

REVIVIFYING THE UR-TEXT

A Reconstruction of Sword-&-Sorcery as a Literary Form

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ABSTRACT

From the early 1980s until the late 1990s the genre or sub-genre known as sword-&-sorcery was largely moribund. The Tolkien-derived high fantasy novel, on the other hand, flourished and mutated into six, eight, ten volume, or open-ended series. Even though the terms high fantasy and sword-&-sorcery are sometimes used interchangeably, sword-&-sorcery came to be viewed as an inferior, cruder form: rougher in style, more limited structurally, stunted in terms of character development, even morally questionable (rather than ambiguous).

‘Revivifying the Ur-text’ aims to investigate if it is possible to subvert the genre, to create a work that realizes the form’s potential to exist as ‘literature’.

In order to do this it attempts to both analyze and re-vision the form by rendering the genre down to its pristine elements - exemplified but not monopolized by the widely-acknowledged creator of the sword-&-sorcery form, Robert E. Howard. The critical areas of the thesis thus concentrate on Howard, but extend backwards to Beowulf as proto-sword-&-sorcery and forwards to contemporary fantasy writers such as Joe Abercrombie and Steve Erikson.

It begins by constructing an account of the creation of the form by Howard, hypothesizing that the conditions for its genesis are a result of the writer’s internal emotional and thought processes interacting with external circumstances.

This is followed by a study of a set of highly influential anthologies published in the sixties edited by Lyon Sprague de Camp, interrogating de Camp’s introductions as well as his selections, sub-categorizing these into the variations on the Howardian model which evolved in the wake of his 1920/30s work, work from which other writers developed a commonly perceived genre.

From this the thesis proceeds to a consideration of related forms such as epic fantasy, science fantasy, and grimdark, prefaced by a survey and analysis of what sword-&-sorcery was/is perceived to be by commentators such as de Camp, Brian Attebery and Peter Nicholls.

These sections are followed and augmented by a refocusing on Robert E. Howard. A consideration of the crucial relationship between violence and the numinous in his fantasy is central to this thesis. This is done both through research into published texts, mainly fictional but also non-fictional, and is discussed both generally and through in-depth case studies of two stories, attempting to identify the particular elements of his writing which contributed to the birth and definition of sword-&-sorcery in order to establish Howard’s output as an ‘Ur-text’.

The creative heart of this research is my sword-&-sorcery fiction, *The Shadow Cycles*. Here I have attempted to write a narrative in the form which innovates narrative techniques, modifying or abandoning the generic scaffolding of situations, and methods of characterization, and developing a style of language appropriate to my aim of revisioning Howard's Ur-text for the 21st century.

This is followed by a concluding 'afterthesis' which draws on all the preceding sections to explicate the relationship between the critical and creative elements of the thesis. As with earlier critical sections, these recruit a synthesis of literary history, influence studies, genre theory, narratology, and practical criticism. By so doing they touch on conceptions of the literary such as those of Bakhtin, Eagleton, Todorov, and Katherine Hume.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In memory of my mother and father, whose love and support enabled me to become a writer.

SECTION ONE

SWORD-&-SORCERY

Howard the Pioneer: The Emergence of Sword-&-Sorcery

In order to understand what makes sword-&-sorcery a discrete genre I focused on the form's beginnings, in order to analyse those beginnings, but also to examine the form's potential. Tentative claims have been made for Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs as originators. Brian Attebery asserts that Leiber invented sword-&-sorcery by 'combining Burroughs's and Howard's underdressed warrior heroes [note the belittling effect], Lord Dunsany's forgotten and malevolent gods, and Pratt and de Camp's irreverent attitude'.¹ But the entry on 'Sword and Sorcery' in *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* (1979)² cites the commonly accepted claim that Robert E. Howard, if not the coiner of the term, as the progenitor of the form. This thesis argues that the nature of early sword-&-sorcery is so intimately entwined with its creator's personality that the conditions for the birth of the form are a result of Howard's internal emotional and thought processes interacting with external circumstances. This context can be categorized into geographical, historical, economic and literary factors, often in combinations.

howard

Robert Ervin Howard was born, and lived his entire life of thirty years in the Texas of 1906 to 1936. Relatively isolated in a remote part of a sparsely populated state, only one newspaper article appeared on him in his lifetime.³ Information may however be inferred through his work and from his autobiographical articles and his letters; the details of Howard's life have been documented by the bio-bibliography of Glenn Lord, by biographies by Lyon Sprague de Camp⁴ and Mark Finn⁵ and numerous articles in publications such as *The Dark Man: The Journal of Robert. E. Howard Studies*. George Knight contends: 'Howard's constant struggle to disinter revenants lurking within his native Texan soil is responsible for his work gaining and maintaining a primal naturalism. Like his literary

¹ *Stories About Stories*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.103.

² Peter Nicholls, 'Sword and Sorcery' in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* ed. John Clute and Peter Nicholls (London: Orbit, 1979) pp.589-590.

³ Alvin Earl Perry, 'A Biographical Sketch of Robert E. Howard', first published in *Fantasy Magazine*, July 1935, reprinted in *The Last Celt: A Bio-Bibliography of Robert Erwin Howard*, edited by Glenn Lord, Berkley, pp.65-66 (1977).

⁴ L.S. and C. de Camp, *Dark Valley Destiny*, New York: Bluejay Books, 1983.

⁵ Mark Finn, *Blood & Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard* (Austin: Monkey Brain Books, 2006). See <<https://rehtwogunraconteur.com/mark-finn-talks-about-the-updated-edition-of-blood-thunder/>> [accessed 26 February 2018] for a discussion on the second edition (lulu.com, 2014).

forebears, he is empathically close to the land of his birth.’⁶ The poem ‘Cimmeria’, written in 1932, suggested by the memory of the hill-country above Fredericksburg in winter, according to Howard’s own prefatory note, supports this:

Oh, soul of mine, born out of shadowed hills,
To clouds and winds and ghosts that shun the sun,
How many deaths shall serve to break at last
This heritage which wraps me in the grey
Apparel of ghosts? I search my heart and find
Cimmeria, land of Darkness and the Night.⁷

Beside the obvious link to Howard’s best-known character, Conan, and his homeland, the poem incorporates the two primary elements of his sword-&-sorcery, violence and the numinous. As Finn posits: ‘the geography and character of Texas is undeniably present in the Conan stories’.⁸

the pioneer influence

The Ervins were cast very much in the pioneer mould, and Howard was very aware of his frontiersman ancestry. He valued the pioneer characteristics of toughness and honesty. In his short history of his family entitled ‘The Wandering Years’⁹ his distrust of sophistication can easily be discerned: ‘A cowman’s word was his bond. And in dealing with such men, my grandfather never lost a cent. It was different when the country began filling up with smart gentlemen from the more sophisticated sections.’ The roots of his long-running correspondence with fellow fantasy writer H.P.Lovecraft over the relative merits of barbarism and civilization and the presence of that theme in his sword-&-sorcery can be detected here. Those roots were formed when the geographical and economic circumstances of early twentieth century Texas combined in the shape of the oil booms which had a profound effect on small towns such as Cross Plains. Such short-lived booms brought many hundreds of temporary workers who set up camps just outside towns. Mark Finn devotes a chapter of his *Blood & Thunder* to this phenomenon. One letter from Howard to Lovecraft is quoted: ‘I’ve seen whole towns debauched by an oil boom and boys and girls go to the devil whole-sale. I’ve seen promising youths turn from respectable citizens to dope-fiends,

⁶ George Knight, ‘Land of Dreams and Nightmares’ in *The Barbaric Triumph*, ed. Don Herron (New Jersey: Wildside Press, 2004), pp.129-140 (p.132).

⁷ Howard, *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian* (New York: Random House, 2003), p.3.

⁸ Finn, *Blood & Thunder* (1st edn.), p.172.

⁹ Howard, *The Last Celt*, pp.23-28.

drunkards, gamblers and gangsters in a matter of months.’¹⁰ Finn himself argues that much of Howard’s personal philosophy: ‘was a by-product of, and a reaction to, the changes in Texas brought on by the oil booms.’¹¹

Nevertheless, Howard's infatuation with the pioneer myth also carried over into his writing. A prime example of this is the Conan story ‘Beyond the Black River’.¹² The similarities herein to James Fenimore Cooper's historical ‘Leatherstocking Tales’¹³ are powerful and direct, and Howard apparently saw his writing ambitions as a continuation of that heritage:

I was the first to light a torch of literature in this part of the country, however small, frail and easily extinguished that flame may be. I am, in my way, a pioneer. ... I have not been a success, and probably never will be. But whatever my failure, I have this thing to remember - that I was a pioneer in my profession, just as my grandfathers were in theirs.¹⁴

Concepts of freedom, the wholesome quality of a rough rural existence, and the inherent if harsh moral code of the primitive, characterise his work. Both Solomon Kane, the sixteenth century swashbuckling puritan and Conan are wanderers and the lack of freedom is lamented by both King Kull and Conan in their later lives as a king. Howard gave to most of his other heroes, such as Cormac Mac Art the Viking seafarer and itinerant adventurer, that freedom which he himself longed for. Howard admitted:

Writing has always been a means to an end I hoped to achieve: freedom. Personal liberty may be a phantom, but I hardly think anybody would deny that there is more freedom in writing than there is in slaving in an iron foundry.¹⁵

Howard’s literary precedents in this philosophy include Rudyard Kipling and Jack London, whom Howard much admired.¹⁶ The sequence in ‘Beyond the Black River’ where Conan meets the character Balthus has been suggested seen by critics such as George

¹⁰ Finn, p.17.

¹¹ Finn, p.12.

¹² Howard, ‘Beyond the Black River’, *Weird Tales*, May and June 1935, reprinted in *Conan the Warrior*, London: Sphere Books, 1973.

¹³ *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), *The Deerslayer* (1841).

¹⁴ Howard, ‘On Reading - And Writing’, in *The Last Celt*, pp.50-51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.49.

¹⁶ See particularly Leo Grinn, 'The Reign of Blood' in *The Barbaric Triumph*, pp.144-5.

Scithers¹⁷ as having symbolic level: Howard as he was confronting Howard as he wished to be:

[Balthus] emerged dubiously and stared at the stranger. He felt curiously helpless and futile as he gazed on the proportions of the forest man. ... He moved with the dangerous ease of a panther; he was too fiercely supple to be a product of civilization, even that fringe of civilization which composed the outer frontiers.¹⁸

As this quotation also demonstrates, another Howardian preoccupation is physical prowess. For instance, from 'The Valley of the Worm', the hero: 'could run all day without tiring, and he possessed a co-ordination that made his movements a blur of blinding speed. If I told you his full strength, you would brand me a liar.'¹⁹ This preoccupation is also to be found in the writer's letters, for example in a letter dated July 1933 he tells August Derleth: "thanks also for the picture. You know, you are rather a striking figure of a man; power evident both in body and features."²⁰ As a child, Howard was apparently the victim of school bullying and as a result took up sports such as boxing and body-building. When fully grown he stood near six feet and weighed around two hundred pounds. The ice house in Cross Plains was a regular meeting place for boxing matches which Howard both attended and took part in, something evocatively described by Finn,²¹ and by Howard himself:

when I look for the peak of my exultation, I find it on a sweltering breathless midnight when I fought a black-headed tiger of an Oklahoma drifter in an abandoned ice vault, in an atmosphere laden with tobacco smoke and the reek of sweat and gut-rot whiskey²²

A link strongly suggests itself between such an environment and the typical Howardian sword-&-sorcery protagonist. 'A strong element in modern heroic fantasy', Lyon Sprague de Camp argues, 'is that of romantic primitivism. This is the concept of the primitive, the lusty barbarian, as the hero, the superman, superior to the decadent weaklings of urban civilisation.'²³ There is usually a hint of the style of the Texan tall tale tradition in Howard's depiction of his protagonists. Yet tellingly there is also an element of realism. Howard goes

¹⁷ In an article in *Amra*, vol.2, no.3 (1959).

