanted corridor, taking care not to put a foot on a door, lest it open. The corridor met up with another at the far end, this one running from on high where the fighting was thickest, to the aft and what Laith hoped was the captain’s cabin. Laith took Kit’s hand and readied himself to slide down the passage to the bottom, when a creaking floorboard from below gave him pause.

Laith pushed Kit behind him. He strained his ears. The hushed sound of voices drifted up to him from the door at the bottom of the passage.

"We're wasting time, Captain," he heard someone say. "I'm assuming command myself. She is no longer yours. I will let you live if you help me. Just tell me how to sail her."

"I won't share my love with any of you," said a woman. "Get off my ship, or die."

"Damn it, Ulyssa, I'm not asking for your love. I'm taking your ship."

"I love her. You will not take my *Penelope* from me."

There were a few laughs. Laith counted three distinct voices in the group. The woman was the third. From what he could tell, he needed her to sail the ship. He decided not to think about how she could sail a half-buried ship in a desert for now.

"You know what?" continued the man. "Screw it. We can't waste any more time here. The longer we wait, the more thieves arrive. Kill her."

The passage came alive with the sound of gunfire.

Laith cursed and reached up for the *Hero's Arc*. His hand passed through the hilt. He cursed again, and drew the broken sword on his hip. Kitsune had her eyes tightly shut and her hands pressed to her ears.

"Kit?" said Laith, grabbing her arm.

"I know," she said, opening her eyes. "You have to save the captain. Go. If someone comes, I'll hide."

“Kit...”

“Don’t worry, I understand. Help her!”

Laith nodded, turned and threw himself into the passage, sliding down to the Captain’s door on his back. As his feet hit the door, the focus of the gunfire turned in his direction. Bullets tore through the door. Laith rolled to one side and curled up, trying to make himself as small as possible.

The gunfire stopped. Laith gingerly raised his head.

“You think they’re dead?” said someone.

“Probably. Still, there are always more, right?” said another.

“Go look,” said the leader.

Three of them. Not two.

“W-what?”

“Go and have a look,” the leader repeated slowly, as if talking to an idiot. “I’ll watch the Red Lady’s door. Put an extra bullet in every corpse.”

Laith looked up the passage to see if there was anywhere he could hide. Kitsune was looking down at him from the passage in which he had left her. He motioned for her to hide and, still crouching, pressed his back against the wall. He made certain to avoid blocking any of the bullet holes in the wood. Two pairs of footsteps made their way to the door. Laith braced himself, holding the broken sword in both hands.

The door opened. Laith stood, stepping in as he did so. The sword was in the first man's throat before anybody could react. The second man cried out and began to discharge his rifle. Laith threw his victim into the second attacker, losing his sword in the process. The leader of the band turned from watching the door on the other side of the room and raised his rifle. Laith pushed past the second attacker and ran straight towards the leader. The door on the far side of the room swung open and an arrow flew out of the darkness. It entered the back of the leader's skull. A second arrow flew over his shoulder as he fell and took the surviving rifleman in his heart. Laith raised his hands in surrender.

"Are you going to shoot me too, Captain?" said Laith. "Or are you going to ask why I risked my life to help you?"

"I'm not stupid," said the woman the others had called Ulyssa. Laith could not see inside the shadows of the adjacent room, but he knew she had an arrow nocked to the string and at half-draw. She was a very good archer. "You're just after my *Penelope*, the same as everyone else."

"Yes and no, Ulyssa."

"It is one or the other."

"I need your ship to get to where I am going, Captain, and then I'll leave her to you, to do with as you please."

"Where is it that you are going?"

Laith thought about keeping Kitsune's existence from her for now, but discarded it straight away. The girl was out in the open back there and he needed her with him in the captain's cabin, where he could keep her safe.

"I am taking a child to Underworld. I do not want your ship, but I want to keep her safe."

"I see no child."

"Let me call her in."

"Call her from here."

Laith nodded. "Kitsune?" he called. "Kit?"

"Yes?" Kitsune replied from her hiding place.

"Come down now, you'll be safe."

Laith did not turn around, he did not think he was allowed to, so he heard rather than saw Kitsune slide down the passage and walk haltingly into the room.

"Why are your hands up?" she asked. "You said it was safe here."

"It is," he replied. "For you."

"What about you?" said Kitsune, coming to stand by his side.

"I'm working on it. Don't worry," he said to Kitsune, then turned his attention back to Ulyssa. "You see? I just want to keep the girl safe. I don't care about anything else."

Ulyssa was silent for a moment. “Why is that sword on your back shining like that? Who are you?”

“My name is Laith bin Asad bin Hamza Al-Bahri. The story behind the glowing sword will have to wait. We need to get moving *now*. King Death will be here at any moment and-”

Ulyssa stepped out of the room with her red compound bow at her side. She was dressed in plain, serviceable clothing: a white shirt under a simple red coat, black leggings and knee-high boots with the tops turned down. Her hair was tied back with a maroon bandana. Her hip quiver was full of red-fletched arrows. *The Red Lady*. She had a harsh look to her, and hard eyes, the years of sailing with cutthroats had marked her plainly. She looked shaken. King Death’s name had clearly scared her.

“We need to get *The Penelope* moving,” she said.

#

The three of them hurried up the inclining passage on hands and knees, Laith and Ulyssa protectively flanking Kitsune. At the far end of the passage, there was an even steeper stairwell leading up to a pair of wooden doors. The war-shouts and death-cries of those on the upper deck drifted down to them. The group clambered up to the doors and Ulyssa pushed one open an inch. They gazed outside.

There were easily more than a hundred people fighting for control of the ship on the upper deck alone. Ulyssa eased the door shut and shook her head at no one in particular.

“Pirates,” she said. “Thieves. Killing each other for what does not belong to them.”

“Where do we need to go, Ulyssa? To the helm?” said Laith.

“Not the helm, but the bow. If I can get to *Penelope’s* figurehead, I can convince her to sail.”

Laith reached over his shoulder and drew the *Hero’s Arc*. As he had expected, the sword chose to be drawn. The light from the blade illuminated the hallway. He stood and put his free hand on the door. “Ready?” he asked without looking back. Before they could answer, he flung the door open and stepped out into the fighting.

And the fighting stopped. Soldiers, pirates, knights, hooligans, priests – hands still curled about throats, swords inches from bellies, guns pressed up against temples – they all stopped and stared at him, their mouths agape and their eyes squinting against the brilliant glare of the Arcblade. Laith held it high above his head like a talisman and those around him backed away. He strode across the richly carpeted deck and into their midst, filled with the calm and confidence that flowed from the blade. His companions followed him out, drawn by the power of the moment. No one attacked them.

“*The Castle of King Death!*” a samurai screamed into the silence, his voice shrill with fear.

People were abandoning ship before the man had raised his hand to point at what he saw.

Laith turned in the direction of the wall of dust. Kitsune and Ulyssa stood on the deck beside him and watched as the massive shape took form through the swirling clouds.

Ulyssa spoke, her voice low and rhythmic. She spoke in verse, a poem to frighten children, a tale told by old wise men to the deaf ears of the young and foolish:

Deck manned by the ghosts of storied captains, hull carved from the flesh of great Poseidon, masts hewn from the bones of fallen titans, sails torn from the hides of mighty krakens, sailing in the wake of screaming sirens, it sails upon the souls of countless dragons. Here comes corpse ship, here comes Castle, here comes nail ship, here comes nightmare... all fall beneath the banners of the dread King Death.

As Ulyssa spoke, the monstrosity tore itself free of the wall of dust. It was Laith's first clear look at the ship that had been stalking him, and he knew fear. There were no embellishments in Ulyssa's words, no stretching of the truth. It was like a living creature, its flanks heaving with the strain of staying in the air, its belly dripping with Poseidon's blood, crowned with bones and a million different pirate flags, rising and falling on an angry grey sea of dead dragons. *The Castle of King Death.*

Ulyssa ran. Laith and Kitsune stood rooted to where they were, unable to look away or move. It was coming. Ulyssa's voice cut through Laith's paralysis as she screamed at the figurehead of the now empty, grounded ship.

"Move that ass, *Bitch!*"

Her *Penelope* did not have to be told twice.

XI.

The Man in the Mirror

Laith and Kitsune ran to the prow and leaned over the guardrail.

The hull shook and shuddered violently. Green spouts of flame blasted out through the holes and tears in the ship's belly, crawled through the cracks between earth and vessel. It began to slide forward on its keel, the wood cracking against hard rocks buried in the gravel. *The Royal Bitch* shuddered again, this time more forcefully, and Kitsune pulled away from the guardrail, trying to drag Laith away with her. Laith realised he still held the *Hero's Arc* and tried to sheath it, but his arm slept at his side unmoving. For once, the sword refused to be sheathed. Whatever it was that was making the Arcblade yearn to be used was on *The Castle of King Death*.

The ship groaned and the air was filled with the sound of snapping wood. The lower half of the stern, buried too deeply in the ground, was torn from the rest of the ship and the *Bitch* shot forward, leaving a swirling green inferno in its wake. Forward, and up.

Dirge City seemed to roll away from view as *The Royal Bitch* rose steeply into the air, until the bowsprit pointed to the grey heavens, and the stern flew directly away from the earth. Laith grabbed hold of the guardrail and screamed to the others to hold onto something. Kit dropped to her knees on the carpeted portion of the deck and held onto Laith's leg. They should have been falling to their deaths. Down was now at their backs on this rising ship. Only it was not. Somehow, 'down' was still beneath their feet. Kit vomited on the carpet. Laith's stomach lurched. The sky rolled back to its proper place as the ship levelled out, and

Laith was relieved to find the ground below them once more when he looked back over the guardrail.

Something pulled the sword towards the stern. Laith pried the fingers of his free hand from the guardrail, shrugged Kitsune off and ran to the back of the ship, ignoring her many questions. He ran up a stairwell and along an uncarpeted stretch of deck until he slid to a halt at the very back of the ship. Kitsune joined him.

The Castle of King Death rose and fell on its ghostly sea of dead dragons, harpies circling above like crows. It was almost within rifle range.

#

Songspeaker leaned against the ramparts at the prow of the *Castle's* high walls, oblivious to the blood seeping from the ship's living flesh and into his clothes, and watched the flying shipwreck ahead of them trail green fire across Dirge City's colourless sky, listening to one of his new shipmates recount tales of past valour.

"... So I left her bleeding on the pavement, right, snatched the candyfloss, yeah, and – get this – kicked the pram into the middle of the road!"

He had long since learned to ignore the wasted words of his shipmates. They were neither eloquent nor purposeful, without rhythm or structure – words for the sake of words. Such words did not matter, and were meant only to fill up empty spaces that were oft best left unsullied.