¹⁸ Howard, 'Beyond the Black River' in *Conan the Warrior*, London: Sphere Books, 1973, p.160.

¹⁹ Howard, 'The Valley of the Worm', *Weird Tales*, February 1934, reprinted in *Wolfshead*, New York: Lancer Books, 1968, p. 37.

²⁰ Letter from Howard to August Derleth, July 1933, published in *The Howard Collector*, p.175.

²¹ Finn, 'The Fists of Robert E. Howard', in *Barbaric Triumph*, pp.11-35.

²² Letter to H.P.Lovecraft, September 1932, quoted in Edward A. Waterman's essay 'The Shadow from a Soul on Fire: Robert E. Howard and Irrationalism' in *Barbaric Triumph*, p.45.

²³ L. Sprague de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers*, Sauk City: Arkham House, 1976, p.14.

on to describe his exultation: ‘Animalistic is may be; unworthy it possibly is; bound to the tie-ribs of reality it must be.’ Here Howard touches on what Waterman describes as: ‘one of Howard’s most important dichotomies, his dialectic between reasoned intellect and animal instinct’.²⁴ A kind of rationalist ‘sword’ and irrationalist ‘sorcery’.

Howard was subject to vivid narrative dreams, which he drew upon for his writing: I have lived in the Southwest all my life, yet most of my dreams are laid in cold, giant lands of icy wastes and gloomy skies, and of wild, wind-swept fens and wildernesses [...] I am never, in these dreams of ancient times, a civilized man. Always I am the barbarian, the skin-clad, tousle-haired, light-eyed wild man, armed with a rude axe or sword.²⁵

Howard’s heroes all broadly adhere to this type. Richard L. Tierney in his introduction to ‘Tigers of the Sea’, emphasises the similarities between them:

Howard's favourite hero-type is a tall, rangy, wolf-like warrior of pure gaelic ancestry - blue-eyed, but with a rather swarthy complexion, black-maned and with a scarred, somewhat sinister countenance; he is always a barbarian, neither giving nor expecting quarter in open battle, but possessing a concealed, innate chivalry or basic decency that keeps him from being downright cruel.²⁶

irrationalism

A fascination with things Celtic is a strong element linking the man and his creation of sword-&-sorcery. He was highly aware and proud of his Irish ancestry, a fact that emerges in both his fictional and non-fictional writing: ‘I am largely Gaelic; Irish and Scotch-Irish, and Norman-Irish, and Anglo-Irish, and straight Norman with a touch of the Dane – Dano-Irish, from a red-headed great-grandmother. Mainly I am Irish and Norman, with the Irish predominating.’²⁷ In my essay ‘Celtic Influences in the Works of Robert E. Howard’²⁸ I discuss this link in detail, including the Celtic preoccupation with the supernatural.

Howard himself spoke of the possibility that he was working as a kind of literary medium for supernatural forces, speculating about his strangely powerful style and subject matter:

²⁴ Waterman, 'The Shadow from a Soul on Fire' *Barbaric Triumph*, p.46.

²⁵ Quoted in ‘Lone Star Fictioneer’ by Glenn Lord, *The Last Celt*, pp.73-4.

²⁶ Introduction to *Tigers of the Sea*, Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1974, p. 13.

²⁷ Howard, ‘A Touch of Trivia’, *The Last Celt*, p.34.

²⁸ Philip Emery, ‘Celtic Influences in the Works of Robert E. Howard’ in *The Dark Man: The Journal of Robert. E. Howard Studies*, vol.5 no.1, 2010, 41-56.

While I don't go so far as to believe that stories are inspired by actually existing spirits or powers (though I am rather opposed to flatly denying anything) I have sometimes wondered if it were possible that unrecognisable forces of the past or present or even the future - work through the thoughts and actions of living men. This occurred to me when I was working on the first stories of the Conan series. ... the man Conan seemed suddenly to grow up in my mind without much labour on my part and immediately a stream of stories flowed off my pen - or rather my typewriter - almost without effort on my part. I did not seem to be creating, but rather relating events that had occurred. ... The character took complete possession of my mind and crowded out everything else in the way of story-writing. When I deliberately attempted to write something else, I couldn't do it. ... I still write of Conan more powerfully and with more understanding than any of my other characters. But the time will probably come when I will suddenly find myself unable to write convincingly of him at all. That has happened in the past with nearly all my rather numerous characters; suddenly I would find myself out of contact with the conception, as if the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character.²⁹

This account, however, is at variance with another account of Conan's genesis:

It may sound fantastic to link the term "realism" with Conan; but as a matter of fact [...] he is the most realistic character I have ever evolved. He is simply a combination of a number of men I have known [...] some mechanism in my sub-conscious took the dominant characteristics of various prizefighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers, and honest workmen I had come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian.³⁰

The latter account seems more considered and rationalist, but both emphasise the role of instinct in Howard's creative process.

The recurring combination of the physical and the metaphysical is encapsulated in the opening of 'Marchers of Valhalla',³¹ one of the six stories that use the character of the

²⁹ Letter from Howard to Clark Ashton Smith, December 14th, 1933, quoted in de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen*, p.165.

³⁰ Quoted in Coffman, 'Barbarism Ascendant: The Poetic and Epistolary Origins of the Character and His World', by Frank Coffman, in Prida (ed.), *Conan Meets the Academy* (London: McFarland, 2013), pp.35-50 (pp.44-45).

³¹ Howard, *Marchers of Valhalla*, Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1972. Much of Howard's work received its first book publication years after his death.

disabled Texan James Allison recalling previous incarnations to introduce or frame narratives:

The sky was lurid, gloomy and repellent, of the blue of tarnished steel, streaked with dully crimson banners. Against the muddled red smear lowered the low hills that are the peaks of that barren upland which is a dreary expanse of sand drifts and post-oak thickets, checkered with sterile fields where tenant farmers toil out their hideously barren lives in fruitless labor and bitter want.

I had limped to a ridge which rose above the others, flanked on either hand by the dry post-oak thickets.

[...] Then suddenly I realized that I was not alone. A woman had come from the dense thicket, and stood looking down on me.

[...] 'This country has memories,' she said.

'yes, but I have not shared in them. I could have lived life deeply as a cowboy, even here, before the squatters turned the country from an open range to a drift of struggling farms. I could have lived deep as a buffalo hunter, an Indian fighter, or an explorer, even here. But I was born out of my time.'

[...] 'You should remember,' she said softly. 'Even now dreams should come to you like the echoes of distant lutes.'

[...] there was a sense of fading time and space – a sensation of being whirled over illimitable gulfs, with cosmic winds blowing against me – then I looked upon churning clouds unreal and luminous, which crystalized into a strange landscape – familiar, and yet fantastically unfamiliar.

[...] this sensation faded almost instantly, and I was Hjalmar, a son of the fair-haired, without cognizance of any other existence, past or future.³²

From what is known of Howard, including his fascination with history both recent and ancient, and his belief that his own dreams were often ancestral memories, the Allison reincarnation becomes more than a storytelling conceit. This tension between reality and fantasy (again physical and metaphysical) characterizes Howardian sword-&-sorcery, which results in a fundamental binary opposition of violence and the numinous which this thesis examines in detail later.

the gothic

³² Ibid., p.11-17

Another element in Howard's Texan environment was the presence of the gothic. Finn points out: 'His mother told him stories of Indian cruelty to the settlers of Texas, and he absorbed southern ghost stories from his grandmother and other family acquaintances.'³³ Gramlich argues that Howard: 'wove his fantasy and horror stories from threads of the older European traditions and from an emerging new American gothic that incorporated the wilderness and the "Indian"'.³⁴ Stephen King describes 'Pigeons from Hell'³⁵ as 'one of the finest horror stories of our [20th] century'.³⁶ Gramlich continues to argue for a link with Howardian sword-&-sorcery:

Horror stories have a natural connection with the gothic, of course, but fantasy is often thought to arise from other sources. This is a mistake in that the two primary innovators and trend setters for modern fantasy, Robert E. Howard and J.R.R. Tolkien, both used gothic themes and imagery to give weight and power to their fantasy tales. Howard, in particular, mined the gothic and mixed it with history and fantasy to create sword-&-sorcery.³⁷

And from the gothic there is a clear link to the idea of the numinous. Varma makes the case:

Primarily the Gothic novels arose out of a quest for the numinous. They are characterized by an awestruck apprehension of Divine immanence penetrating diurnal reality. This sense of the numinous is an almost archetypal impulse inherited from primitive magic. The Gothic quest was not merely after horror [...] but after otherworldly gratification. These novelists [...] were moving away from the arid glare of rationalism towards the beckoning shadows of a more intimate and mystical interpretation of life.³⁸

If the parallels with Howard and his working methods were not striking enough, Varma goes on to argue: 'No doubt there is a strikingly close relationship between dreams and supernatural impressions.'³⁹

the pulps

³³ Finn, 'Texas as Character in Robert E. Howard's Fiction', *The Dark Man*, no.8, 2004, 3-8 (p.4).

³⁴ Charles Gramlich, 'Robert E. Howard in the Gothic Tradition', *The Dark Man*, no.8, 2004, 13-24 (p.16).

³⁵ Howard, 'Pigeons from Hell', *Weird Tales*, May 1938, reprinted in *The Dark Man and Others*, New York: Lancer Books, 1971.

³⁶ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Futura, 1982, (p.258).

³⁷ Gramlich, 'Gothic Tradition', p.15.

³⁸ Devendra P. Varma, 'Quest of the Numinous: The Gothic Flame', in Messant (ed.), *Literature of the Occult* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981), pp.40-50 (p.41-2).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.49.

The final circumstance for the emergence of sword-&-sorcery was a publishing phenomenon of the time: the pulp magazine. This was the name given to the cheap fiction magazines popular on American news-stands from the end of the nineteenth century until the Second World War. Haining describes their format:

In appearance, the publications measured seven inches by ten and were, on average, half an inch thick. The number of pages varied considerably, but were normally about 128, and were printed on the untrimmed, rough wood pulp paper which gave them their name. The covers, on the other hand, were printed on art paper and featured scenes of climactic action painted in the most vivid colours and highlighted by ingenious and provocative catch phrases.⁴⁰

Although publishing work by such writers as Mark Twain, Raymond Chandler and Tennessee Williams, these magazines had a reputation as purveyors of sensationalistic and poorly written material. Yet their cheap cost enabled them to sell in great numbers. Except for *The Thrill Book*, begun in 1919 and lasting for sixteen issues, *Weird Tales*, beginning in 1923, was the first fantasy magazine. It was, for most of the pulp era and Howard's life, the only specialist market for such material and it was here that he made his first professional sale at eighteen, 'Spear and Fang'⁴¹ and in *Weird Tales* that his sword-&-sorcery first appeared. 'The Shadow Kingdom',⁴² is commonly considered the first of these, combining the elements of adventure, historical fiction, horror and myth. Lin Carter traces the literary sources Howard drew from:

In the first place Howard welded together three different kinds of story into one. He took the Clark Ashton Smith sort of yarn laid in fabulous, glimmering dawn kingdoms of magic and sorcery, and the Lovecraftian horror tale of prehuman, eldritch evil, and grafted them onto the swashbuckling heroica of Harold Lamb and Rafael Sabatini and the Talbot Mundy of 'Tros of Samothrace' fame.⁴³

Howard's method of working was that of the pulp professional. He would rapidly produce three stories instead of spending an equal amount of time polishing just one, acknowledging the likelihood that he would probably sell only one of the three. Although the Depression Era

⁴⁰ Peter Haining, *The Fantastic Pulps*, London: Gollancz, 1975 (p.12).

⁴¹ Howard, 'Spear and Fang', *Weird Tales*, July 1925.

⁴² Howard, 'The Shadow Kingdom', *Weird Tales*, August 1929, reprinted in King Kull, Lancer Books, 1967.