A quick glance over the courtyard behind him showed pirates, goblins, ghouls, skeleton-men, trolls, walking lizards and a hundred other kinds of foul beings hard at work aligning

canons and ballistae of many different designs. A few score sub-captains made sure this was done properly by randomly lashing out at crewmembers with whip and club. It was not unlike the Furnaces, mused Songspeaker. He shook his head. That part of his story had been told. It did not pay to revisit it. Not yet.

There was a commotion at the far end of the courtyard. King Death had left his throne of meat and bones. His crew scrambled away from him as he strode out of the bone doors and across the courtyard. Members of the 666th Sharpshooters and the man named Harlequin fell into line behind him in rows of two as he marched up one of the stairways that flanked the portcullis on the prow of the ship. King Death stalked along the wall until he towered no more than a dozen feet away from Songspeaker and curled his fingers around the light-gnawing hilt of that gargantuan, lifeless black blade at his waist. It was harder to look at the sword than King Death himself, but every crewmember's eyes hungered for it, craved it.

"Report?" said King Death.

The nearest crewman tore his eyes from the sword and looked up at King Death with what momentarily looked like relief before being replaced with fear once more. He cleared his throat. "Eh... My Lord, their ship is too fast. They are losing us."

King Death said nothing. He turned his head slightly to his left. One of the 666th spoke.

"Sir, they are out of rifle range."

King Death drew his Arcblade and the roar of ten thousand cold and stormy nights on icy seas filled every ear on deck. Light swirled into the black blade and was swallowed. Eyes drowned in the void within the slender sword and all who saw it despaired. This was the sad

ending, the fall of heroes and the triumph of evil forged into a terrible blade. Songspeaker knew it at once, for he had seen its opposite scabbarded on Laith's back. The *Villain's Arc*.

King Death held the sword forward, blade pointing upward, almost in salute. Then he flicked his wrist and the sword *cut* the air. And the *cut* grew as it shot forward in a perfect line towards the other vessel, and *continued to* grow as it closed the gap between ships in moments, until it became a sharp *tear* in the fabric of Dirge, and the *tear* severed the masts from the other ship. Where it did not cut the masts, it continued into the horizon.

The masts came crashing down.

#

Laith followed the *cut* as it tore through the very air, passed over his head and through the *Bitch's* three remaining masts. They made no sound as they slid apart and fell away from the ship. Laith's heart nearly stopped as he realised the ship would fall from the sky. Two of the masts cleared the ship and tumbled to the earth below like matchsticks in the wind. The third smashed through the starboard side of the ship as it fell. Laith held onto the stern rail and wrapped an arm around Kitsune. But the ship did not lose altitude, or even slow down. If anything, she moved faster.

"How is the ship still flying?" shouted Laith.

Kitsune looked up at Laith with wide eyes. "I... I don't think we're on a ship, Laith."

Something akin to a memory stirred in the back of Laith's mind. He saw himself sitting on something, flying as he was doing now... Laith laughed aloud and Kitsune grinned up at him.

“The carpet!” he said, “The ship was built around the carpet!” He pushed himself to his feet, and held his sword of light in both hands. “Go back to the carpet and stay there, Kitsune. I will remain here and make sure they do not damage it.”

“I won’t leave you, Laith,” said Kitsune stubbornly. “Come back with me.”

A second *cut* tore across the sky towards them, this one at waist height. Laith waited until the last possible moment, and then swung his sword down. The *cut* dissipated.

“Do not worry about me, Kit,” he said. “I have been doing this for a long time. I’ll be fine.”

Kitsune looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded and ran back the way they had come. The worst thing about the lie he had just told was that Laith was not sure if it was a lie at all.

#

Songspeaker watched King Death and Laith duel across the sky: the former slashing great wounds into the very air, faster than the eye could follow; the latter healing them with slashes of his own. The ship they were chasing had now become a tiny figure on the horizon.

“You’d think these guys would get tired and call it even,” said Harlequin.

Songspeaker ignored him.

The Harlequin sighed and looked away, apparently bored.

King Death growled in frustration and sent one last spiteful *cut* in the direction of the distant ship. He motioned towards the man that had told him the enemy ship was too fast and a pair of Sharpshooters seized him. The man began to scream and struggle. He babbled and

begged. King Death drove the *Villain's Arc* through his chest without even caring enough to look at the man as he did so. The man's eyes and mouth became light-consuming voids like the sword and he stopped screaming. His veins grew black, his body shuddered. King Death removed the blade and sheathed it in a fluid motion. The Sharpshooters threw the man overboard.

Songspeaker watched the exchange, taking mental notes. He already knew that the sword craved to be used, that was why King Death always had a hand on it. And now he had learned that it refused to be sheathed without tasting blood. It truly was the opposite of Laith's noble blade. Not for the first time Songspeaker questioned what he was doing in such company. Not for the first time Songspeaker told himself he was doing what was necessary.

"Orders?" said the Sharpshooter closest to King Death.

"We know where they are heading," replied King Death. "When we get there, I will deal with the Protagonist myself."

Songspeaker looked up at the mention of the name. He had never heard of such a thing, and yet it seemed familiar. The Harlequin seemed to notice.

"You don't know what one of those is, do you?" said the Harlequin.

Songspeaker tried to ignore him.

"Now *that's* interesting," continued the Harlequin.

"Most interesting," agreed King Death, turning his attention to Songspeaker. "How could he not know that?"

Those that had been watching the exchange stood in silence around them. Worried whispers were passed back along the length of the *Castle*. There was a man aboard that did not know what a Protagonist was.

“I have no idea,” replied Harlequin. For once, he had nothing strange to say.

As was quickly becoming the norm, Songspeaker did not understand. But they were worried. He saw it reflected in the eyes of the men around him. Or was it fear? The man he saw in their eyes was not Songspeaker at all, but something else, someone far worse. He smiled at the thought, and walked to the stairway leading down to the courtyard. His shipmates could not move out of the way quickly enough.

It was definitely fear. But was he the monster he saw reflected in those frightened eyes? He fancied that he was. He fancied it very much indeed.

#

Laith and Kitsune watched as Ulyssa made her farewells to the ship she had come to love in some other time, in another story. Kitsune felt for Laith’s hand. Laith curled his fingers around hers.

King Death’s sword strokes had left the already ruined ship in pieces. What was left of the ship was falling to the land below, bit by bit. Soon, all that would be left was the large stretch of thick carpet in the middle of the upper deck.

“My dear *Penelope*,” said Ulyssa, raising a trembling hand to the inward-looking figurehead’s cheek. It was carved into the shape of a plain-faced woman in a flowing dress, a varnished wooden statue that stood with arms held out in front of her like an invitation to

embrace. Her expression was ever imploring. Ulyssa traced a finger along the figurehead's temple, as if brushing a stray strand of hair behind its varnished ear. "I wish... I wish you were..." Her voice trailed off. She let her hand fall and looked away, composing herself. She transferred her gaze to the crumbling deck at her feet. The deck shook, the wooden planks groaned and snapped, and green fire crept up between the cracks. A guardrail fell away to their right. She met the lifeless eyes of the figurehead that had been the embodiment of the ship she had loved so dearly, and her next words were full of strength, hard words edged with emotion. "This is goodbye. Be good, my girl. Until we sail again."

Ulyssa backed away as the floor began to break apart. The front of the ship fell away, piece by piece, letting her make her farewells to every plank, rope and nail. Ulyssa stopped once she stood on the carpet. The floorboards that surrounded the figurehead were pulled down into the green fires below. Ulyssa's hand came up for a moment, as if she could stop the ship from burning with a gesture. The figurehead, her *Penelope*, slid backward, arms outstretched for help, eyes still imploring. Ulyssa stepped toward the statue. Laith grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her away from the edge of the carpet.

Penelope fell into the emerald fires, still pleading for the help that would never come.

The rest of the ship crumbled around them, cascading through the flames that kept the carpet aloft and falling to the Settings below. Ulyssa dropped to her knees, unable to stand. Laith let go of her arm.

"I built her, you know?" said Ulyssa, looking down at the carpet. "I built her with my own hands around this cursed thing, so we could sail upon an ocean of stars together. But when we got to this endless sea above the ground, we realised there are no stars above Dirge.

They were just dreams. And the very thing that gave my *Penelope* her wings would consume her from within until she was no more. We knew this back then, when we first sailed the skies. And she implored, and she implored... but I loved her too much, and I could not leave her grounded. Now all that is left are the bare bones of what she once was. And even those will soon be ashes.”

Laith laid a hand on her shoulder. “She is still here, in the very fibres of the carpet we stand upon,” he said, hoping she would find wisdom in his words. Wisdom he did not feel. “This carpet *is* your *Penelope*, Ulyssa. Sometimes, you have to cut away all the things that make someone beautiful to you to find the person you love beneath. You wanted to sail the skies. You are. *Penelope*, to me, is now fleeter and freer than she ever was.”

Ulyssa smiled sadly. “Perhaps you are right, and I so want to believe it to be so,” she said. “But I think not. All we have here in Dirge City are sad stories and nothing more. And the story you have just told me makes me smile. How could it ever be a story of Dirge?”

Kitsune sat down in front of Ulyssa and held her hands in her own. “Not all stories have to be sad,” she said. “Some have happy endings. Those are my favourites.”

“No, child,” said Ulyssa. “All stories are sad, because someone always loses.”

“Do they have to?” whispered Kitsune, as the final few timbers of the ship that had been *Penelope* and *The Royal Bitch* and so many other things fell to the strange landscapes beneath them.

“Someone always does.” Ulyssa looked up at Laith, her eyes almost begging him to tell her otherwise. “Isn’t that so, Laith?”

“Stories...” whispered Laith, a tear spilling onto his cheek. “All... *stories.*”

Ulyssa wept silently into her hands. For a moment, Kitsune knelt where she was, looking to Laith to say something more, something to say that everything would be alright and happy endings did happen, even if only very rarely. But he did not. Kitsune threw her arms around Ulyssa and held her as she cried.

Laith walked to the end of the carpet and looked down. A sea of church spires, a stretch of roads and houses half-sunken in a putrid bog, a shining cityscape of glass and steel patrolled by machine-men... *All of them, thought Laith, they are just... stories. That’s why they are so different. That’s why nothing here makes sense. Each Setting has its own set of stories. Most of the people here never cross the borders to other Settings. Only a handful of us ever do... So what does that say about me?*

If all there is here are stories... who am I?

The question scared him. But the worst thought came next.

If all there is here are stories, why should I care what happens to them – what happens to her?

He looked back at Kitsune holding Ulyssa tightly to her, and wept. He had no answers.

XII.

Conflict

They watched the massive carpet sail away across the grey sky, on a bed of green fire.

“Will she be alright?” asked Kitsune. “Will she be safe up there, on her own?”