⁴³ Lin Carter, 'The First Barbarian', in *Savage Sword of Conan* vol.1 no.3, 30-32 (1974).

took a heavy toll on the pulp industry, causing many of his markets to close, Howard continued to make a living from his writing, documented by his earnings itemized by Lord.⁴⁴

In 1936 he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. However for the last ten years of his life, beginning with ‘Spear and Fang’, he earned a reputation as a prolific story writer. In those ten years his output consisted mainly of short stories but also included verse and two novels. He left approximately 156 published stories, together with many unpublished and incomplete works. Howard's imagination enabled him to create worlds, such as Conan's Hyborian continent or King Kull's Thurian continent, with great vividness. De Camp comments: ‘It is partly the concreteness of Howard's imaginary world that gives his stories their vividness and fascination.’⁴⁵ This feeling of total commitment to the reality of his fiction is a trademark of his writing. Discussing the Solomon Kane series, de Camp draws attention to this: ‘In these stories first appears Howard's distinctive intensity - a curious sense of total emotional commitment which hypnotically drags the reader along willy-nilly.’⁴⁶ The word ‘curious’ possibly suggests that de Camp was not fully in tune with Howard’s work and in fact de Camp’s representation of Howard and treatment of his work as editor and writer have all become controversial in recent years. Finn is particularly damning in his biography. The speculated motivation for Howard’s suicide tends to fall into two possibilities: first that it was as a result of an intense attachment to his mother and news of her impending death; second, that he had planned his death for many years and news of his mother’s approaching end and consequently an end to his caring duty, gave him the license to carry out his plan. Accounts of Howard's personality are often conflicting. His character seems to have been at the same time sullen and sensitive, aggressive but compassionate. Certainly he felt himself born out of his time. It may be that the power and vividness of his writing are manifestations of a desperate need to escape the confines of his everyday situation.

conclusion

In concluding this consideration of the circumstances shaping the emergence of sword-&-sorcery, throughout the above the idea of the frontier in various aspects, historical, geographic, psychical, proves itself significant. Howard’s fantasy is certainly a poor fit for the Southern/Pastoral Gothic, despite his fascination with the supernatural and Texan history. There is no sense of idyll to be found. Indeed Waterman argues rather that ‘Howard’s [...]

⁴⁴ ‘Lone Star Fictioneer’, pp.77-79.

⁴⁵ Introduction to *Conan of Cimmeria*, New York: Lancer Books, 1969. p. 11.

⁴⁶ De Camp, *Sorcerers.*, p. 141.

notion of paradise on Earth rests on the assertion of violent action as a vital ideal'⁴⁷. The concept of a frontier is itself both oppositional and liminal, physical and metaphysical, reinforced through Howard's first hand knowledge of violence and mediated through an irrationalist instinctive approach to life and writing. One sentence from Slotkin's study *Regeneration Through Violence: the mythology of the American frontier, 1600-1860*, looms out with haunting relevance. It comes in the chapter 'A Pyramid of Skulls', a title that would not be out of place prefacing a Howardian sword-&-sorcery tale: 'Physical combat with and captivity to the dark forces (whether they are really dark or only imagined to be so) infects the mind itself with darkness'.⁴⁸

Beyond the Ur-textual Black River: The de Camp Anthologies

Nicholls attributes the coinage of 'sword-&-sorcery' to Fritz Leiber in 1960, a date repeated in the 1993 edition of the encyclopaedia as well as other sources. However in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*⁴⁹ the date is given as 1961. This latter date is also found in other sources and is a more solid assertion since the letter where Leiber first suggested the term appeared in the April 1961 issue of *Ancalagon*.⁵⁰ Leiber's term post-dates much of what are now recognized as early examples of the form and was first interrogated in a sequence of four anthologies edited and introduced by Sprague de Camp and published between 1963 and 1970. The contents are as follows: *Swords & Sorcery*: 'The Valor of Cappen Varra' by Poul Anderson, 'Distressing Tale of Thangobrind the Jeweller' by Lord Dunsany, 'Shadows in the Moonlight', by Howard, 'The Citadel of Darkness' by Henry Kuttner, 'When the Sea King's Away' by Fritz Leiber, 'The Doom that came to Sarnath' by H.P.Lovecraft, 'Hellsgarde' by C.L.Moore, 'The Testament of Athammaus' by Clark Ashton Smith; *The Spell of Seven*: 'Bazaar of the Bizarre', by Leiber, 'The Dark Eidolon' by Smith, 'The Hoard of the Gibbelins' by Dunsany, 'The Hungry Hercynian' by de Camp, 'Kings in Darkness' by Michael Moorcock, 'Mazirian the Magician' by Jack Vance, 'Shadows in Zamboula' by Howard; *The Fantastic Swordsmen*: 'Black Lotus' by Robert Bloch, 'The Fortress Unvanquishable Save for Sacnoth' by Dunsany, 'Drums of Tombalku' by Howard and de Camp, 'The Girl in the Gem' by John Jakes, 'Dragon Moon' by

⁴⁷ Waterman, 'The Shadow from a Soul on Fire' *Barbaric Triumph*, p.45.

⁴⁸ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: the mythology of the American frontier, 1600-1860*, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973.

⁴⁹ ed. John Clute and John Grant (London: Orbit, 1997).

⁵⁰ <www.jessesword.com/sf/view/235> and <<http://forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?682370-Swords-and-Sorcery/page10>> [both accessed 28 May 2015] The full letter is reproduced at <<http://alphabravopositivity.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/defining-sword-sorcery-leibers-letter.html>>) and reprinted in the July 1961 issue of *Amra*.

Kuttner, 'The Other Gods' by Lovecraft, 'The Singing Citadel' by Moorcock, 'The Tower' by Luigi de Pascalis; *Warlocks and Warriors*: 'Turutal' by Ray Capella, 'The Gods of Niom Parma' by Lin Carter, 'The Hills of the Dead' by Howard, 'Thunder in the Dawn' by Kuttner, 'Thieves' House' by Leiber, 'Black God's Kiss' by C.L. Moore, 'Chu-Bu and Sheemish' by Dunsany, 'The Master of the Crabs' by Smith, 'The Valley of the Spiders' by H.G. Wells, 'The Bells of Shoredan' by Roger Zelazny.

the terminology

These anthologies contain stories that not only post-date but pre-date Howard's output, and considerably expand the use of the term to stories which move away from the strict binary opposition of sword versus sorcery. They consequently both define and redefine a generic horizon of expectations of the form, and in doing so throw light on that very Howardian Ur-text. Paratextual considerations interestingly appear to work against de Camp's widening agenda. For example the back cover blurbs all emphasise the Howardian sword versus sorcery agon with phrases such as 'where might fights magic and spears clash with spells' and 'baleful wizardry challenges human valor'. The anthology titles also underline this agon. The first juxtaposes 'swords' and 'sorcery', the second cites sorcery alone, the third swords alone, and the fourth inverts the order of the juxtaposition of the first.

In the first of these, *Swords & Sorcery*, the ampersand, to which I attribute significance in my own conception of the form, is used on the cover, though 'and' is used on the spine and on the title page. But little mention of the term is found in de Camp's introduction, which prefers to use 'heroic fantasy'.⁵¹ 'Heroic fantasy' has a moral connotation which is potentially misleading. John Clute, David Langford and Roz Kaveney maintain that 'there may be a useful distinction between' the two terms but go no further, suggesting distinctions between 'S&S' and what they term 'Adventurer Fantasy' are 'over-finicky for practical use' and settling for a broader catch-all that S&S is a 'fantasy subgenre'.⁵² In his anthology introductions de Camp shies away from the term, perhaps for the same reasons as the term 'dark fantasy' in later decades was adopted for horror in order to imply better writing and more serious capacity for the genre. Although a few years later, in his critical collection *Swordsmen and Sorcerers* he has no compunction using the term. Apart from two citations of the title of the first anthology, the closest de Camp comes to using 'sword-&-sorcery' is in the last of the four, *Warlocks and Warriors*, in which 'swordplay-and-sorcery' is equated with heroic fantasy.⁵³ This thesis

⁵¹ *Swords & Sorcery* ed. L.S. de Camp (New York: Pyramid Books, 1963).

⁵² *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* p.915.

⁵³ *Warlocks and Warriors* ed. L.S. de Camp, (New York: Berkley Medalion Books, 1971).

contends that this is a symptom of a trivializing subtext term running through all four introductions, constantly equating the form with simplicity and escapism. De Camp's introduction to *Swords & Sorcery* includes the phrase '[the world] as it *ought* to have been to make a good story' (7). He also uses the term 'escape reading'. Distance from the contemporary quotidian is a requirement, as is lack of any message. The word 'fun' is used three times in this introduction, once even italicized. In his second anthology 'fun' appears once but temporal distance for the form is more strongly emphasized. The word 'drab' is used in referring to reality – a word Tolkien also employs in discussing escape in *Tree and Leaf*.⁵⁴ In his third anthology de Camp allows some element of didacticism but is at pains to place its importance as secondary. 'Fun' only appears once here, but in the fourth anthology it again appears three times. (John Clute, in his entry for 'Escapism' in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* allows the subject less than a hundred words.) In an internet blog, 'Going on Retreat to Middle Earth', Brian Attebery argues for Tolkien's fantasy as 'retreat' rather than escape, defining this as the provision of 'quiet, harmony, and self knowledge' – not qualities readily associated with sword-&-sorcery. He also points out that these elements are skirted over in the film versions of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. It has been observed elsewhere by commentators (such as Steven Tompkins as referenced below) that these films are more effective as sword-&-sorcery than as high Tolkienian fantasy.⁵⁵ It may be that the very term 'sword and sorcery', invented by Leiber, a famously wry practitioner of the mode, is a stumbling block to looking at the form with any degree of seriousness.⁵⁶ The title of the first collection is also potentially reductive in that 'swords' rather than 'sword', discourages a connotation of the latter as concept rather than simply a referential noun. This thesis employs an adaptive reading of the word, placing sword on a par with sorcery as another metaphor-bearing unit, with sword equalling violence, and sorcery equalling the numinous – a conflation of violence and supernatural which by its intensity is potentially doubly violent.

the introductions

De Camp's introductions were not intended as a scholarly mapping of the genre's characteristics and parameters, but it is worth examining them still further, not only because these anthologies were influential, but to tease out other recurring concepts beyond an emphasis on 'adventure' and 'fun'. The protagonist of the form, de Camp suggests, possesses 'preternatural might and valor' and inhabits a 'prehistoric or mediaeval' milieu. De Camp

⁵⁴ London: Allen & Unwin, 1964, p. 53.

⁵⁵ <<http://blog.oup/category/language-words/>> [accessed 15 October 2014]

⁵⁶ Whereas the term 'Grimdark', a far more recent name for a similar type of fantasy suggests a twenty-first century shift to a more Gothic sensibility.

regards William Morris as the writer who ‘revives’ heroic fantasy, but criticises him for too much ‘sweetness and light’, hinting at a form which is more ‘realistic’.⁵⁷

The introduction to the second anthology, *The Spell of Seven*, reiterates much of the first introduction’s contents.⁵⁸ Escapism is again stressed, and Morris is once more cited as reviving ‘heroic fantasy’, though de Camp also mentions that the form goes back to saga, epic, legend, and myth. In addition, he mentions the Gothic novel. I found this potentially significant, given my feeling that the Gothic sensibility is part-and-parcel of much sword-&-sorcery, not least because of its fondness for the withholding of information as a narrative technique. I examine this in my essay ‘Storm of Shadow’⁵⁹ and use it as a crucial device in *The Shadow Cycles*.⁶⁰

The introduction to the third anthology, *The Fantastic Swordsmen*, is the slimmest of the four, rehearsing again the theme of escapism, but mentioning the desirability of mixing ‘elements from everyday life’ with the fantasy – again suggesting a latent element of realism within the form.⁶¹

The final collection, *Warlocks and Warriors*, does little more than recap (to the point of paraphrase) matter from the three earlier forewords. It does however go into more detail where milieu is concerned. According to de Camp, an heroic fantasy can take place in the distant past or distant future: distance seems to be a qualifying factor. Another important aspect of the genre, mentioned here for the first time in the introductions, is that ‘modern science and technology’ is not allowed: de Camp’s previous mentions of prehistoric and medieval worlds suggest as much. He speculates that dwindling interest in heroic fantasy in or after the Second World War was as a result of the ‘machine age’, but I suspect Robert E. Howard’s premature death in 1936 might also be a factor. Another milieu he claims legitimate for the form is the alien planet, probably prompted by the Mars series of Edgar Rice Burroughs. A formulation of sword-&-sorcery as

⁵⁷ de Camp, introduction to *Swords and Sorcery*, pp.7-8. Morris wrote several fantasy novels and short stories in the 1880s and 90s and earlier in his career made extensive use of mythology in his writing in such works as *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867). Some of the fantasies, such as *The House of the Wolfings* (1889), mixed prose and verse – something which prefigures the technique in later fantasy.