Laith started walking. Dead land, littered with the bones of large animals, stretched out to either side of them as far as Laith could see. Ahead lay the maws of a daunting cave, an unnatural hole that rose out in the middle of the otherwise flat plains, stalagmites and stalactites like jagged teeth. Underworld – the Setting where Nature had first struck, many tales ago. Something was obviously wrong here. Laith was done being surprised.

“... I’m not sure,” he said to himself.

“She’ll be fine,” said Kitsune, assuming he had been talking to her. Laith let her. “I don’t like this,” she continued, stepping over the charred remains of another dead animal.

They appeared to be dogs, or had been once. If so, mused Laith, they were larger than any dog had a right to be. “No,” he agreed. They walked on in silence.

Once they reached the cave mouth, they stood a while, peering inside. The darkness was absolute.

“Is this...” Kit’s voice trailed away.

“Yes,” replied Laith. “It is.”

“My new home,” said Kit. The way she said the word made it sound like a bad thing.

Laith did not find himself disagreeing. He looked down at her, and noted, not for the first time that she was taller than she had been when he had seen her in the Furnaces.

“How old are you?” he asked.

The question seemed to startle her. “Se- Eleven. I’m eleven.”

Laith nodded, as if nothing was amiss. He looked back into the cave. It was no place for a child to grow up. And where was Nature? Worse, he could feel something fast approaching, and it was not his pursuers. No, Laith and Kitsune were rushing towards something terrible and could do nothing but carry on going. They knew of no other way to go. What approached, he realised, was an end of sorts. The feeling was not unfamiliar. He had felt it once before, as he had knelt in the Heart of Nature with his own pistol pressed against his temple.

“Can you feel that?” asked Kit.

“Yes,” said Laith, crouching in front of her. “It’s an ending.”

His worry must have shown. Kit raised a hand and stroked his cheek. She was definitely older than he had first thought, or she had aged in the telling. Her eyes told stories.

“It will be a good one,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“How do you know?”

“All the best stories have them.”

Laith did not remind her of Ulyssa's words. Instead, he reached out and took her hand. Standing, he drew the Arcblade and let the calm flow over him. Light flooded into the cave mouth. He breathed in deeply and slowly exhaled.

Laith smiled down at Kit. "Let's see this happy ending."

Kit returned the smile. They walked into Underworld together.

#

The tunnel descended into the earth at a steep gradient.

The *Hero's Arc* lit the passage in its own strange way – emitting light and drawing it in at the same time, making the shadows dance a weird jig at the edges of their sight. The creepers on the walls were burnt to a crisp, the roots beneath their feet blackened and dead. Where the plant life had burnt away, the walls bore carvings that depicted scenes of battle, men on horseback charging at a line of massive dogs. The dogs were Underworld's defenders. *That explains the bones on the plains*, thought Laith. Nature's creepers had covered them all. And now her creepers hung lifeless.

Ahead, the tunnel opened into a wide cavern. They hesitated at the threshold. The cavern still burned in places. Two separate cataclysms had ravaged the vast hall, leaving only a shadow of its former glory in their wake. The masonry, statues and decorated pillars that must once have made this cavern a sight to behold had been pulled down by the vines of Nature during the attack that had torn Hela from her kingdom. And then a second invasion, far more recent, had burnt Nature's stolen kingdom to ashes.

"We should never have come here," said Kit, giving voice to his thoughts.

"No," agreed Laith. "Nature is not here. It is not safe. We should go."

He tried to turn around, but the sword strained to pull him into the cavern. He fought the urge to walk out, knowing what it meant, but it was too strong. He was dragged forward by the Arcblade, pulling Kit in tow, the calm emanating from the sword making him unable to bring himself to worry.

As they walked past a fallen pillar, entwined with still-burning brambles, the sword twisted violently towards it. Laith pushed Kit behind him and brandished the sword two-handed.

From behind the toppled stonework, the nightmarish, crowned figure of King Death strode forth, his burnished plate chest piece and one-eyed metal skull glinting in the swordlight, his white robes and hooded cowl seeming to glow. His fist, sheathed in lobstered plate, curled about the hilt of the dark blade at his side, and he drew the sword as he walked, the antithesis of Laith's own sword, gorging itself on the shadows in the cavern and regurgitating them.

"Kitsune?" said Laith, backing away slowly. "*Kit?*"

"Y-yes?" she managed.

"Run."

"I'm too scared."

King Death laughed. "You ran from the Furnaces," he said. "I found you. You ran from my *Castle*. Still, I found you. There is nowhere you can go where I cannot follow. Nowhere you can hide where I cannot find you. Your life is mine, child, to take when I choose."

“Why?” asked Laith, stalling for time. He racked his brains for a means of escape, but all he could think of was killing the wielder of the other *Arc*. The *Hero’s Arc* was bent on battle. “What do you gain from killing her? And don’t tell me the story about Kitsune being Nature’s anchor in Dirge, we both know that’s a lie.”

“Orders,” apologised King Death. “Just following orders. ‘Kill the child and anyone that tries to stop you’.”

“More lies.”

“I don’t know what else to say... Perhaps I really don’t have any reason at all. I’m just trying to do the right thing here.”

“Which is?”

“Keep things interesting.”

Laith locked swords with him, yelling at Kit to run. Laith’s sword drew the cavern’s meagre light in and pulsed with the brilliance of its own. King Death’s sword drew on darkness and smothered everything beneath a shadowy cloak. When their blades met, the fabric of reality tore open and closed, there was deafening thunder and the absence of sound, the light and the darkness were blinding. Every swing hammered Laith back. He barely moved fast enough to defend against the onslaught. Every slash of the black blade tore the cavern apart, just as it had torn the skies above Dirge. King Death was faster, stronger and a better swordsman. Laith did not stand a chance.

“Swiftly goes the swordplay, blades go snicker-snack,” someone said.

Even as Laith fought for his life, his heart sank. He knew that voice. The end was here.

The girl Laith had called Kitsune jumped at the sound of his voice and turned to face him.

Songspeaker dropped the now spent flamethrower he had used to clear a path into Underworld and drew a dagger, smiling apologetically. Beside him stood the Harlequin, dressed as always in his trademark red and black duster, his yellow eyes glowing from within his black mask, amused by a joke known only to him. He had not bothered to draw his guns.

“Why are you doing this?” pleaded the girl, her eyes wide in terror.

Songspeaker took no joy in frightening children. He walked over and knelt before her, laying a hand on her shoulder. He held up the blade. “Know, O Princess, that this *is* a dagger you see before you,” he said solemnly, almost sadly. Kitsune whimpered and he raised a finger to her lips, shaking his head. “The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones. I come to bury Kitsune, not to save her. Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and die. You stand on the graves of dreams, on the way to dusty death. The powerful play goes on, and we will contribute a verse. Out! Out, brief candle. May you stay forever young.”

Songspeaker’s fingers curled into her hair and wrenched her head back. He pressed the blade to her throat.

“Wait!” shouted the jester, latching onto Songspeaker’s wrist, the wrist of the hand that held the dagger.

Songspeaker did not let go of Kit’s hair, nor did he remove the knife from her throat. He strained against the Harlequin to slit Kitsune’s throat. The clown was strong.

Harlequin tightened his grip and the bones in Songspeaker's wrist crumbled. The dagger fell from his hand. Songspeaker was thrown back, clutching his now useless wrist.

"I just remembered a really good joke," continued Harlequin. "You're gonna love this one. Actually it's a bit rubbish, and not really a joke. Still..." The jester laughed and danced a merry jig to the sounds of the clashing Arcblades. "What do you need to tell a story?"

Songspeaker said nothing.

"To tell any story? Anybody? No?" The Harlequin's shoulders slumped and he palmed his forehead. "Conflict. To tell a story, you *need* conflict. Look who's fighting King Death over there. That's the Protagonist, right? Don't answer that. Well..." Harlequin laughed and danced again. "Well... He can't have conflict with himself now, can he? That's where I come in."

Harlequin suddenly stood bolt upright. His eyes glowed with malignance rather than mirth and he no longer laughed. He raised his hands to the back of his head, as Songspeaker had once seen Black Hat do. The jester's fingers dug into his flesh and his hands jerked forward, tearing the Harlequin's persona away and letting it fall to the floor. Songspeaker's mouth fell open.

The Harlequin's flesh, clothes, bells, guns, mask and glowing eyes lay at the feet of the goddess who had rescued him from Nature's clutches. Her scourge and sword still hung at her hips, her saxophone was still slung over her shoulder. The dark, perfect woman laughed, and her laugh was more musical than any song Songspeaker had ever spoken. He longed for her to speak, for she actually sang her words, but at the same time he dreaded what she would say. She had freed him, sent him on this quest to kill the child and save Dirge City. But

she had been with him the entire time, pretending to be someone else. Lying to him, deceiving him, *saving* the girl she had told him to kill. She was probably a lie herself.

“Bingo,” she said. When she spoke, the sounds of the men fighting seemed to fade away for Songspeaker, until there was only this woman and her voice.

“You... you’re a girl?” said Kitsune, her eyes wide in awe.

“Sorry, cutie,” smiled the goddess, “but ain’t many gals that look this good.” She turned her gaze to Songspeaker, and her smile became almost sad. “Poor boy. You know me as your saviour, the woman that freed you from Nature’s grasp. Now I’m here to save Dirge, and to do so, I might just kill you. I haven’t said a word to you that’s true since the day we met, Songspeaker, but I’ll speak three now. I’m the *Antagonist*.”

The last word cut through the air like a guillotine. The sounds of fighting ceased. Laith stared at the woman, his blade still locked with King Death’s. King Death pushed him away and stood with his sword at his side, watching Laith.

“You’re all just pieces on a chess-board,” continued the Antagonist, walking a slow circle around the girl, trailing a finger across Kitsune’s shoulder blades and collarbone. “Everyone in Dirge is. Sure, some of you are knights, some bishops, some queens or rooks. But most of you are just pawns. There are only two kings on the board. One of them is standing there with a sword in his hands and his mouth wide open,” she walked over and crouched in front of Songspeaker, turning his head with a soft hand until he was looking at Laith. “But the other one? The other ‘King’ has been right here in front of y’all and you never even knew. Nature, the Registrar, Harlequin, Hela, Black Hat,” she sighed, “yes, even me – we’re all just Faces of the Antagonist. I played you like a sax. Sorry...”

Songspeaker tried to process what her being Hela, Nemesis and Nature at once implied. She had sent him to fight herself. She had released him to kill Kitsune, who he now realised did not need to be killed. Dirge City was never in any danger from her, because there was never any threat. So why send him after the girl? Why send Laith to save her?

He felt something slide into his belly. Songspeaker looked down to find the length of Nemesis's sword embedded in his stomach. The pain came a moment later. Songspeaker gasped and slumped to the floor.

"... But this is why they call me Nemesis."