⁵⁸ *The Spell of Seven* ed. L.S. de Camp (New York: Pyramid Books, 1965).

⁵⁹ Philip Emery, 'Storm of Shadow' in *The Shadow Cycles* (Stafford: Immanion 2011), 217-251 (p.217). This essay was appended to a commercial version of *The Shadow Cycles*. However the essay was written during the writing of the original thesis version of the book presented here. The versions differ significantly in many respects. They should therefore be regarded as entirely separate works. (An appendix to this thesis, ‘Double Shadow’, details the differences between the two versions. The published version, particularly ‘Storm of Shadow’ are occasionally cited in the thesis as an extra layer of reference.)

⁶⁰ Sometimes abbreviated to *TSC* for ease of use.

⁶¹ *The Fantastic Swordsmen* ed. L.S. de Camp, (New York: Pyramid Books, 1967).

defined initially by Howard disallows such settings.⁶² Though Burroughs can clearly be claimed as utilizing sword-&-sorcery elements such as fast-paced action set in exotic imaginary worlds, the fact that there is no sorcery/supernatural factor in his stories places him outside the strict requirements of the form. Nicholls claims that the atmosphere Burroughs evoked establishes a 'continuity' between the Burroughs oeuvre and that of Howard – but what he means by 'atmosphere' remains unclear – certainly the only eerie feel to Burroughs's fictions comes in John Carter's initial transportations to Mars and an occasional passage, in the early stories particularly, evoking the strangeness of the planet. As Attebery observes: 'A longing for myth lies at the heart of the Mars books, as acknowledged in the second volume of the series *The Gods of Mars* (1912), but the titular gods turn out to be scientifically advanced frauds, and myth is perpetually deferred.'

evolution of the ur-text

The following suggests several categories of the form which diverge from the Howardian Ur-text, these being Howardian Epigones, Neo-S&S, and Weird-S&S.⁶³ The first of these begin toward the end of Howard's career. In the years immediately after his death, S&S understandably lost force and direction. In the final chapter of *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers*, 'Conan's Compeers', de Camp addresses this period:

When Robert Howard killed himself in 1936, he left a gap in American fantastic fiction. Nobody was writing anything much like his stories of Conan and Kull, although Clark Ashton Smith and C.L. Moore, in their separate and highly individual ways, were contributing greatly to heroic fantasy. [...] Several writers undertook to fill the hole left by Howard.⁶⁴

His phrase 'individual ways' indicates an idea of not simply duplication but evolution of Howard's Ur-text. The fact that Moore's protagonist is female may support this, as does the mention of Clark Ashton Smith with his very different approach to fantasy. However the emergence of Howardian epigones (or clones or hybrids) do not generally develop the Ur-text. There is a sub-genre of Conan pastiches by de Camp, Carter, Wagner, and many others, often based on fragments or outlines left by Howard. This began in earnest in the

⁶² Attebery, *Stories*, p.102. Besides the title 'Science Fantasy', such stories often go by the name 'Sword-and-Planet'.

⁶³ The contents of the *Swords Against the Millennium* anthology include a variety of these forms such as Weird-S&S, Science Fantasy, and also parody. The title probably references Leiber's Fafhrd and Gray Mouser collections.

⁶⁴ de Camp, *Sorcerers* pp.276-7.

1960s as a consequence of the upsurge of interest in Howard's work. As Wagner himself admits:

These are not Conan stories - not Robert E. Howard's Conan [...] don't let anyone kid you that you're reading Robert E. Howard. It is far more than a matter of imitating adjective usage or analyzing comma-splices. It is a matter of spirit.⁶⁵

The final sentence is vague, but the template of plot, style, character, and milieu which Howard designed for sword-&-sorcery was mined by those who created their own worlds and protagonists in the fantasy boom of the 1960s and 1970s. The opening chapter, for instance, in Gardner Fox's *Kyrik: Warlock Warrior* is textbook Howard: strangeness, narrative drive, muscular prose, broad slashes of description, active verbs, otherness/exoticism, violence: 'Kyrik rasped icy laughter in which were the sounds of great bergs meeting and crunching together in the northernmost seas.'⁶⁶ Fox also employs, as do many sword-&-sorcery writers from Howard on, the occasional off-putting touch of sci-fi language: 'Still the verdant globe clung to that manlike thing, filling its flesh and pores, its veins and *neurons*'.⁶⁷ The use of such terminology has the effect of 'foregrounding' a scientific worldview onto the fiction's milieu, which mars the pristine Howardian sword-&-sorcery sensibility.

Other Howard Epigones from the period include John Jakes, with his Brak the Barbarian stories, Mike Chinn, and Kenneth Bulmer, though Bulmer is perhaps more indebted to Burroughs.⁶⁸ Few new writers or writing in the form appeared in the 1990s, but Simon R. Green began publishing in this decade. His 'In the Labyrinth' has a chthonic milieu, typical of sword-&-sorcery, but his prose, though accomplished and controlled, or perhaps because, vis-a-vis my earlier observation about de Camp's prose, does not have the intensity of Howard's sword-&-sorcery.⁶⁹ Consequently the use of cliché, italicised below, has a potentially more damaging effect: 'Jarryl grinned with a *savage joy* as the sorcerous flames seared the demon's picture from the wall', and 'By the time they reached the final stairway, the flames were a *raging inferno*.'⁷⁰

⁶⁵Howard, *Dragon*, Foreword p.10.

⁶⁶ Gardner Fox, *Kyrik: Warlock Warrior* (London: Herbert Jenkins 1976), p.22. Fox authored three fantasy series from 1964 to 1976.. The Llarn sequence owes more to Burroughs but the Kothar and Kyrik series are very much Howardian Epigone works. It should be said that Howard would often begin a story with a slow-moving atmospheric tableau, as for example in 'Black Colossus' (*Weird Tales*, June, 1933.) Reprinted in *Black Colossus* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1979), 11-101.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.24. My italics.

⁶⁸ A series of stories originally appearing in *Fantastic* magazine from 1963 and later revised and expanded for book publication.

⁶⁹*Fantasy Tales* 12, Winter 1983.

⁷⁰Both quotes from *Fantasy Tales* no.12, p.38.

Less literary Howard imitators tend to produce an uneasy striving-for-effect feel in their prose, alternating a fairly innocuous style with flashes of what becomes hyperbole through its occasional nature and its (often clichéd) lack of vigour. Edmund Burke warns writers against invoking a sense of the vast to produce a false sense of the sublime, and this may be akin in some respects to the Epigones' fall into hyperbole.

neo-s&s

The next category suggested by the de Camp anthologies, 'Neo-S&S', is what Joanna Russ might recognize as the second stage of the genre's development when she writes about the problem of genres failing:

I would like to suggest that there is a way out of this dilemma, that writers take it, and that their taking it accounts for the phenomenon of genre material wearing out (maybe all fictional narrative eventually wearing out). Not only that, the way out of the dilemma accounts for *the way* scenes or plots do in fact wear out; that is, not all at once but in three distinct stages. I have named these Innocence, Plausibility, and Decadence; they might just as well be called Primitivism, Realism, and Decadence (though 'Realism' here has nothing to do with realism as a style or historical period).⁷¹

Neo sword-&-sorcery thus represents a form which echoes but mutates Howard's 'Innocent' or 'Primitive' Ur-text, often in reaction against him. Such a response suggests Harold Bloom's 'clinamen' or perhaps 'kenosis' categories in his six revisionary ratios. His study is focused on poetry, but has some relevance to fiction and the process of genre.⁷² Leiber's Fafhrd and Gray Mouser, two protagonists in contrast to Howard's lone (if sometimes accompanied) heroes, were designed to be 'not Conans or Troses but earthy characters with earthy weaknesses, winning in the end mostly by luck'⁷³ Moorcock writes that the stories are full of ironic metaphor, and Leiber again comments: 'One of the original motives for conceiving Fafhrd and the Mouser was to have a couple of fantasy heroes closer to true human stature than supermen like Conan and Tarzan and many another.'⁷⁴ From 1939 publication of the more editorially ironic *Unknown* magazine allowed these stories to see

⁷¹ Joanna Russ, 'The Wearing Out of Genre Materials' in *College English* no. 1, Vol.33, Oct 1971, 46-54.

⁷² Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn. 1977), pp.14-5.

⁷³ Leiber quoted in de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen*, p.286.

⁷⁴ Michael Moorcock, *Wizardry and Wild Romance* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1987), p.83; Leiber, Author's Note, *The Swords of Lankhmar* (London: Grafton Books, 1970), p.5.

print after *Weird Tales* had rejected four of them.⁷⁵ De Camp describes Fafhrd and Mouser as ‘whimsical scoundrels’, i.e. presumably not possessing the intensity of Howard’s characters. The work of the Neo-S&S writers can have focus, certainly, but not intensity. Leiber, particularly, represents an ironicisation of the Howardian branch of sword-&-sorcery, albeit still possessing a strong adventure element. The two concepts of Gothic and adventure, often found in juxtaposition or opposition to each other, suggest a ‘Gothic-adventure continuum’, along which a sword-&-sorcery story might be placed. Both terms have undergone shifts of meaning over the centuries, but for the purposes of this study, the connotations as much as the denotations are important. Though both when applied to narratives imply risk and danger, adventure has taken on a light, optimistic connotation, typified by the documentary ‘It’s Cutlasses Now, Men’: ‘In swashbucklers, the sky is always blue, the sea always sparkles, and everything is clean, colourful, and effortlessly elegant.’⁷⁶ The documentary’s title comes from an Errol Flynn film, *The Sea Hawk* (1940) and the same aesthetic can be found little altered in the current ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ Disney franchise (In fact *The Sea Hawk* is referenced in one of the series). The Gothic resonances of angst, decay, atmosphere, pessimism, madness, death, deathwish, darkness, monsters, non-naturalistic approach, irrationality, dread, dream, perversion, can certainly be detected in the more adventure-oriented sword-&-sorcery, but approached with a different, more distanced ‘angle of attack’ away from the more Gothic or horrific tropes of the original Ur-text. Hantke reinforces this point:

Common to all these manifestations of sublime ontological horror is the inability of the self to assume a position of relative critical distance toward its own cognitive processes and perceive itself as occupying a middle ground in experience through what [Edmund] Burke still sees as aesthetic distance, what later periods will conceptualise as the modern sense of irony, and what we would call self-reflexivity, we are trapped.⁷⁷

In his Viriconium story *The Pastel City* (1971), M. John Harrison cannot resist slyly edging toward distancing parody with his thinly-veiled Elric clone protagonist: ‘Cromis was a tall man, thin and cadaverous. He had slept little lately, and his green eyes were tired in the

⁷⁵The stories were collected as *Swords and Deviltry*, *Swords Against Death*, *Swords in the Mist*, *Swords Against Wizardry*, *The Swords of Lankhmar*, *Swords and Ice Magic*, *The Knight and Knave of Swords* (London: Grafton Books, 1979-90). Each collection has an ironic, witty foreword mirroring the wry knowingness of the stories themselves.

⁷⁶ BBC Radio Four, 20 March 1981.

⁷⁷ Steffen H. Hantke, ‘The Function of the Sublime in Contemporary Horror: From Edmund Burke to Michael Blumlein’, *Foundation*, 71 (1997), 45-62 (p.54).

dark sunken hollows above his high, prominent cheekbones.’⁷⁸ More blatantly, ‘The right fist rested on the pommel of his plain long sword, which, contrary to the fashion of the time, had no name.’⁷⁹ Cromis is also a better poet than swordsman. Harrison more often than not utilizes a casual approach to wonder, reminiscent of my category Weird-S&S, that is generally destructive of a sense of the numinous: ‘The black eyes flickered warily round the walls. They touched briefly on a powered battle-axe that Cromis had got from his friend Tomb the dwarf after the sea-fight at Mingulay’.⁸⁰ Harrison is also suspect regarding physical action, dramatic events almost *sidle* up as afterthoughts. Moorcock has praised his concentration on the human rather than the wonderful, but magic is accepted too readily in the milieu of these writers, or at any rate is not feared enough, thus engendering less friction/frisson when the supernatural is encountered.

Samuel R. Delany’s ‘Neveryon’ stories, both short and novel length, demonstrate a different kind of distance other than irony: a highly controlled and accomplished prose style, with no sense of verbally (or otherwise) spilling into the irrational:

The sense of adventure that had dissolved into a kind of quivering anomie when the riders had left her on the street was now rewritten across the field of its own dissolution without really reforming it.⁸¹

It is hard to imagine any other sword-&-sorcery writer, Epigone, Neo-S&S, or Weird-S&S who would use the word ‘anomie’ with its foregrounding of the rational and modern. Additionally the use of postmodern segues into contemporary sections and fictionalized academic appendices reinforce the effect.

This reduction in mythic stature is one aspect of most Neo-S&S: part of the process of taking the form and expanding the envelope away from the essential Ur elements, beginning a few years after Howard’s death with Leiber and continued later by Moorcock. By the time we reach Moorcock’s Elric the oppositional agon of Ur-text sword-&-sorcery has become not oppositions but parallels, with the character combining both sword and sorcery elements. In

⁷⁸ M. John Harrison, *Viriconium* (London: Gollancz, 2000), p.29.

⁷⁹ Both the Howardian and indeed Tolkien Ur-texts have been parodied over the decades. The latter high fantasy model has tended to aim its effects more widely, targeting plot and character and style. Examples of this include Beard and Kenny’s *Bored of the Rings* (Signet, 1969) and Marshall and Lloyd’s radio drama *Hordes of the Things* (BBC Radio Four, 20 March 1981). However the Howardian parodies have tended to focus, possibly significantly, on the violence of the form. Examples include Carl Critchlow’s *Thrud the Barbarian* (1983-2007), initially at least Dave Sim’s *Cerebus the Aardvark* (1977-2004), and Sergio Aragonies’s and Mark Evanier’s *Groo* (1982-2015). Comics have parodied sword-&-sorcery extensively, suggesting again the visual importance of the form.

⁸⁰ Harrison, p.34.

⁸¹ Samuel R. Delany, *Neveryona* (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p.91.

fact Moorcock installs a set of nested parallels: law-chaos, sword-sorcery, Elric-Stormbringer in these stories. The dilution of the original sharply bifurcated agon began with the early epigones, with the swordsmen of Kuttner and Clifford Ball as well as Leiber forming albeit uneasy alliances with sorcerers.⁸² The conflation of swordsman and sorcerer originated by Moorcock is later followed by Wagner with his Kane character. The Kane stories, both novels and short stories began publication in 1970. (Gardner Fox's Kyrik is labelled as a 'warlock warrior', but exhibits little of the former.) In some ways this is prefigured by the insouciant attitude to magic Leiber gives Fafhrd and Mouser: 'Fafhrd cursed superstitiously. Sorcery working against him he could always accept, but magic operating in his favour he invariably found disturbing.'⁸³ Here is Conan's distrust of magic, couched ironically. Herron points out the powerful sense of awe the young Conan felt about the supernatural - if only in order to disparage the more blasé response of the de Camp/Carter version.⁸⁴

Like Leiber, Moorcock created his Elric character in part as a reaction against the Howardian Ur-text. Moorcock relates how he wrote the opening of a Conan story for *Fantastic Universe* and latterly submitted it to Ted Carnell on the misunderstanding that Carnell wanted Conan material. And that this misunderstanding, to Moorcock's relief, led to the creation of Elric.⁸⁵ Beyond reaction against the Ur-text, however, Elric's guilt over the killing of his cousin Cymoril and betraying his people is a kind of self-hate which develops the characterizing aspect of the sword-&-sorcery form: 'He felt hot bitterness sweep over him again as the memory of her death upon his own sword-point came sharply to him.'⁸⁶ 'He sobbed on, not heeding them, great griefs racking his soul.'⁸⁷ As noted elsewhere in this thesis, the Howardian deathwish, manifested in the berserker fury his protagonists are given to, can sometimes be glossed as a self-deathwish - but never in Howard is it so blatant.⁸⁸

Reaction against and development of the Ur-text, often employing irony, are features of Neo-S&S. These elements, while not extreme enough to turn this category into a counter-

⁸² Henry Kuttner, 'Spawn of Dagon', *Weird Tales*, July 1938; Clifford Ball, 'The Thief of Forthe', *Weird Tales*, July 1937.

⁸³ Leiber, 'When the Sea King's Away' in *Swords in the Mist* (London: Grafton Books, 1986), p.94.

⁸⁴ Don Herron, 'Conan vs Conantics', originally published in 1976 in 'The Hyborian League' apa, and can be found at: <http://www.donherron.com/?page_id:1539> [accessed 10 September, 2006]

⁸⁵ Moorcock, 'Aspects of the Author No.1 The Apocalyptic' in *Sojan* (Manchester: Savoy Books, 1977), 123-30 (pp.123-4).

⁸⁶ Moorcock, 'The Dreaming City' in *The Stealer of Souls* (London: Mayflower Books, 1968), p.33.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁸⁸ The concept is expanded upon in the 'Deathwish and Madness' section of 'Storm of Shadow'(pp.245-7).

genre, suggest a connection with the concept of ‘revisionist fantasy’ with its observation that some genre fantasy makes attempts to ‘make standard genre tropes over,’⁸⁹

weird-s&s

The ‘Weird-S&S’ branch of sword-&-sorcery is, on the surface, easily differentiated from the Howardian Ur-text form through language, characterization and plot. Weird sword-&-sorcery is not a development of sword-&-sorcery, but a parallel form, actually pre-dating Howard (the generic Ur-text does not, I think, necessarily have to possess strict linear primogeniture). It might be said to be ‘founded’ by Dunsany’s wistful fantasies of the early twentieth century. Playful, whimsical, sometimes winking at the reader, Dunsany’s language has energy but not urgency. There is colour and sonority, but his rhythmical prose lacks Howard’s tautness. Lovecraft comments: ‘Beauty rather than terror is the keynote of Dunsany’s work. [...] Humour and irony, too, are often present to impart a gentle cynicism and modify what might otherwise possess a naive *intensity*.’⁹⁰ ‘The Fortress Unvanquishable Save for Sacnoth’, sometimes claimed as prototypical sword-&-sorcery, though possessing few of the elements of Propp’s⁹¹ fairy tale structure, is typically fairy or folk tale in style, with fantastical events and phenomena passed through casually, supplemented by a lyrical semi-biblical style and a light descriptive touch regarding violence with little extreme imagery and a closure-resisting ending which is almost postmodern. Dunsany negotiates a middle path between Bettelheim’s⁹² optimism and pessimism of fairy tale and myth via a tension between wonder and irony. His approach to violence, a staple of all forms of sword-&-sorcery, differs drastically from Howard:

And Rold said: ‘O sword, sword! How horrible thou art! Thou art a terrible thing to come among men. How many eyes shall look upon gardens no more because of thee? How any fields must go empty that might have been fair with cottages, white cottages with children all about them? How many valleys must go desolate that might have nursed warm hamlets, because thou has slain long since the men that might have built them?’⁹³

⁸⁹ ed.Clute and Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p.810. (Entry by Roz Kaveny.)

⁹⁰ H.P.Lovecraft, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ in *Dagon and other Macabre Tales* (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1965), p.430. My italics.

⁹¹ Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

⁹² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (Thames and Hudson, 1975).

⁹³ Lord Dunsany, ‘The Sword of Welleran’ in *The Young Magicians* ed. by Lin Carter (New York: Ballantine, 1969), p.38.

Clark Ashton Smith, a contemporary of Howard, produced fiction that, although existing within de Camp's general catchment area of sword-&-sorcery, differed greatly stylistically from him. Together with Howard and Lovecraft, he remains one of the most well-regarded *Weird Tales* contributors. In a short dynamic period reminiscent of Howard (approximately 1929-33), he wrote over one hundred mannered, elegant short stories and prose poems, characterized by heavy Latinate and Greek usage and a density of archaic or semi-archaic word-choice and inverted syntax. Smith's fantasy differed crucially from Howard's in the presentation of the supernatural through the deployment of irony - an approach that could be called 'wonder en passant'. With few exceptions his work is built on irony of tone, though of a darker kind than Dunsany. (Albeit after Dunsany, with Smith and even the Dunsany-esque pastiches of Lovecraft in the first and third anthologies, the 'sword' of Weird-S&S exchanges the signifier's metaphorical focus on the physical or violence for 'death'.) Moorcock's *Wizardry and Wild Romance* notes this irony and links it with the slightly later work of Leiber. The reason I have placed Leiber in the Neo-S&S category and Smith in the Weird-S&S category is largely due to considerations of plot: the former's sword-&-sorcery centres on physical adventure whereas the latter's fantasies focus on protagonists who rely more on magic: sorcery rather than sword. This has an effect on the form's intensity: the sorcerer in sword-&-sorcery being a metaphor for the unknown, potency is reduced when the sorcerer becomes the protagonist or viewpoint of a story, as with Smith or Jack Vance's early Dying Earth stories or the Kane stories of Karl Edward Wagner.

Influenced by Poe⁹⁴ as well as possibly Dunsany,⁹⁵ Smith's fantasies employ a self-consciously poetic register:

As to my own employment of ornate style, using many words of classic origin and exotic color,' he wrote, 'I can only say that [it] is designed to produce effects of language and rhythm which could not possibly be achieved by a vocabulary restricted to what is known as 'barbaric English'. As Strachey points out, a style composed largely of words of Anglo-Saxon origin tends to a spondaic rhythm, 'which by some mysterious law, reproduces the atmosphere of ordinary life.' An atmosphere of

⁹⁴ Letter to Samuel J. Sackett, October 21st, 1952, published in *Klarkash-Ton* number one, June 1988, p.21-2.

⁹⁵ Donald Sidney-Fryer, 'On the Alleged Influence of Lord Dunsany on Clark Ashton Smith, *Klarkash-Ton* number one, June 1988, pp.9-15.

remoteness, vastness, mystery and exoticism is more naturally evoked by a style with an admixture of Latinity, lending itself to more varied and sonorous rhythms,⁹⁶ Smith's style immerses the reader in the milieu of the story, a characteristic of Weird-S&S, but it eschews the intense friction between the merely exotic and the numinous employed by Howard. Ironic humour is also un-Howardian. Howard comments:

[Smith's] work has a subtle mirth that I can only describe as classic. I've gotten some real belly laughs out of his subtly turned hints and allusions. This, to my mind, keeps some of his tales from being weirdly perfect – humor however subtle not fitting in with true horror.⁹⁷

To further define the differences between these types of sword-&-sorcery, compare the opening of Mike Chinn's 'But the Stones will Stand'⁹⁸ with that of David Malpass's 'The Grey Horde'.⁹⁹ The former is Howardian Epigone, the latter Weird-S&S. Chinn's story opens, 'Rain bore down on the earth with a force that crushed grass and battered leaves from protesting trees.' Immediately there is a vivid, violent image: 'force', 'crushed', 'battered'. The Malpass opening is very different:

It is writ of the sorcerer Sitalces that he was obsessed with the creation of life. The pits beneath his island fortress pullulated with nameless monstrosities, yet Sitalces was never satisfied but strove ever after some vision of organic perfection which obsessed him.