She slipped the sword out and stood, taking the child by her hair as Songspeaker clutched at the air feebly. He had failed. He had failed on so many levels from the very beginning.

"I'll be wanting that sword back," Nemesis said to King Death. "Play nice."

"Yes, boss," replied King Death, his voice sounding amused.

One of the *Castle's* grey ghosts swept down from the hidden ceiling above. It swallowed Nemesis and the child, and then veered back into the dark heights.

Laith's angry screams sounded so distant now, so faint...

Had it all been for naught? Had he died for nothing? It appeared so.

#

When the apparition dropped from the invisible heights of the cavern's murky ceiling towards the Antagonist and Kitsune, Laith burst into action. Before he had moved half a dozen steps, King Death was upon him, his dark sword cutting through earth and air. He was

forced into slowly retreating, and all he could do was scream Kitsune's name as the Antagonist spirited her away.

Laith was flung to his back, throwing up a cloud of ash as he hit the floor, and barely rolled away from a downward stroke by King Death. He got to his feet and held his own sword two-handed, backing away from the advancing giant.

"You have the girl," snarled Laith, barely parrying a second cut. "You have won. Tell me why. Why are you doing this? Why did the Antagonist send me after herself? Why did she stop me from taking my own life, only to send you to kill me? Why tell me to save Kitsune, and then take her from me?"

"Why indeed?" said King Death, launching into a methodical one-handed attack. Masonry fell from the ceiling with every blow; statues toppled over, sliced in two; the cavern trembled with each sword stroke. The blades shook as if they would shatter when they clashed. The shadows danced around them. Every time the swords met, the world seemed to be pulled into their meeting point and explode simultaneously outward. "So what if the Antagonist *did* lie to you? Our very existence is dishonest, and yours most of all. You play at hero, but your success would be the end of us. The Antagonist is everything that you are not."

Laith swung a two-handed blow at King Death's throat. His enemy swayed back and responded with an ascending counter. Laith managed to block the attack but was thrown to his back by its sheer force. He scrambled away as King Death slashed at him again. "I don't understand!" he shouted.

"You will," replied King Death, leaping forward and stabbing down.

Laith rolled away and came up facing him.

“You see,” said King Death, holding his black blade loosely at his side and advancing once more, “people don’t cry out for heroes in Dirge City – never have and never will. What they crave are the villains. War criminals and child killers, Dark Lords and Big Bad Wolves – they root for the bad guys, because they stand against *you*, Protagonist. Bad guys like me.”

King Death sent a vicious cut toward Laith’s head. Laith ducked it and slashed at King Death’s hamstring. King Death parried it with ease, leaned away from a second high attack and landed a hard punch to Laith’s jaw with his gauntleted fist. Laith stumbled, his knees nearly buckling. His head swam, his mouth streamed blood.

“The Trope Cycle turns and characters come and go like trade ships in the harbour, but the two of you are like the tides, Laith,” said King Death. “You ebb and flow. *You* give us purpose and then take it from us. *She* tries to stop you from taking it. The rest of us are just tools in your Conflict, and the Conflict is what makes all this,” he moved his free hand in a wide arc to encompass everything, “*all of this* possible. You know this.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Yes, you do. You can’t stay stupid forever. Your curse is that you come to every tale ignorant of what came before, and hers is that she can’t forget. You are both fixed in your roles. You wanted to know who you were, so she lied to you a hundred different ways and made you doubt each one. You wanted to deliver the child safely to a new home, so she made it hard for you and then took her away when the end was in sight. That is what you do. You end stories and she tries to slow you down. Don’t worry, fool. You always win.”

Something within Laith broke apart, revealing the beginnings of a new, terrible understanding. He lowered his sword until it hung at his side, as King Death held his. Both men stood motionless. The façade of patchwork memories fell away, the knowledge of things he could not know grew. So many lies, so much history... *Such blood*. He drowned in guilt and a sudden sense of familiarity. This had happened before. Many times. It had to end – the fight, the chase, the Conflict, the story – all of it. It could not go on. Laith could feel it in his bones. He was destined to end this tale.

He could end it right now. He did not need to save Kitsune. He had never needed to. None of it mattered. If he dropped his sword and let King Death slay him, he would not even really die. Why were they all even here? *Why do we tell stories, Laith? Why does the storyteller gather people around the fire at night, and why do people listen? Why does the writer spend his hours putting pen to paper, and why does the reader spend his own putting images to the words? To some, telling stories is pointless. But I see conflict in everything – the duel I am engaged in, the door being opened, a father arguing with his son – stories in everything. We need stories. Stories tell us who we are. Are you a keeper of promises? Are you a man who would fight for the girl he has come to love, or would you leave her in the clutches of your enemies?*

“Not while I live,” snarled Laith.

“What-” managed King Death, before Laith was upon him.

Laith fought like a maniac. King Death parried and blocked with ease, but the speed of Laith’s attack kept his sword busy in defending. King Death struck him with his gauntleted fist instead. Laith was rocked by every punch. Yet he gave King Death no time to capitalise

on the openings. He began to slow. Still, he pressed forward. *Arcs* clashed, pillars collapsed and the shadows danced on.

Kit. The word became many things in that moment: an admission of failure, a prayer for strength, a final wish, an apology for a promise broken and a promise renewed. Laith had spent too long telling himself that he was not the hero of this story, that he was not a fiction. Too many people had died so he could feed himself these lies, too many stories had ended because of his denials. Yet, on some level, he had always known. He was who they said he was. He was the Protagonist. And protagonists did not die until the story was told.

Let's see how good a man you really are, Protagonist.

Laith slashed wildly at King Death's head. King Death leaned back at the waist as Laith had seen him do before and the sword sailed by harmlessly. Laith reversed the sword, allowing the momentum of his attack to turn him around. With his back to his opponent, he turned the sword on himself. King Death never saw the blade coming.

The *Hero's Arc* passed through Laith's chest and King Death's armour, tearing into the giant's belly. King Death grunted in pain. The black blade fell to the floor. Laith pulled the sword clear and turned to face his enemy, unharmed.

"I was never meant to win," said King Death, dropping to one knee, his arms wrapped around his midriff, where the wound that Laith had torn into him lay hidden beneath his unscathed breastplate. A red stain spread into the white robes beneath his armour.

"Then why did you attack me?" said Laith, gently.

“Someone had to,” replied King Death. “Every breath spent fighting you is a breath in a Dirgedweller’s lungs, another sub-plot unfolding, another moment to *be*. Remember your curse, Protagonist. You know not what you do, what you’ve done. The Trope Cycle turns and the cast changes, but the two of you remain the same... the ignorant and the aware. All I wanted was to make commas of full stops.” He lowered himself to the floor and lay there for a moment, gasping for air and growling in pain.

“Tell me how to find her,” said Laith.

King Death laughed. “No,” he spat. “*She* would help, do you know that? She would never allow you to give up. Because if you gave up, if you failed... that would be the end. But I am not as good as she is at this game. I can’t bring myself to help you.” King Death grabbed a handful of dirt and ash, raised his fist and let it trickle to the floor. “You’ve killed me, Laith. Not just the man, but the character too. I can feel all I am trickle away like the dirt in my hand. My story has ended, Protagonist. You will end far more before your tale is told.”

King Death’s hand stretched out for his black blade, lying in ashes, inches away. Laith made no move to help.

He thought about taking the sword himself. It called to him, wanted him to take it, a sword that could cut everything and *wanted* to be used. With two Arcblades there would be no limit to what he could do. He thought hard. In the end, he chose to leave it where it lay. That was the weapon of the Antagonist. It was not meant to be held by men such as him.

He left the cavern the same way he had come; only, he did not leave the same. The more things made sense in Dirge, the more they confused you. He was a character, a fiction. He knew that now, part of him always had. But he was more than that. He was *the* character.

He was the Protagonist. Kitsune living or dying did not matter to him anymore. In fact, nothing did. How could it, knowing what he now knew? Knowing that he was merely a shadow and not *real*? But it mattered to someone, somewhere. Someone telling the story perhaps, or whoever they were telling it to. And that act of caring for what happened to lies like Laith and Kit, that event of wanting Laith to succeed and Kitsune to live, *that* was worth being true to. Even lies could be true if people wanted them to be. Someone clearly did.

As Laith finally admitted his role in *The Dirge City Story* and learned *why* he was that person, the sense of ending returned to him, stronger than before. But with it, came another feeling, one far more daunting. All the pieces were in place, all the players revealed. The endgame was here. The Final Act.

The End.

He hoped it would be a happy one. No, he would *make* it so for Kitsune. All the best stories had them.

XIII.

Vitai Lampada

Songspeaker bled. Songspeaker crawled.

He could not feel his legs. He relied on his weakening arms to pull him through the dirt. He had been betrayed. Long before the story had begun, he had been betrayed. Now his betrayer was gone. She had left with Kitsune, the girl she had sent him to kill. She had never wanted her dead. Laith was gone too, victorious in his battle but, like Songspeaker, a failure in his quest. King Death lay face down in the dirt. Songspeaker's good arm was almost done.

But the voice of a mad man rallies the ranks, 'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'

Songspeaker dragged himself forward with renewed strength, not stopping until he found himself lying by King Death's side. He patted the prone figure's shoulder. The once intimidating man was heaving in his last gulps of air.

"There is not room for Death," said Songspeaker. "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. I do not commiserate, I congratulate you."

King Death's arm stretched out towards something that lay just beyond his reach. Songspeaker's eyes followed it and fastened upon the black blade. That sound returned – the sound of ice-winds and stormy seas, of frozen rain lancing into the earth on ten thousand cold nights. Songspeaker crawled to the sword and reached out. His hand hovered hesitantly over the hilt. Like Drake's Drum, it had come to him in his hour of need. Once grasped, his path would be set. Once taken, all he could do was play his part. The power to

smite down his foes, the power to play a new role in the story, inches from his hand. Perhaps it had been his role all long? All he had to do was pick up the sword and *make it new*. Still, he hesitated.

“Nay,” he told himself, “too steep for hill-mounting; nay, too late for cost-counting; this downhill path is easy, but there’s no turning back. There’s no easy way out, there’s no shortcut home. The world is weary of the past – oh, might it die or rest at last! Lay on, Nemesis. Lay on, Laith. And fuck’d be the one that first cries, ‘Hold! Enough!’”

Songspeaker seized the *Villain’s Arc* and the Devil’s fingers played along the strings of his heart. Sin ran through his veins, filled his mind and soul. Songspeaker drowned in these thoughts and rejoiced – then flung them aside and was himself once more. Desires were beneath him. He knew his role now. There could be more than one Protagonist in a story, more than one Antagonist. Laith wanted the girl alive on his terms. Nemesis wanted her alive on her own. There was one thing that neither of them wanted, and he would give it to them.