There is an amorality (a quality often cited as characteristic of sword-&-sorcery) about this scenario which is overwhelmed by its ironic expression. Though perhaps slightly more subtle in style than Smith, the effect is the same. The opening establishes a distance between reader and story through the language, through an obtrusive narrator ('It is writ', etc.).

Howard's work was not devoid of irony, but his irony differs from that found in Weird-S&S. It is a broader variety and is only really found in his non-fantasy fiction such as the Steve Costigan fight romps and the Brekenridge Elkins westerns. Re-enforcing the comment on Smith's work quoted above, little humour of any kind is found in his sword-&-sorcery, particularly among his protagonists. In 'The Tower of the Elephant' (1933), for instance, a young Conan reacts angrily to being made fun of in a tavern.

⁹⁶ Letter to Samuel J. Sackett, October 21st, 1952, *Klarkash-Ton* number one, June 1988, pp.21-2.

⁹⁷ See (ironically) Fritz Leiber's essay on James Branch Cabell's 'Jurgen' stories, for a comment on the destructiveness of irony, in *Blade of Conan* p.203. Letter to H.P.Lovecraft, October 1932, quoted in *The Barbaric Triumph*, p.172. Such a comment becomes particularly relevant given Howard's leaning toward the Gothic.

⁹⁸ Chinn, *Fantasy Tales* no.10, Summer 1982, p.28.

⁹⁹ Malpass, *Fantasy Tales* no.9, Spring 1982, p.16.

Another example of Weird-S&S is Adrian Cole's 'Voidal' stories:

The growing sense of dread that had been no more than a subtle streak in his dreams had now become an awning of doom drawn over the city. [...] Thick magics hung like incense, and terrible sigils flickered like beads of light.¹⁰⁰

The Voidal is a continuing character moving from story to story, which is more a feature of Ur-text sword-&-sorcery than Weird-S&S. The continuing element in Weird-S&S, particularly Smith's, is the milieu: what Maund describes as 'thematic' rather than 'classic' or 'scripted'.¹⁰¹ However Cole's elaborate language fits the Weird-S&S sensibility. Elaborate imagery tends to make dread less dreadful and magic less terrible, if no less 'other'. Again, there is Smith's ironic distance. This is not 'bad' writing or even bad fantasy *per se*, but is different in effect to Howardian sword-&-sorcery. There is little use of 'sword' in its sword and sorcery mix.

Weird-S&S substitutes exoticism for the Howardian (and Neo-S&S) adventure element. Lovecraft makes a comment that also crystallizes the difference between Howard's sword-&-sorcery and Weird-S&S:

In the Orient, the weird tale tended to assume a gorgeous colouring and sprightliness [...] In the West, where the mystical Teuton had come down from his black Boreal forests and the Celt remembered strange sacrifices in Druidic groves, it assumed a terrible intensity and convincing seriousness of atmosphere which doubled the force of its half-told, half-hinted horrors.¹⁰²

Another point of differentiation is that the hero of this class of sword-&-sorcery commonly has no great physical prowess. This points to this class fitting into what *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* defines as 'adventurer fantasy'. The definition stipulates that the protagonists of this type of fantasy need not be physically 'heroic' in either physique or action. Most of Smith's protagonists would meet the protagonist requirements of this form, moving through plots that tend to focus on magical rather than physical events.

The balance of these 'types' within the de Camp anthologies is as follows: seven Howardian Epigone stories, seven Neo-S&S stories, eleven Weird-S&S stories. (That Weird-S&S is arguably the most 'literary' of these types might account for the editor's favouring of this category.) De Camp's own story in the second anthology is difficult to place in any of the

¹⁰⁰ Adrian Cole, 'First Make Them Mad', *Fantasy Tales* no.4, Spring 1979, p.20 and p.7.

¹⁰¹ Kari Maund, 'Reading the fantasy series', *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.147-53.

¹⁰² H.P.Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror', pp.369-70.

‘types’, uncomfortably combining elements of Epigone and Neo-S&S, being comedic rather than ironic and having little physical action and no sorcery. Pascalis’s story, translated from Italian by the editor, is an allegory and is even followed by an explanatory afterword. The Wells story is adventure bordering on horror. Jack Vance’s story fits most convincingly into the related genre of science fantasy which this thesis discusses later. While de Camp’s ambivalence toward Howard, has been mentioned,¹⁰³ besides Dunsany Howard is the only writer to appear in all four of his anthologies, albeit ‘Drums of Tombalku’ is completed and edited by de Camp. This would suggest a significant if inadvertent acknowledgment of his importance.

negative capability

By way of a postscript, it is possible to create a further differentiation between the above categories in terms of the quantity and quality of negative capability demanded of the reader. This by no means involves a simplistic sliding or rising scale of intensity.

The Epigone type of sword-&-sorcery lacks the Ur-text intensity because it follows the original and so is weaker if for no other reason than that it is not original and is the beginnings of genre, and therefore the beginnings of formula. Thus, the softening effects of pre-knowledge about milieu, character types, language and register of reality, contribute to a decreased need for negative capability.

The Neo-S&S form takes some of the Epigone’s effects of familiarity and uses them to again increase intensity by reacting against or developing as opposed to mimicking the Ur-text. Or extending the Howardian model as in the case of Wagner’s Kane books and stories with (in the short stories at least) a more developed psychological approach to the protagonist’s characterization. Wagner also, like Moorcock before him, conflates the ‘sword’ and ‘sorcery’ components of the form into his protagonist.

Weird-S&S actually engineers and makes a feature of negative capability in its predominance of Latinate style and ironic macabre sensibility, distancing yet situating the reader within the numinous milieu without use of any numinous envelope or portal device - what Farah Mendlesohn in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* refers to as ‘immersive fantasy’.

The Naming of Swords: Related and Contrasting Genres

The next two sub-sections further seek to contextualize sword-&-sorcery with particular emphasis on the Howardian Ur-text. In-depth discussion of the various attempts at taxonomy

¹⁰³ See Mark Finn’s Howard biography, *Blood and Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard* (Austin: Monkey Brain Books, 2006), particularly p.250.

lie outside the scope and purpose of thesis, particularly since Attebery argues that: ‘Within a genre like fantasy, subgenres regularly emerge, merge, or disintegrate.’¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless an examination of several related genres follow: science fantasy, high or epic fantasy, and grimdark.

The treatment of sword-&-sorcery in particular adds more complication, since the term has been addressed in many critical analyses through omission, misprision, elision or downright derision. Attebery himself maintains that Fritz Leiber rather than Howard ‘invented’ the form and additionally places it into his category of ‘formula’ rather than ‘genre’.¹⁰⁵ Davidson’s ‘Sword and Sorcery Fiction: An Annotated Book List’ includes numerous epic fantasies and makes no distinction.¹⁰⁶ Mark Finn, as de Camp, conflates the term with ‘heroic fantasy’ (something which will be discussed in detail later).¹⁰⁷ Senior adds a further term for ‘the dreck of what might be called muscle fantasy’.¹⁰⁸

other anthologies

Beside de Camp’s, from the late 1960s onwards other anthologies appeared, with introductions which, if only in passing, attempt a definition of S&S. Among these were Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Sword and Sorceress* collections.¹⁰⁹ Bradley had long been interested in the representation of women within fantasy writing, and her feminist-inflected Arthurian novel, *The Mists of Avalon* was an international bestseller.¹¹⁰ The introduction to the first of her anthology series makes her ideological agenda explicit. Dedicated to C.L. Moore, the creator of Jirel of Jory,¹¹¹ who is generally recognized as the first female sword-&-sorcery protagonist, Bradley’s essay asserts that sword-&-sorcery tends to be male dominated, and that this imbalance needs to be corrected. Several interesting points emerge as a consequence. Although the essay is dedicated to Moore, Bradley posits a reductive critique of the first Jirel story. Also, though she distrusts the standard sword-&-sorcery characterization of women, she also leans toward admitting a moral dimension to sword-&-sorcery protagonists which goes against the commonly cited ‘brutal’ and ‘amoral’ traits

¹⁰⁴ Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.126.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁰⁶ Don Adrian Davidson, ‘Sword and Sorcery Fiction: An Annotated Book List’ in *The English Journal* no.1, vol.61, Jan 1972, 43-51.

¹⁰⁷ Finn, ‘Texas’, in *The Dark Man*, no.8, p.3.

¹⁰⁸ W.A.Senior, *Stephen Donaldson’s Chronicles of Thomas Covenant: Variations on the Fantasy Tradition* (London: Kent State University Press, 1995), p.167.

¹⁰⁹ Continuing after Bradley’s death in 1999 – some twenty-six volumes so far, the first appearing in 1984.

¹¹⁰ Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (new York: Alfred a. Knopf, 1983).

¹¹¹ Catherine Lucelle Moore’s five Jirel stories appeared in *Weird Tales* between 1934 and 1939, and were collected in *Black God’s Shadow* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1977).

considered defining aspects of the genre. This perceived moral potential of the form is a departure from the previously analysed anthology introductions, though it is a crucial element in Michael Moorcock's Elric stories, the earliest of which pre-date the Bradley anthologies by more than two decades.¹¹² Also, there is no mention of how the supernatural/numinous element of the form has been or should be presented. Finally, perhaps most importantly, in her last paragraph Bradley suggests that sword-&-sorcery has a didactic responsibility: 'to entertain the reader, and to make her – or him – think.' This potentially categorizes sword-&-sorcery as both genre (entertainment) and literary (artistic) fiction.

Swords Against the Millennium, edited and introduced by Mike Chinn in 2000, was the first significant anthology for some years.¹¹³ The contents include a variety of forms that might fit my categories of Weird-S&S, Science Fantasy, and also parody. The title probably references Leiber's Fafhrd and Gray Mouser collections such as *Swords Against Death* (1972). The collection is dedicated to Howard, Burroughs and Leiber – in that order. The first title applied to the form in the opening sentence is 'heroic fantasy', though quickly followed by 'Sword & Sorcery', and followed even more quickly by 'Thud'n'Blunder': the light-hearted tone continues, taking up the de Camp stress on escapism. Chinn much more than de Camp credits Burroughs with beginning the form, dismissing the admitted lack of sorcery and prioritizing 'swordplay'. Admittedly de Camp had a vested interest in the Howard material, but most writing on the subject gives Burroughs at most only an influence on the forming of sword-&-sorcery. Though Chinn's comment that the form 'demands passion of operatic levels' contradicts, probably unintentionally, the overall trivial stance mentioned earlier. (The writer David C. Smith, in an interview touches on the operatic effect available for the form – though this in connection with a novel length story, *The Sorcerer's Shadow*.¹¹⁴) Chinn ends by positing the short story as the best form for fantasy, though reasons given are at best tentative: 'it's that little extra effort which makes the short story the best medium for fantasy fiction'.¹¹⁵

Eight years later, the first of Jason Waltz's 'Rogue Blades' anthologies, *The Return of the Sword* was published, its title suggesting that, since *Swords Against the Millennium*, there

¹¹² The first Elric story, 'The Dreaming City', appeared in *Science Fantasy* June 1961, and was reprinted in *The Stealer of Souls* (London: Mayflower Books, 1968).

¹¹³ *Swords Against the Millennium*, ed. by Mike Chinn (Birmingham: Alchemy Press/Saladoth Productions, 2000).

¹¹⁴ <www.swordandsorcery.org> [accessed 11 March 2007]

¹¹⁵ Chinn, *Millennium* p.11.

had been little activity in the sword-&-sorcery short story area.¹¹⁶ The cover wording uses the term ‘Heroic Adventure’ rather than sword-&-sorcery, while the back cover matter of the first edition refers to ‘heroic fantasy’. However the second edition, also 2008, prints comments received about the first, and of the seven quotations cited five use the term ‘sword and sorcery’. The substance of Waltz’s introduction, though touching on the traditionally acknowledged traits of escapism and pace, gives more attention to the nature of ‘heroic’ behaviour. In fact this focus on morality and particularly psychology, not only in the general introduction but the introductions to each story, articulates at length this aspect touched upon previously by Bradley. Although the heroic predominantly characterizes as a display or exercise of courage, there is an ambivalence here and there which is particularly in evidence in his introduction to my story, ‘The Last Scream of Carnage’: ‘For the Carnage-Lord [...] is not heroic. [...] By his very being, he negatively proves my assertions.’¹¹⁷

Another anthology was published in 2010. *Swords & Dark Magic*, co-edited by Jonathan Strahan and Lou Anders, contains the lengthiest introduction of any of the books surveyed. The sub-title of the book being ‘The New Sword and Sorcery’, the introduction itself begins with the term and defines it immediately as ‘action meets magic’, which echoes my over-arching definition as violence combined with the numinous. Strangely the main title utilizes the ampersand while the sub-title chooses ‘and’. Check Your Dark Lord at the Door’ in *Swords & Dark Magic*.¹¹⁸ However, ‘action’ has a more adventure-oriented connotation. Strahan and Anders develop this with a sub-definition which they employ to separate sword-&-sorcery from fantasy: small(er) scale, morally compromised – the expression ‘character pieces’ questionably suggests a greater emphasis on character and characterization, elements more associated with literary than with generic fiction. In a short overview of the form, Strahan and Anders fall in with the belief that Howard was the progenitor, but contend that sword-&-sorcery is older than high fantasy. This is based on the contention that Tolkien was the progenitor of high fantasy as a ‘*recognized genre*’ [editors’ italics], though Morris, Dunsany and E. R. Eddison are footnoted as preceding and influencing Tolkien – perhaps forgetting that in the same introduction they have noted that the term ‘sword and sorcery’ post-dates Howard’s output by some thirty years; they give the date of Leiber’s term as 1961, convincingly adding a quotation from his letter in

¹¹⁶ The first edition under the publishing imprint 'Flashing Swords Press' (Saginaw, Texas: Flashing Swords Press, 2008), the second edition dropping the 'The', under Waltz’s own ‘Rogue Blades Entertainment’ publishing operation (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2008) .

¹¹⁷ I point out in ‘Storm of Shadow’ (p.227) that the term ‘hero’ incorporates a number of connotations and denotations.

¹¹⁸ *Swords & Dark Magic*, ed. Strahan and Anders, (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), xi-xviii (p.xi).

Amra.¹¹⁹ The introduction goes on to touch on realism, again in connection with Howard, and later returns to this element as one which contributes to the definition of modern (twenty-first century) epic fantasy which they believe contains a “sword and sorcery sensibility”.¹²⁰

definitions of s&s

This thesis now moves from anthology introductions to look at articles specifically addressing a definition of sword-&-sorcery, including encyclopaedias. This includes the sword-&-sorcery entry written by Peter Nicholls in the 1979 version of *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*. Nicholls maintains that the members of the Hyborian League, a group of Howard enthusiasts, considered the Conan story ‘The Phoenix on the Sword’, which appeared in *Weird Tales* in December 1932, to have begun sword-&-sorcery as a form. He also states that Howard introduced an element of brutal ambition into this type of protagonist, which prefigures the ‘morally compromised’ aspect noted in the Strahan/Anders introduction. Later, when addressing Michael Moorcock’s work, he observes that in this writer’s sword-&-sorcery good and evil are difficult to define. (Though it could equally be argued that Moorcock’s usage of Law and Chaos is the more ambivalent, less black-and-white term.) He also asserts that much sword-&-sorcery is ‘violent, sexist and even, according to some, fascist’. Nicholls also notes that the form creates ‘memorable images’, which acknowledges the importance of the visual to the genre.¹²¹

In the 1993 edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, now co-edited with John Clute, Nicholls modifies his entry. To take the first paragraph as an example, Nicholls states in the earlier edition that the form has previously been named science fantasy, weird fantasy, fantastic romance and heroic fantasy. In the later edition he argues that the form *overlaps* with heroic fantasy and science fantasy. He goes on to maintain that the overlap with the first is considerable, but that all three terms have differing ‘nuances’, frustratingly refraining from expanding on the comment.¹²² The terms weird fantasy and fantastic romance are still included in the paragraph, but are now said to have ‘similar meaning’, a remark which merely adds to the contradictions noted elsewhere.

The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy has a sword-&-sorcery entry co-written by Clute, David Langford, and Roz Kaveney. In this, sword-&-sorcery apparently requires ‘muscular heroes’, and is claimed (‘commonly considered’) as being synonymous with heroic fantasy, both of which are designated as aspects of ‘adventurer fantasy’. This term is described as encompassing

¹¹⁹ Strahan and Anders, *Dark Magic*, p.xi

¹²⁰ Strahan and Anders, *Dark Magic*, p.xviii

¹²¹ Something which scratches the surface of a rich and complex element in fantastika and particularly important to narrative strategy in *The Shadow Cycles*, discussed in detail later in the thesis.

¹²² Nicholls and Clute, p.1194.

stories where the protagonists ‘need not be heroes’ (though the term ‘hero’ is not expanded upon). The entry uses milieu as a tool for differentiating between sword-&-sorcery and heroic fantasy, maintaining that the former is set in ‘lands of fable’(which offers a convenient familiarity through established mythic elements useful for the economy required by the short story) while the latter takes place in wholly imaginary secondary worlds, with adventurer fantasy licensed to use either. This in itself opens another semantic can of worms, since secondary worlds inevitably draw on existing historical or legendary settings in some way and to some degree. In fact Strahan and Anders point out that Leiber’s sword-&-sorcery stories take place in a secondary world: Nehwon, a near-anagram of ‘nowhere’.¹²³ However the encyclopedia entry’s later statement that sword-&-sorcery landscapes emphasise gateways or portals suggests a concept of a ‘numinous envelope’, a device employed by Howard, in most of the Conan stories: where a single encounter with the supernatural within a more naturalistic albeit exotic milieu creates greater intensity than long narratives where several such encounters usually occur.¹²⁴

The entry also claims that sword-&-sorcery is the type of heroic fantasy which most readily lends itself to humour, citing Leiber’s Fafhrd and Mouser stories (1939-88) as examples. This may connect to the idea of sword-&-sorcery as ‘low’ fantasy as opposed to ‘high’, with ‘low’ being synonymous with ‘light’ and ‘high’ with seriousness? This term has, however, been used in differing ways. George Knight defends Howard's worth while acknowledging a class 'high' – 'low' fantasy divide. But 'low' has also been used to denote fantasy with a low level of supernatural elements.¹²⁵

There are two essays which actually focus on the differentiation of sword-&-sorcery from related genres rather than producing it by default. Both appeared on the website ‘Sword and Sorcery.Org’. In his ‘The Demarcation of Sword and Sorcery’ Joseph A. McCullough V states that sword-&-sorcery exists as part of the larger form of heroic fantasy, and that Tolkien’s work defines one end of an heroic fantasy continuum with Howard defining the other.¹²⁶ In terms of sword-&-sorcery McCullough follows the line that Howard created the sword-&-sorcery form, but differs from the Nicholls encyclopaedia entries in claiming ‘The Shadow Kingdom’, published in 1929, as the first example.¹²⁷ This claim is not unique to McCullough, nor was he the first to make it: Lin Carter makes the same claim. However he

¹²³Strahan and Anders, *Dark Magic*, p.xiii.

¹²⁴ Mentioned in 'Storm of Shadow' (p.239) and expanded upon in this thesis.

¹²⁵ 'Robert E. Howard: Hard-Boiled Heroic Fantasist', in *The Dark Barbarian* (New Jersey: Wildside Press, 2000) pp.128-129.

¹²⁶ McCullough, 'The Demarcation of Sword and Sorcery', published on <www.swordandsorcery.org> [accessed 19 June 2007].

¹²⁷Howard, ‘The Shadow Kingdom’, *Weird Tales*, August 1929.

does emphasise that citing this King Kull story as the first sword-&-sorcery story places Howard's earlier characters and story-cycles, Solomon Kane and Bran Mak Morn, outside the form.¹²⁸

His rationale follows:

The characters of heroic fantasy take full advantage of the ambiguity of the word 'hero' and can vary as greatly as Sir Galahad does from Mordred. It is partially this ambiguity that allows sword and sorcery to exist within the scope of heroic fantasy, despite the fact that its characters universally share three traits that separate them from the majority of the great fantasy heroes. They are all self-motivated, outsiders, of heroic stature.

This may seem clear enough but, arguably, Kane and Bran Mak Morn both fit this description: both have 'missions' but are atypical of their people. Both are concomitantly outsiders in a sense, and both have heroic stature in terms of extraordinary if not superhuman physical/martial skill.

McCullough also cites scope as a demarcating factor, indicating that sword-&-sorcery is characteristically a short form, whereas other types of heroic fantasy gravitate to novel-length. He cites the trilogy as the latter's 'common form', moving into even longer series. In fact he claims, 'there can be little argument that a great deal of separation exists between sword-&-sorcery and the rest of heroic fantasy when discussing the scope of the narratives'. McCullough bases the difference on the existence and significance of what he calls 'higher powers' than the protagonist(s), which often control events. The argument itself is tentative, with many sword-&-sorcery protagonists triumphing against odds provided by numinous antagonists, most obviously Moorcock's Elric - but it does draw again on the idea of the sword-&-sorcery protagonist as loner/outsider.¹²⁹

Another article from the same website, Howard Andrew Jones's 'Defining Sword and Sorcery', reprises much of the thinking that has gone before, quoting de Camp, Carter, John L. Flynn and Karl Edward Wagner's opinions.¹³⁰ Jones and McCullough both quote from Flynn's three-part essay 'A Historical Overview of Heroes in Contemporary Literature'.¹³¹ (Though Flynn's authority is dented by his confusing of *The King of Elfland's Daughter*

¹²⁸Carter, 'First Barbarian', *Savage Sword of Conan* vol.1 no.3, 30-32 (1974).

¹²⁹ The first Elric stories appeared in 1961, initially in *Science Fantasy*.

¹³⁰ <www.swordandsorcery.org> [accessed 21 June 2007].

¹³¹ <<http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/IRELAND/2001-01/0980631526>>

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20071219035427/http://pages.towson.edu/flynn/herofan.html>>

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20071219035427/http://pages.towson.edu/flynn/swordsor.html>>

[all accessed 21 December 2012].

(1924) with *Don Rodriguez: Chronicles of Shadow Valley* (1922), he does make some interesting observations in the previous section of the essay on heroic fantasy in general, namely that heroic fantasy gravitated toward novel-length through Tolkien's influence, and widens the idea of the hero concept to idea rather than character.) While Jones begins by differentiating sword-&-sorcery from 'other fantasy', he does conflate sword-&-sorcery with 'epic fantasy' via a Wagner quotation.

The more brutal violence of sword-&-sorcery is emphasized via quotation from Flynn, as are tendencies for the form's protagonists' morality to be questionable and for it to be darker than other types of 'heroic fantasy'. (The term 'dark' is dauntingly multivalenced, but my own main usage refers to the degree of physical violence, certainly, but more to the Anglo-Saxon meanings of being 'devoid of moral or spiritual light' and gloomy and dismal. Also the Middle English denotation of 'obscure in meaning' or secret. All are appropriate for my themes in the thesis. Also, perhaps tangentially appropriate, given the mental health issues anecdotally attached to several sword-&-sorcery writers, it apparently once referred to a room where madmen were kept.) Milieu is touched upon by the observation that 'Unknown or hazardous lands are an essential ingredient to the genre', something acknowledged in the *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* entry addressed above.

Jones acknowledges that much sword-&-sorcery, as defined by de Camp and others, is usually traditionally structured and agendaed escapism, but moves away from this in observing that 'de Camp misses some of the underlying philosophical depth to sword and sorcery, depth that lay within the best texts from the very start.'