Darkness crawled up his arm, crept towards his heart, begging him to reconsider. He bent and twisted it to his will, and clothed and cloaked himself in it.

“Let us roll all our strength, and all our hatred, up into one ball,” he said to the sword, standing as strength returned to his limbs, as the bones in his wrist began to mend and the wound in his belly sealed itself. “We’ll follow them around the Mall, around the Chair of Idris, around perdition’s flames before we give them up. For the voice of a mad man rallies the ranks. Play up, play up...”

He recalled that the sword needed blood before it could be sheathed. He drove the blade into King Death's skull and twisted it viciously, then removed the scabbard from his corpse and slid the blade into place. Songspeaker walked briskly towards the tunnel that led to the surface. As he moved, the sword worked its magic on him – increasing his strength, feeding on his hatred – and he worked his own, *making new* as he had done so many times before.

He heard their restless snorts and stamping hooves long before arriving at the cave mouth. And even though it was he that had made them anew, his heart was filled with dark joy at the sight of them. Outside, in forty rows of fifteen, cowed and faceless riders cloaked in black smoke sat upon horses cut from shadow, each rider armed with cavalry sabre, buckler, carbine and a slender black lance. As Songspeaker stepped out of the cave, they raised their lances in silent salute.

He returned the gesture with the scabbarded sword and smiled.

"Noble six hundred."

End of Act II

Shadows on the Wall: An Exegesis of The Dirge City Story

TDCS is a speculative metafiction, a 'self-aware' novel that falls into the broad category of speculative fiction, which includes the fantasy, science fiction and horror genres. It asks the questions: What makes a subject in a fictional world, in which the characters know they are fictional and admit to being so? What is the purpose of a fictional existence? And is morality even relevant in such a world? The characters in *TDCS* know that there is a real world, in the sense that they *have faith in it*, as they have been created with the knowledge that their own world is not real. However, they have no way of knowing what 'real' actually is. All they have to work with is their knowledge of their own fictionality and the word 'real' itself. Their predicament, then, is about learning what to do with the knowledge they have been given, how to remain true to events that are by their very nature false, and, in one case, asking if one should do so at all.

I will begin to look at this predicament by examining the extent to which metafiction is 'self-conscious', and then move on to looking at the notions of truth and falsehood in fictional worlds. Thereafter, I will explore the nature of *being* in Dirge City, and how characters come to terms with dealing with it, whilst drawing comparisons with some of Plato's more well-known discourses – namely, the theory of Forms, which deals with the realm of its subjects as well as a second, transcendent realm, much like *TDCS*; and the allegory of the cave, which deals with the central protagonist's discovery of the falseness of his 'world', an allegory that resonates with *TDCS*. I will then highlight the issues that arise from what I have discovered about being in metafiction, and explain how I have gone about dealing with them in *TDCS*. Finally, I will look at morality in metafiction, in relation to the characters, as well as to ourselves, and why they *should* be moral at all, considering their knowledge of their

fictionality. Throughout the exegesis, I will comment upon the choices I made as a writer, as well as why I chose to write the story in this particular way. In a final note at the end of the exegesis, I will give some thought to the linguistic choices I made, how my chosen genre affected the storytelling, how some of my choices challenged the genre's conventions, and what changes I would make if I took this research further.

So, is metafiction actually self-conscious? Nicol, writing about modernist and postmodernist fiction, explains that the act of writing is constructive, rather than an act of transcription, because the verbal representation of the object being described is created as a separate entity, insofar as it is a construct of the mind (Rowe & Horner 17). The actual object represented exists in the physical realm, as we ourselves do, and the mental image of it exists as an idea or a concept within the mind of the reader, creating a potentially infinite number of copies. Taking this further, characters in *TDCS* exist in much the same way, as potentially infinite copies of ideas in the minds of those that read their stories. However, where they differ is that the characters have no 'real' original, unlike the objects in Nicol's example – or perhaps Nicol's model assumes an original which is not necessarily there, since characters are, after all, ideas created specifically for a story. This leads one to wonder if the 'potentially infinite copies of ideas' can be self-conscious. Nicol (Rowe & Horner 26) quotes Mark Currie as having argued that 'the idea of self-consciousness is strangely inconsistent with most postmodern literary theories which would attribute neither selfhood nor consciousness to an author, let alone a work of fiction'. When the authority of subjectivity and consciousness has been undermined by theories such as psychoanalysis and deconstruction, how then can we define metafiction and the characters that populate it as being self-conscious? One obvious answer would be that metafictional characters are self-

aware in a metaphoric sense, exhibiting some of the qualities of self-conscious beings to a limited capacity. *TDCS* nevertheless acknowledges and integrates the concerns raised by these postmodern and poststructuralist doctrines with regard to the limits of self-knowledge. For example, Waugh (33) believes the purpose of metafiction is to bridge 'the gap between fiction and reality', so claiming that the characters in *TDCS* are self-conscious is a way of highlighting the problems of claiming self-consciousness in the 'real' world. Even if one takes the opposite view to Waugh and sees the purpose of metafiction as highlighting the fact that there is a gap between fiction and reality (ibid), the claims to self-consciousness again expose this very problem and show that the characters could not possibly be *truly* self-conscious, as attention is constantly drawn to the characters' fictionality and thus toward the impossibility of their having self-conscious thoughts.

Although this is the case, it requires further consideration, as defining what is *true* in an exclusively imaginary world is a difficult task at best. Mercer (2) writes that 'metafiction posits alternative worlds that challenge our perception of reality' and that these 'literary worlds' are actually free of any of our preconceptions about truth because whatever is said within the text that these worlds inhabit cannot be deemed as true or false by our own standards. Fictional worlds like *Dirge City* 'can only be valid in relation to [their] own premises' (Todorov 10). For example, just as a flying castle that sails on the souls of dragons (Anwar 70) is as true as anything else in the internal logic of *TDCS*, it clearly cannot be true in our own reality. So too, according to Todorov and Mercer, must all things within a story be judged, in relation to themselves and not in relation to reality. Since 'language in itself cannot represent truth' (Mercer 2) and the very nature of a fictional world is that of a fabrication, conventional ideas of truth and falsehood cannot apply to a fictional world.

Essentially, in a literary world nothing is true *per se*. This is underlined in *TDCS*, when Black Hat (Anwar 47) says:

Listen to me, Laith, listen good. You think she's been telling the truth? She hasn't. She's been telling you lies that you needed to hear, so you'd do her will. Same as Hela, the Registrar and me. [...] This is a goddamn pantomime. We're all liars here. I'm lying when I say that the sky's above and the ground's beneath, lying when I call you Laith, lying when I say I'm lying. This is a world of lies. I lie to you, you to me, and we all of us lie to the third person. Don't you get it? In here, even the truth is a lie. So don't tell me how honest Nature's been, because everything you see in Dirge is just so many fallacies and fictions.

When Black Hat, who seems to be judging the world of Dirge City from the reader's perspective, calls everything in Dirge City 'just so many fallacies and fictions', he creates a liar's paradox. If Laith takes what he is saying as true, then he must believe Black Hat is lying. If he believes Black Hat is lying, then he is accepting that Black Hat is telling the truth. Truth and falsehood in *TDCS*, despite Black Hat's words, or perhaps because of them, are not as black and white as he would have Laith believe. Moreover, within the world of the story there has to be at least the concept of truth, otherwise he could not make the claim that all things in Dirge City are false. After all, if nothing is true, then neither can anything be false, since truth is the absence of falsehood, and vice versa. Finally, there is the question of whether he himself believes his own explanation. After all, if he sees everything in his world as false, including himself, then he should not care about the fate of Dirge City. Clearly, he does care, as he has taken several steps to ensure that the story keeps moving forward. Principally, truth and falsehood in fiction, as Todorov (10) says, or indeed *anything* in fiction, can only exist in relation to the world in which they exist, rather than in regard to the real world. This is also the case when we speak of self-conscious characters in fiction. If a character is considered self-conscious within the context of the story, then we too must consider the character self-conscious.

Turning to the question of the ontological status of metafictional characters, I will begin by looking at how the characters see their own existence within the context of the story, and how they come to terms with what they know, and then turn to looking at their ontology in general.

For the characters in *TDCS* there are two realms of being, much as there are in the Platonic theory of forms – the fictional world corresponds to Plato's conception of our 'reality', and our 'reality' corresponds to Plato's realm of transcendental Forms. In this analogy Plato's material realm occupies the place of the transcendent realm for two reasons. Firstly, using only two realms of being in this way allows *TDCS* to contrast its fictional world with the 'real' world, as well as contrasting itself with Plato's theory of Forms, a comparison which would become needlessly complicated with the addition of Plato's transcendent realm. Secondly, this analogy is based on the point of view of the characters, who have only a notion of our own 'reality', and the realm of perfect Forms to which Plato refers is a realm of being above our own and thus beyond the comprehension of the characters. The characters in *TDCS* have a concept of the existence of a real world beyond that of their own, but it is not a known world. Dirge City has ships, and thus it is assumed that the characters suppose there must be 'real' ships too. In what way these 'real' ships exist, or what they look like, is not known to them. Continuing with the Platonic motif, in the Dirge City version of the allegory of the cave, it is not the prisoner who is set free from his chains to learn that everything he once took to be real is merely a shadow on the wall, but it is the shadows themselves, as in the fictional characters, who are made aware that they are only shadows on a wall. Whereas Plato's prisoner-philosopher was allowed to see the world of the cave and then venture out and see the world beyond, the inmates of *TDCS*'s fictional realm cannot leave

the prison of their own fictionality and are left stranded in their original positions on the wall, with only the knowledge that all they know is false. They have no way of learning what is 'real', as Plato's prisoner ultimately does.

The characters try to find meaning in their fictional existence in a variety of ways. The Antagonist is convinced that the role of Conflict is paramount in giving a purpose to her existence. She is frequently heard speaking of 'the struggle' (Anwar 18) and/or 'the Conflict' (88), claiming that it is 'all there is' (18) or that it is the prerequisite to tell 'any story' (88). King Death too is convinced of this idea (95). The Antagonist's cosmological theory is that the two primary characters, herself and her opposite, the Protagonist, are locked in a struggle that spans every story. This struggle is Conflict, which in turn creates a story. McKee (210) writes 'nothing moves forward in a story except through Conflict'. Without Conflict in a story, the story simply stops. In fact, without Conflict there cannot be a story to tell. Sartre theorised that 'scarcity', a universal and eternal lacking in our existence, is the structure 'within which human action takes place' (Craib 129). According to Sartre, as humans we strive for what we lack. To live is to be in a constant state of wanting something, and struggling to achieve it. If the subject gains the desired object, the subject wants something else. Even if the subject was to have everything the subject desires (McKee 212), the very lack of something to desire would prompt an inner struggle to find something new, or a struggle to come to terms with this lack. To be alive, then, is to be in constant Conflict (McKee 211), in constant need of something. In the same way, for the characters within Dirge City to continue existing, according to the Antagonist's belief, there must always be Conflict. Indeed, the Protagonist himself muses, 'I see a conflict in everything – the duel I am engaged in, the door being opened, a father arguing with his son' (Anwar 93). For anything

to happen there has to be some form of dialectic between forces of protagonism and antagonism. Each character needs an individual conflict to exist, and for *TDCS*'s characters the inner struggle to find a purpose or come to terms with not having one is their conflict. But the Conflict between the Antagonist and the Protagonist is the reason that the story is being told or read, and thus the entirety of the fictional reality depends upon this conflict's existence. Without it, there *is* no *TDCS*. The idea behind the Antagonist's theory itself sprang from Sartre's theories on scarcity and McKee's book, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. Conflict was used as the driving force behind the Antagonist because it provided her with a reason to be antagonistic in a world where her self-awareness would give her no reason to do anything antagonistic to begin with. Conflict in itself is a component of any reality, but for a story to exist there must be a conflict important enough for the story to focus upon it. All other conflicts in *TDCS* are minor conflicts, but the conflict between the Antagonist and the Protagonist is the driving force behind the story. The moment when the conflict stops is the moment when the story will stop being told. Without a reason to oppose the Protagonist, the Antagonist cannot exist and nor can the story. This also had the effect of creating a character with a skewed sense of reasoning that the reader could sympathise with, if not condone, as her primary motives are to ensure that her world and herself continue to exist. Her means might involve deceit and murder, but the ends she wishes to achieve cannot be considered to be 'evil' in and of themselves.

Other characters, like those engaged in the battle on *The Royal Bitch* (61), itself a microcosmic story-within-a-story that satirises the futility and apparent pointlessness of a fictional existence (why endlessly fight over a ship that one cannot own? Why give her a

name at all?), choose not to think about the implications of their fictionality and instead distract themselves by other means. They must, because, in *TDCS*, they cannot use death as an emergency exit. As the Narrator (Anwar 56) explains, 'the Trope Cycle ensures that archetypes are immortal, but characters do die'. A character that dies in Dirge City is reincarnated as another version of themselves from the same character trope with all the memories of their previous incarnations, by a phenomenon known as the Trope Cycle (92). Death too is thus rendered meaningless in Dirge City, and suicide is therefore an equally meaningless gesture. The characters have no other choice but to continue existing. Of all the characters in Dirge City, only the Protagonist begins each life unaware of his previous incarnations, because this allows the reader to learn about the world of the story at the same time as the hero.

As the Protagonist, Laith goes on a journey of self-discovery throughout the story. At the beginning he is convinced that he is real (16, 22), and that he has found himself in some strange, fantastical world. As he travels through Info Dump (53), he is exposed to an environment that continuously points to Dirge City being a fictional realm through excessive footnotes and free indirect discourse that he has little control over, which incidentally gives the reader a feel for the overwhelming amount of information to which Laith is subjected. Unable to cope with the knowledge he is being given, Laith attempts to silence the voices before they say too much, resulting in a chapter filled with erratic half-sentences. By the time he reaches No Man's Land, he has fallen into the same easy trap of the *Bitch's* combatants (60), blocking out the 'truth' in favour of living a life of ignorance (55). By the end of the story, he can no longer fool himself, or the reader, with his apparent ignorance and must confront himself and his surroundings (93) as he now knows too much. Laith best

fits the description of a metafictional Prisoner of the Cave, in that he begins the story blind to the nature of his existence. He discovers the fictionality of the world in which he resides, and his own fictionality, and must come to terms with this new ontological knowledge during the telling of the story. Almost all of his fellow characters begin the story with this knowledge and have found their own ways of attempting to deal with what many of them see as a meaningless existence. Only Laith, who is the Protagonist, and Songspeaker, who knows that he is fictional but is delusional and thus never fully grasps the implications of what that means, are left to discover how to deal with it. Songspeaker seems unconcerned with the implications emerging from the fictionality of Dirge City at the beginning of Act II. He has no clear role in the story when the reader first encounters him, as he is one of the forces of antagonism pitted against Laith, but he is also enough of a protagonist to warrant being lied to by the Antagonist in much the same way as Laith is. By the end of the act, when he takes up the *Villain's Arc* and decides to go up against both the Protagonist and the Antagonist, he becomes the third player in the dialectic of Dirge City, both a synthesis of the two primary forces and the sublated remainder from their conflict. Songspeaker becomes the anti-hero and, much like the Antagonist and Laith, creates his own reason for being, since no reasons are forthcoming from elsewhere.

Laith's journey of self-discovery and self-knowing leads him to venture into a cave that is not unlike the cave in Plato's allegory. However, when Laith enters the cave mouth with Kitsune and ventures into Underworld, he is going in the opposite direction to Plato's prisoner because in order to discover his own truth, a truth that has eluded him since the story began, he must *descend* into the cave. Plato's prisoner discovers the falseness of all he thought to be true when he is allowed to look around his cave and learn that the shadows

on the wall are fictional, and thereafter discovers a wider, truer world when he ascends to the surface. Laith, on the other hand, goes down into the cave to have his final epiphany (Anwar 93) during his battle with King Death, where, metaphorically, he takes the original place of Plato's prisoner and looks upon the shadows on the wall for the first time, and sees himself there, along with everyone else he has encountered. It is then that he accepts his role in what he now knows to be a story, and finally joins the ranks of the metafictional characters of Dirge City.

Laith's acceptance of his role cements him into the hierarchy of being within *TDCS*. This hierarchy amounts to four levels, all of which are in the fictional realm of existence. The lowest level is that which Black Hat refers to as the 'furniture' (Anwar 43) character, a character that has no name, no description and no *character* (by which I mean personality traits). Characters at this level of being share the same ontological status as scenery, they are given a minimal description and nothing more. This means that the prisoners in the Furnaces share the same ontological status as the furnaces themselves. At a higher level of being, there are named characters (ibid). These characters matter, as they have been given names, faces and personalities. They influence the story and they imitate 'real' people in the way they interact with one another and demonstrate a mimetic ability to 'feel'. Dirge City itself also falls into this category of being, as it has a name and personality of its own. At a still higher level of being there are the primary characters – the Protagonist and the Antagonist, who are shown to be the primal forces that move the story along (18, 88), the former being the most relatable and detailed character, and thus the most 'real' to the reader. By the end of Act II, Songspeaker also falls into this category. I chose to use three separate points of view (POVs) to tell *TDCS*, and it is no coincidence that they are all from

this level of being. As the three most powerful and influential characters outside of the metanarrative, which I will address shortly, making them the POV characters helped in the co-creation of the characters by giving the reader a more intricate understanding of their psyches. At the highest level of being there is a trinity of characters implied throughout the on-going metanarrative, which is especially apparent during the Info Dump chapter (53-6): the Author, the Reader and the Narrator. These characters are close enough to their real-life counterparts (author, audience and storyteller, respectively) to blur the lines between fiction and reality, the importance of which will become apparent later in this exegesis. The position of a particular character on this four level scale corresponds to how well the character is formed in the minds of the actual, 'real' reader and author. The more detailed the representation of the character is, and the more closely the character mimics a 'real' person, the higher the character's level of being. The way this is done is through a version of the concept of 'realism'.

According to Watt (Fludernik 53), realism is 'an essential defining feature of the novel'. Watt believes that the novel represents 'real' everyday life, often in meticulous detail. The reader already knows what running water sounds like, for example, so if the author writes 'he heard the sound of running water', the reader will know exactly what the author means and imagine the sound. Similarly, if the author writes a scene set in the London Underground, the reader who has used an underground railway system will be able to imagine the sights, sounds and smells of the setting, without the author ever having mentioned them. What is not fully described in the novel is filled in by the imagination of the reader, through the related knowledge and experience the reader has with regard to what is described, ensuring that the illusion of reality is complete by taking images directly from the 'reality' the reader

has already experienced and allowing the reader to co-create the image with the author. 'The same holds true for the psychology of the [characters]' (Fludernik 54), as the author creates a convincing image of a character with apparently 'real' thoughts, feelings, worries, etc., and the reader breathes life into the character by filling in the blank spaces that the author leaves with characteristics from real people or characters with similar qualities in other novels. The latter is especially present in the case of characters and places in speculative fiction, where the reader also takes what he or she already 'knows' from similar speculative fictions to fill these gaps, like the consensus science fiction cosmogony that is derived from Asimov's *Galactic Empire* series, which posits an eight-stage timeline of human advancement in space exploration that readers can slot any similar story into, so long as it takes place at a stage of future human or technological advancement, without needing any further explanation of how the Federation of United Planets was formed, or how the Galactic Republic managed to unite a billion worlds, and so on. This sharing of knowledge and experience between fiction and reality, and *fiction and fiction*, endows a fundamentally fictional setting with a sense of realism. In *TDCS*, Laith himself realises that he has access to more knowledge and experience than he should (Anwar 53):

Laith took to riding the motorcycle like a man that had spent a lifetime riding them. It worried him. How could he possibly know what a throttle was, what gears and tachometers were?

It is implied here that he has gained this knowledge from being the Protagonist in other stories, or past lives. He himself has unknowingly taken knowledge and experience from other fictions and used them in *TDCS*. The knowledge he has is entirely fictional, he cannot really know how to ride a motorcycle, as I the author do not know myself (Plato 300). But by using the device of 'realism', one can give the impression that he does, which, in a fictional world, amounts to the same thing.

In sum, novels create the illusion of quasi-real fictional worlds that prove to be convincing by providing choice details that help to bridge the gap between the fictional world and the 'real' world, and thereafter allow the reader's imagination to help complete the fictional representation. In *TDCS*, the concept of realism is used in a similar way to develop the characters and create them in the mind of the reader. A good example of this can be found in Kitsune, who is described as having 'a name, but no story' by the Harlequin (Anwar 51), who then goes on to point out that 'she could be a magic potion or a pet gerbil or a letter to some king' (ibid). As far as the Harlequin is concerned, she could be an object or an animal and fulfil the same purpose. To the reader, however, she is considered more important or real than the 'furniture' characters in that she has been given a name, a description, and a handful of selected mimetic characteristics. Other ways in which the reader is made to continue developing her as a character are the on-going mystery of her rapid aging process, which leaps forward every time she is subjected to something a child should not be exposed to, and the implication within the Info Dump chapter (Anwar 56) that she plays a much bigger role later on in the overall story.

With that in mind, there is an issue here that arises due to the nature of metafictional storytelling. Sarraute (55), writing on the waning of the realist novel in post-war society, states that 'not only has the novelist ceased to believe in his characters, but the reader, too, is unable to believe in them', the result being that the characters, having lost 'the twofold support that the novelist's and reader's faith afforded them', 'seem to vacillate and fall apart'. In metafiction that is as insistent about highlighting its fictionality as *TDCS* is, as in when the reader's attention is constantly drawn to the fictionality of the literary world and the characters that populate it by both the author and the characters, using realist

techniques for developing characters and world-building becomes more difficult for the author, as increasing the reader's awareness of the fictionality of the account hampers their willingness to suspend their disbelief. This poses a problem, since it has already been established that the levels of being within *TDCS* are dependent upon the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief and complete the author's fictional representation through co-creation. To counteract this, characters at the highest level of fictional being in *TDCS* are employed. By utilising metanarrative techniques, the author turns the reader into one of his characters by entering the reader into dialogue with the implied narrator, bringing the reader into the world of the story and blurring the lines between fiction and reality. The implied narrator is thus seen to be telling the reader a story, which is continually highlighted as being such. The reader believes the words of the narrator because the reader 'knows' them to be true, but in doing so has been made to suspend his disbelief unwittingly since the narrator is himself a fictional character. In *TDCS*, this relationship between reader and narrator is made into a central plot device, using the relationship between the Antagonist and Laith as an allegory. The Antagonist comes to Laith throughout the story behind several 'Faces', including Hela (Anwar 16), Nature (17) and Black Hat (16). Each of these characters is a false persona of the same storyteller, the Antagonist, and is shown to be lying to Laith. The Antagonist tells Laith these 'stories' in order to keep moving the plot forward, each one as far-fetched as the last. Laith, despite knowing they are almost certainly false, goes along with them because he has become immersed in the world of Dirge City, and because he has no other source of information but the Antagonist, since *all* of the sources available are actually one and the same. In a similar way, as the author, I am telling the story under the false personae of the narrator, the antagonist, her Faces, etc. Throughout the story, I constantly remind the reader that the story is fictional. Despite this, the reader believes

whatever I say about what happens within the story anyway, because I am the only source of information in the world of Dirge City.

I will now turn to looking into the morality of metafictional characters in *TDCS*. In several places in *TDCS*, the question of what is right and wrong in Dirge City is brought up by dressing what we would see as a clearly immoral act as almost virtuous. For example, at one point in *TDCS* (Anwar 73), a character recounts the story of how he assaulted a woman, literally stole candy from her baby, and then kicked the pram into the road. The text refers to this story as a tale of the speaker's 'past valour' (*ibid*). It is assumed by the reader that this is a sarcastic comment made by the narrator of the story. It is also assumed that nobody in the fictional world finds this deed 'valorous' in the least. Why is this? Walton and Tanner (37-40) point out that though readers are prepared to imagine almost anything is 'true' within the context of the fictional worlds the author has constructed, which Weatherson (2) refers to as 'authorial authority', no matter how farfetched that is from the 'real' truth, moral principles are so strongly bound into the human psyche that it is not possible for the reader to imagine that what he considers to be an immoral act *is* moral within the context of the story. For example, flying ships do not exist, but if the author says they do in the realm of the story, the reader is willing to imagine this is so, that they *do* exist. However, if the same author then asks the reader to believe that killing babies is a virtuous deed, the reader will not be willing to imagine that this is so unless a reason that corresponds to our own moral system is given within the text or assumptions are made (for example if the book confirms that these babies will grow up to carry out acts of great evil or the reader assumes that this is the case). Weatherson (2) calls this phenomenon 'the alethic puzzle'. In the aforementioned scene from *TDCS*, we can see that this is exactly what is occurring. As

readers, we are not willing to accept that what the speaker did was 'valorous' and so we make assumptions about the sincerity of the narrator to continue believing in what we are told. Dadlez (147) likens this to the author trying to convince us that a character in perfect safety is in serious danger. It is impossible to do so without making our own assumptions about the character's situation. For example, if a character sitting in his living room is described as being in danger when he turns on the television, we cannot accept that this is so unless we assume that there is something dangerous inside the television, or that he suffers from epilepsy. Essentially, the reader begins to co-create again to make what is being read 'acceptable'. What Dadlez is saying is that as readers we are willing to imagine possibilities, no matter how far-fetched they are, but we are not willing to imagine (and *cannot* imagine) what we know *cannot be true* as true. This is why when Laith tortures the siren in order to beat Songspeaker to the Industrial District (Anwar 23), we are willing to accept that Laith sees this as an immoral but 'necessary' (22) act, just as we accept that Songspeaker sees his attempts to assassinate Kitsune as immoral but necessary (87), and the same again for the Antagonist and her actions (89). Necessity, the idea of choosing the lesser of two evils, is a concept that we as humans are willing to accept. For example, if someone is told that killing a person now will save the lives of thousands of their victims in the future, we have a moral choice: we can murder someone now or allow them to murder others in the future. Neither choice is morally right, but necessity means one of them must be carried out. In the same way, we are only willing to concede that the acts of the above characters in *TDCS* are based on moral choices because we are told that the characters see them as necessary for what they believe is the greater good. If we were not told that they did them out of necessity, we would make assumptions with regard to why. However, if the narrator told us that these acts were moral acts, that killing children or torturing people

were good deeds, we would not be willing to accept it, as is evident in the 'past valour' example.

For the characters themselves, however, no such assumptions are required. They understand that they are fictional and that nothing they do has any real consequences. 'Murdering' the linguistic representation of a self-professed fictional child cannot be considered moral or immoral in and of itself. It is only once we ascribe meaning to this act and imbue it with our own beliefs and understanding that the act has any significance at all. Without those two things all actions are simply words. And that is the case for the characters in *TDCS*. As a result, the majority of their actions are based purely on their own survival, to hold on to their allocated status of being for as long as the story allows. After all, the fictional existence that they are shackled to is all they have. For Songspeaker that means murdering a child, and for the Antagonist, it means lying, cheating, murdering, kidnapping, committing genocide, or whatever else it takes. There is no such thing as right and wrong in Dirge City, there are only fictional actions that allow the characters to continue being. We as readers are willing to believe this is the case because we are told that this is exactly why the characters are doing what they do. The more 'truth' revealed by the Narrator, the more the reader is willing to accept the action that takes place within the story, because the suspension of disbelief in *TDCS* relies on how much the reader already understands about the way in which stories are put together. Thus, when I tell the reader that Laith is allowed to escape the Furnaces so that the Antagonist can chase him across Dirge City (Anwar 36), and by doing so keep the story moving forward, the reader is willing to accept this because that is exactly what the reader *knows* is happening.

So, why does Laith conform to our ideas of morality, unlike almost every other character in *TDCS*? After all, morality is a problem for the 'real' world, and it has already been established that it does not concern the metafictional world of Dirge City. Before Laith's awakening to the fictionality of his world, Laith is a fictional character, rather than *meta-fictional*. As such, his moral compass is similar to the moral compasses of the protagonists of most stories. He has a strong idea of what is right and wrong, because he believes that his actions have consequences, as he is not aware of the fictional nature of Dirge City. Once he begins to question the 'reality' of his world, his moral code begins to waver. He is no longer sure if his actions have consequences, and, in light of his discovery, begins to question whether he needs to follow a moral code at all (Anwar 81). In the penultimate chapter, Laith experiences an epiphany which not only clarifies his role in the story as the Protagonist, making him both the hero of the tale and the prophesised destroyer of his world, but also provides an answer to the question that has plagued Dirge City's inhabitants since the beginning of the story: what to do with the knowledge of one's own fictionality. Laith, speaking to himself, says:

Why do we tell stories, Laith? Why does the storyteller gather people around the fire at night, and why do people listen? Why does the writer spend his hours putting pen to paper, and why does the reader spend his own putting images to words? To some, telling stories is pointless. But I see *Conflict* in everything – the duel I am engaged in, the door being opened, the father arguing with his son – *stories* in everything. We need stories. Stories tell us who we are. Are you a keeper of promises? Are you a man who would leave the girl he has come to love in the clutches of his enemies, or one who would fight for her? (Anwar 93)

He realises that we tell stories to learn about ourselves, as he himself has learned about the kind of person he is from all the stories he has been told throughout *TDCS*. Knowing now that his own life is a story, his reason for doing what he does becomes to help others discover who they are, and who they can be. And therein also resides the answer to the morality question, as we see when he continues a little later on:

Kitsune living or dying did not matter to him anymore. In fact, nothing did. How could it, knowing what he now knew? Knowing that he was merely a shadow, and not *real*? But it mattered to someone, somewhere. Someone telling the story perhaps, or whoever they were telling the story to. And that act of caring for what happened to lies like Laith and Kit, that event of wanting Laith to succeed and Kitsune to live, *that* was worth being true to. Even lies could be true if people wanted them to be. Someone clearly did. (Anwar 96)

Laith has faith in beings greater than himself, in 'real' people with 'real' emotions, such as the actual author and the actual reader, and for these people the choices he makes really do matter. The moral decisions he makes are not governed by his own 'moral compass' as it were, but those of the author and the reader. Laith himself believes that he cannot care whether Kitsune lives or dies anymore (Anwar 96), but it is the author and/or reader that cares. The argument could also be made here that Laith *does* care, in the sense that he cares about the fact that the author or reader cares, and he clearly has a vested emotional interest in Kitsune at this point, since he has admitted that, in some capacity, he loves her (Anwar 93). However, Laith himself has not yet come to realise the possibility that, fictional or not, he does have some capacity to feel, even if only in a metaphorical sense.

Before Laith's epiphany, though he is depicted as a Muslim character, his moral code is one that does not depend entirely on his belief in a metaphysical reality, though it could be argued that his moral code is informed by his belief, since he is seen calling out to God in moments of despair. He does things that he believes to be right for the sake of doing the right thing, because he believes that he himself and everyone around him is 'real'. Once he becomes aware of his fictional status, his sense of moral correctness is shaken. When he has his epiphany he creates a new moral code for himself, one that is built upon his belief in the existence of a metaphysical reality. For the fictional Laith, a sense of morality is a part of who he is, just as it is a part of a 'real' person. For the metafictional Laith, a sense of morality can only come with belief in the metaphysical.

In the above quotation, in which Laith makes a link between his morality and the existence of metaphysical beings above his own existence (Anwar 96), the subject, Laith, has finally found an event to which he can be true. Because his world is more than simply fictional, it is *metafictional*, it allows him to answer one of the questions that *TDCS* poses, i.e. what makes a subject in a fictional world, in which the characters know they are fictional and admit to being so? The event, the situation that Laith must be faithful to, does not and cannot take place in his fictional world, it occurs outside of the story, *outside* of Dirge City, as one cannot hope to be true to a false event, and all events inside *TDCS* must be by their very nature *fictional* events. The metafictional subject must therefore find a real event to be true to, and to do so, he must look beyond the 'fourth wall'. It is the act of the reader and/or the author caring about the actions of fictional characters like himself to which Laith chooses to be faithful. His purpose, he finally discovers, is to live up to or challenge the expectations of those 'real' people. And this belief makes a place for morality in his metafictional world.

Just as there are two realms of being in Dirge City's cosmology, so too does *TDCS* need to be examined at both levels, in relation to ourselves and in relation to the characters. At the beginning of this exegesis, three questions were asked: What makes a subject in a fictional world, in which the characters know they are fictional and admit to being so? What is the purpose of a fictional existence? And is morality even relevant in such a world? It was discovered that in a metafictional world one cannot become a subject until one finds an event to which it is worth responding faithfully, and such an event cannot truly be found inside the fictional realm of existence. Instead, it needs to be found in the real, physical realm, and responded to in a way in which only metafictional characters can respond. Secondly, it was found that a fictional existence has no purpose in relation to itself and,

again, the purpose of this existence must be sought in the real world, where it becomes apparent that the purpose of a fictional existence is to help real people to learn about themselves and their own existence. Finally, with regard to the relevance of morality, the conclusions drawn were, that in regular fiction morality has a place because fictional characters are created with the belief that they are real people and that their choices matter; that for morality to have a place in metafiction, the characters have to have a belief in some form of a metaphysical cosmology, whether that is the belief in a transcendent reality or a belief in the power of Conflict to create stories; and that, despite the fact that in both fictional and metafictional worlds the words of the author, as the only source of information, must be believed true within the context of the story, regardless of how far-fetched they are, the presence of a moral structure (in fact, the presence of *our own* moral structure) is indispensable to the realm of fiction because the human psyche is not willing to accept the possibility of a world without it. The believability of the world and of the characters of a story depends upon our willingness to imagine them, through a process of author-reader co-creation, and makes a difference to whether we see them as characters or just names on a page. It has a bearing on how much the fictional characters *are*. Metafiction holds no meaning in and of itself, it is only when it is held up against reality, and interacts with it, that it can gain meaning and answer any of the questions that it seeks to address.

Author's Note: On Drafting, Genre, Language, and the Road Ahead

The mind of a writer is a warzone of stories, each battling for its place of prominence and its chance to be put to paper. Dirge City is the fictional representation of my mind, the sum of all I have read and all I have written. Its eclectic mix of settings represents the plethora of stories that reside in my imagination, and thus *TDCS* is more than just a single story, it is an exploration of my inner self and an attempt to draw together all of the stories I have written or plan to write into a single whole. In this regard, *TDCS* was successful, as there is a very real sense of Laith and Kitsune moving through quite different worlds as they pass from one setting to the next. However, Dirge City by its very nature can only ever be a sum of parts, rather than a singular whole as I had first intended it to be.

Drafting played a very important role in the construction of Dirge City and the structure of the story, with some chapters having been drafted a dozen times. The story itself came to acknowledge the influence of drafting over its final state, and mention is made of characters and events in previous drafts in the Info Dump chapter. Certain language features, such as footnotes, were also added or removed through the process of drafting. Originally, I had written footnotes into the story, throughout the text, to act as a running commentary to my work. However, the footnotes played too many different roles – explaining plot details, giving background information, reflecting critically on the story in a tongue-in-cheek manner – and had to be removed from the majority of the story and relocated to the 'Info Dump' chapter, as they took from the story rather than adding to it. The Info Dump chapter itself was written into the story to address concerns raised about the abundance of footnotes throughout the text and the lack of a wider world outside of the immediate vicinity of the protagonist. The chapter allowed me to introduce a more focused metanarrative, include

information to help explain some of the dynamics of Dirge City and to give the world of Dirge City a sense of scale beyond the confines of the story. The 'Enter Nemesis' chapter was developed to bring the reader up to speed on the events that occurred in the first act, without forcing the reader to read through a plot synopsis, which was present in the original draft of the chapter in the form of a flashback sequence. This was done by introducing magical mirrors that served as a pastiche of the Mirror in the *Snow White* fairy tale. The addition of the mirrors worked on two levels, providing a means to add the synopsis into the story seamlessly and serving to foreshadow the Antagonist's ability to change Faces.

There are two ways in which I have engaged with different elements in the fantasy genre, by subverting them and by employing them. The fantasy genre has always been linked with the idea of the eucatastrophe, the happy ending. In *TDCS* I wanted to challenge that notion by looking at whether a eucatastrophe can even exist in a complete sense. The stereotypical view of all the best stories having happy endings is held by Kitsune in the narrative (Anwar 83), but in Dirge City, as Ulyssa mentions, there is no such thing as a happy ending, because 'someone always loses' (Anwar 80), and because stories end. No matter how positive a story's ending may seem to the reader, for at least one character the ending is catastrophic, and for the characters within Dirge City the end of *TDCS* is a frightening, apocalyptic concept. *TDCS* provides the reader with a very real sense of the impending finality of its ending. Another example of a subversion of fantasy tropology, is the protagonist-antagonist dynamic, in this case that of the 'heroic' protagonist and the 'villainous' antagonist. In *TDCS*, the protagonist's mission, unknown to him at the beginning, is to end the story and thus end the existence of all characters and setting in Dirge City. The antagonist opposes the protagonist to keep the story going and thus plays the role of the protector of Dirge City, a

quest that she is doomed to fail heroically by struggling until the very end. On the one hand, this worked as a plot point, giving the Antagonist and her allies a driving force to motivate them and make them sympathetic villains. On the other hand, within the second act itself, this was not as clear as it should have been in the completed text. The fantasy genre is also known for being male-centric and dominated by young, white protagonists, with many readers making not unfounded complaints about underwritten female roles and the stereotyping of characters based on ethnicity in the genre. In *TDCS*, I attempted to create a fantasy story set around a protagonist who was neither young, nor white, and populate the world of the story with as many influential female characters as male characters. With regard to my protagonist, Laith, I feel I effectively created a non-white, older central protagonist that is no less relatable as a result. However, this may only be the case in my own subjective view, as I myself am of Asian descent. The inclusion of more, non-stereotypical female characters proved challenging, due to the preconceptions that readers have with regard to female characters in the fantasy genre. I found that describing female characters from a male perspective only reinforced the stereotypes and the only way to avoid falling into the trap of creating stereotypical female characters, or at least being seen to do so, was firstly to avoid describing their physical appearance and concentrate on their psychologies instead. Secondly, by designing roles in the story that were based on their purpose in moving the story along, and then deciding on whether to make them male or female based on separate considerations. In this way, my own preconceptions about female characters in fantasy stories would not affect the way in which I wrote the characters, as I created the characters first and then decided on gender afterwards.

Linguistically, there are conventions in the fantasy genre that allow writers certain liberties and restrict them for others, and it is the linguistics of the fantasy genre that I chose to utilise and adopt, rather than subvert. Fantasy worlds are more often than not inspired by a myriad of time periods and cultures, and the writing often reflects this mixture of influences with the narrator adopting some of the language patterns that the characters possess. For example, in the *Dark Tower* series by Stephen King, the narrator uses slang that has appeared at earlier points of the series as part of his narrative language. Dirge City is literally made of a mixture of time periods, cultures and genres, and the language employed by the narrator is therefore also very much influenced by this eclectic mix. The narrator takes on the mannerisms and linguistic patterns of the POV characters, the result being that in Laith-focused sections we get a sense of wonder with regard to his surroundings, and the language employed in describing his actions and surroundings is often grand, and at times overly romanticised. For example:

One moment they were riding through a phantasmagorical cityscape burdened with black smog, the next they were riding on a pathway that was plastered with thousands of damp sheets of paper, all of them covered in writing, detailed drawings, pictures and strange diagrams. It was not unlike the desert roads Laith was used to, though there were dunes of loose papers that stretched out in all directions and large television screens jutting from the yellowing, ink-stained ground instead of rocks. The winds too were similar, though the dust devils that danced here swirled with writings and not with dirt. (Anwar 53)

Here the narrator structures his sentences in an almost archaic way, describing things as ‘not unlike’ rather than ‘similar’, and takes pains to show how different the world of Dirge City is from our own world, even as he draws attention to its similarities. Sentences in the fantasy genre can also be restructured or shaped in ways that would otherwise be considered incorrect, such as ‘[the siren] had no choice, Laith knew’ (Anwar 21), in which the subject is moved to an additional clause at the end of the sentence to lend weight to the

fact that the siren has no choice, rather than emphasising that Laith knows. Another example of the linguistic effects of the fantasy genre is when Laith first sees *The Royal Bitch*, and the narrator says, 'the silhouette of a great monolith blearily began to take shape in the distance' (Anwar 57). The narrator describes a large object in the distance as a 'great monolith', a term which would not be used had the story been told from Black Hat's perspective, which once again shows how the POV character affects the narrator's language choices. Similarly, in *Songspeaker's* sections, there is a hint of madness throughout and the prose takes on a rhythmic quality that reflects the borrowed poetic nature of his own speech-patterns. The very first paragraph from *Songspeaker's* POV reads as follows:

He stumbled across a broken land, a lonely soul garbed in black and gold. His head was bowed low, chin against chest, his body bone-weary and his heart wearier still. A brigade of six hundred men had set out, yet none besides him remained. Pain and thoughts of murder, these were his companions now. It was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other. All he could do was rage against the dying of Dirge. (Anwar 24)

Again, we can see how the POV character's speech patterns influence the way in which the narrator engages with the reader on a linguistic level. Similarly, *Songspeaker's* dialogue appropriates and paraphrases the often-poetic words of others, and the fantasy genre allows me to make this ability of his more literal. He not only 'makes new' in the sense of taking other writings and making them anew by rewording them or placing them in different contexts, but also in the literal sense, in that *Songspeaker* can take these words or other elements within *TDCS* and physically remake them to his own specifications.

If I was to take this thesis further, I would use a more creative approach to my exegesis in two ways. Firstly, by using footnotes to provide a parallel critical commentary throughout the piece, and highlighting my choices as a writer and the intentions behind the specific uses of language. Secondly, by adding a creative exegesis at the end which would work both as

part of the overall creative piece, by being an intrinsic part of the storyline, and as a critical explanation of the main text, making it a text both *within* the creative piece and *on* the creative piece. In terms of the direction that my research would take, I would focus on the relationship between Islam and representation, specifically in fiction. As a person of faith, I have begun to notice a trend within my writing, especially in metafiction, to lean toward this relationship and its connotations with regard to the parallels between fiction and reality as seen from my own cosmological views and what that means for me as a writer as well as a Muslim. In many schools of Islamic thought, the creation of images of living things is taboo, as it is seen as an imitation of the creative act of God. As this thesis has highlighted, certain parallels can be drawn between the creative act of writing, and the act of creating in itself: there is an element of 'lying' in telling stories, which is considered a sin; and storytelling also involves image creation, although the images created in prose fiction are mental images rather than visual.

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