Jones's summative list of sword-&-sorcery's characteristics is occasionally couched as generalities rather than imperatives, and touches on little that has not been observed by earlier commentators: escapism, sexism, physicality of protagonist, status as lowly or outsider. But he tellingly prefaces this list with the comment: 'Sword and sorcery can be mere escapist fare, and as sexist as any James Bond film. But these characteristics should not be automatically assumed, even in the work of the earliest sword and sorcery authors.' He also quotes Patrice Louinet's introduction to *The Coming of Conan*: 'What sets the Conan stories apart, however, is the distinct sensation that the thrill of adventure in these stories is but a mask, that it is in fact never really possible to forget the grim realities of the world.'¹³² This element of realism is traceable back to de Camp's commentaries in his early anthologies, but the notion of 'adventure' as a minor consideration when analysing Howard's fantasy supports

¹³²Howard, *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian* (New York: Random House, 2003). Louinet, p.xxiv.

my positing of a continuum along which fantasy stories in general and sword-&-sorcery in particular might be positioned. Gillian Polack uses the phrase ‘gloomy end of the spectrum’ in discussing and comparing the dark elements of Joe Abercrombie’s novel *The Heroes* and the French epic *Raoul de Cambrai* (ca.1100-1200) – again a phrase suggestive and supportive of a Gothic-adventure continuum.¹³³ Maureen Moran claims that sword-&-sorcery offers comfort/reassurance through traditional masculine adventure.¹³⁴ Yet though Howard can be seen as writing a ‘masculine’ fiction, there is a mix of adventure and Gothic sensibilities to be found. Lin Carter notes how the King Kull story ‘The Shadow Kingdom’ blends Clark Ashton Smith’s exoticism, Lovecraftian horror, and the ‘swashbuckling heroica’ of Harold Lamb, Rafael Sabatini and Talbot Mundy.¹³⁵ The fact that Edgar Allan Poe was one of Howard’s favourite writers suggests a strong Gothic leaning in his work. Donald Sidney-Fryer, Steve Eng, Dennis Rickard, Ben P. Indick, and George Knight all mention this in their essays in *The Dark Barbarian*.

This is not to say, however, that graphic violence is necessarily part of the potency of ‘Howardian Gothic’. Albeit M. John Harrison comments: ‘If you haven’t the foundation of a palpable battle, torn arteries [...] then your heroisms are void.’¹³⁶ But Howard’s violence often eschews gross detail in favour of a more suggestive poetic set of techniques,¹³⁷ albeit probably in part due to the commercial publishing taboos of his era. He employs a similar methodology in evoking a numinous effect, a subtle approach championed by Burke, and results in the far more intimate yoking of violence and the numinous. As Robert Weinberg observes: ‘The best of the Conan stories have an undercurrent of moody despair that makes them more than a mere sword and sorcery adventure.’¹³⁸

science fantasy

A form similar to sword-&-sorcery is science fantasy. As the name suggests it admixes in various ways elements of science fiction with fantasy. The underlying primary

¹³³ Gillian Pollack, ‘Grim and Grimdark’ in *Fantasy and Science Fiction Medievalisms* (New York: Cambria Press, 2015) 76-95, (p.82).

¹³⁴ Maureen Moran, ‘Anarchic Spaces in Sword and Sorcery Fiction’ in *Diegesis: Journal of the Association for Research in Popular Fictions* no.4, Summer 1999, 41-50, p.42.

¹³⁵ Carter, *Savage Sword*, p.32.

¹³⁶ ‘By Tennyson Out of Disney’, in *Parietal Games*, eds. Bould and Reid (London: Foundation Studies in Science Fiction, 5, The Science Fiction Foundation, 2005), 89-92 (pp.90-91).

¹³⁷ Discussed in detail later in this thesis and in my essay ‘Berserker Synecdoche: Howard’s Aesthetic of Violence’, published in the peer-reviewed journal *The Dark Man: The Journal of Robert E. Howard Studies*, vol.8 no.1, 2016, 70-84.

¹³⁸ My italics. Originally published in Robert Weinberg’s *The Annotated Guide to Robert E. Howard’s Sword and Sorcery* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1976) p.83 and quoted in *The Dark Barbarian*, p.169.

tension of such fiction is not physical versus metaphysical, natural versus supernatural, but a conflation of two differing generic stances. Attebery argues: ‘When we contrast fantasy and science fiction, the rhetoric of each becomes more evident.’ Thus, arguably, the opposition between the rhetorics, of a scientific-rational paradigm and numinous-non-rational paradigm, furnishes an underlying tension or frisson; not the Howardian form of sword-&-sorcery intensity, but nevertheless engendering a related type of effect.

In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* Peter Nicholls employs a circle image in discussing the differences and argues that ‘the contents of the sf circle [...] seek to persuade the reader that their events have a rational explanation.’ Whereas, ‘fantasy [...] depends at some point on the irrational, usually on some form of the occult [...] supernatural power, or magic.’ And that: ‘fantasy is oriented towards mystery, not knowledge’. Further that: ‘it is possible to take a basic story, and by emphasizing its mysterious elements render it as fantasy, or by rationalizing it render it as sf’.¹³⁹

The closest form of science fantasy to sword-&-sorcery is the sub-genre of ‘planetary romance’, the original defining or template work being *A Princess of Mars* (1912 All-Story; 1917) by Edgar Rice Burroughs.¹⁴⁰ Burroughs' s stories employ a combination of Mishra's exotic and technological sublimines with no real supernatural element.¹⁴¹ For this reason among others, this shifts the planetary romance, or sword and planet as a later designation labels it¹⁴², more toward the adventure pole of my posited Gothic-adventure continuum. Burroughs' s protagonist John Carter is physically exceptional and skilled with both sabre and six-shooter, becoming superhuman due to Mars' lesser gravity. However the violence so much a part of Ur-textual sword-&-sorcery is diminished:

As a matter of fact, I presume I gave little attention to seeking an excuse, for I love a good fight too well to need any other reason for joining in when one is afoot. [...]

Thuvan Dihn was not long in joining me; and, though we found the hooked weapon a strange and savage thing with which to deal, the three of us soon dispatched the five black-bearded warriors who opposed us.¹⁴³

The Howardian protagonist's relish for violence is mildly mirrored here, but there is no visceral imagery detailing the combat, which has a feel of ‘swordplay’ rather than ‘sword’. It

¹³⁹ Nicholls, *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, pp.210-11.

¹⁴⁰ ed. Clute and Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p.765. (Entry by David Pringle.)

¹⁴¹ Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.

¹⁴² Donald A. Wollheim, editor of the first such anthology, *Swordsmen in the Sky* (New York, Ace Books, 1964) is rumoured to have coined the term, though the back cover of the anthology uses the term ‘sword-and-wonder’.

¹⁴³ Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Warlord of Mars* (London: New English Library, 1973), p.89.

should be mentioned that Howard did touch on this adjacent form in the novel *Almuric*, which contains no supernatural element though the violence is of Howardian intensity.¹⁴⁴

Gill Kane's *Blackmark* graphic novels ostensibly also lack a true supernatural element but produce a supernatural 'feel'.¹⁴⁵ The key to this is terminology:

Old Earth has died, devastated in the hell of nuclear holocaust. In its place a world of barbarism and ignorance, a new dark ages. [...] Remnants of lost technology still exist, such as the power plants of the dragon-sailed warships. [...] And casting an ominous shadow over this chaos is the dread northern fortress of Psi-Keep where malformed beings ply their uncanny powers, plotting global conquest.¹⁴⁶

Kane conflates fantasy and science fiction terms, such as 'the Demon Waste', turning (albeit pseudo) science into an alternative magic. William Hope Hodgson's *The Nightland*, another science fantasy which arguably falls into the Dying Earth subset, uses a similar technique, but further 'estranges' the science in his novel by largely exchanging rather than conflating science fictional nomenclature with fantasy-connotative language and neologism:

I called the Master-Word into the night; but no answer did there come for a while, and then a faint thrilling of the aether, and the faint pulse of the Master-Word in the night, sent by a far voice, strangely distant.¹⁴⁷

The Nightland achieves sustained intensity through style and focus, following a single protagonist throughout. Although set predominantly in a distant future, the bleak milieu is described through archaic, almost Biblical language and rhythms, in effect archaicising science:

A dim record there was of olden sciences (that are yet far off in our future) which, disturbing the unmeasurable Outward Powers, had allowed to pass the Barrier of Life some of those Monsters and Ab-human creatures.¹⁴⁸

Thus *Blackmark* and particularly *The Night Land* edge closer to the irrationalism of Howardian sword-&-sorcery, though neither milieu presents unambiguous magical phenomenon. However Nicholls's argument that emphasis is more critical in demarcating a science fiction from a fantasy narrative, and Strahan and Anders's belief in a 'sword and sorcery sensibility' would point to their inclusion as a related form of S&S.

¹⁴⁴ *Weird Tales*, May, June/July, August, 1939.

¹⁴⁵ Gil Kane, *Blackmark* (New York: Bantam, 1971) and *The Mind Demons* in *Marvel Preview* vol.1 no.17, 1979.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁴⁷ William Hope Hodgson, *The Night Land* (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2009), p.68. (Its original edition was subtitled 'A Love Tale'.)

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.36.

Conversely, some sword-&-sorcery can be compromised by a science fiction emphasis through word choice. Such misjudgements sometimes mar the numinous effect in the work of such writers as C.L.Moore, Gardner Fox, and Mike Chinn. Chinn's magic sometimes falls prey to an almost Star Wars feel: 'A sudden bolt of cerulean energy shot from the wizard's right hand.'¹⁴⁹ Not even Howard was immune: 'he lay like a disintegrated tun of fat.'¹⁵⁰

Like Kane and Hodgson, Jack Vance's Dying Earth stories distance temporally and estrange science, but embrace magic unambiguously.¹⁵¹ His story 'Mazirian the Magician' appears in the second of de Camp's anthologies and has a number of similarities to my proposed Weird-S&S form, not least due to Vance's employment of irony. However, although the Dying Earth stories make extensive and lyrical use of their setting, plot is still the focus rather than milieu or atmosphere. Only 'Mazirian the Magician'¹⁵² opens with the scene setting gambit often favoured by Weird-S&S – as, for example, Smith's 'The Coming of the White Worm'¹⁵³ or 'The Abominations of Yondo'¹⁵⁴.

Vance's adroitly measured dryness rarely provides the urgency or energy characteristic of Howard's sword-&-sorcery, nor the stylistic or physical violences which contribute to the intensity of Ur-textual effect. A comment by Moorcock¹⁵⁵ concerning Vance's language seems to echo the earlier remark about Dunsany's gossamer quality: 'Vance's stories are often remind me of the delicate oriental fantasies of Frank Owen'.¹⁵⁶ He frequently makes ironic use of the latinate: 'He gestured in disapprobation'.¹⁵⁷ Also of understatement: 'The likelihood of pleasure seems small'.¹⁵⁸

Sometimes the Dying Earth stories present a sense of magic/sorcery as a shabby thing, often as a utilitarian tool, neither evoking a sense of wonder, dark or otherwise.¹⁵⁹ So a kind of antipathy sometimes to sorcery, but not the same antipathy found in Ur-text sword-&-sorcery: 'now, in the last fleeting moments, humanity festers rich as rotten fruit. Rather than

¹⁴⁹ Chinn, 'The Stones Will Stand, *Fantasy Tales* no.10, Summer 1982, p.33.

¹⁵⁰ Howard, 'The God in the Bowl', *Tower of the Elephant* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1975), p.58.

¹⁵¹ *The Dying Earth*, 1950; *The Eyes of the Overworld*, 1966; *Cugel's Saga*, 1983; *Rhialto the Marvelous*, 1984.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, p.22.

¹⁵³ Clark Ashton Smith, *Lost Worlds* (London: Neville Spearman, 1971), p.67

¹⁵⁴ Clark Ashton Smith, *The Abominations of Yondo* (London: Neville Spearman, 1972), p.55.

¹⁵⁵ *op. cit.*, p.87.

¹⁵⁶ Moorcock, *Wizardry*, p.87.

¹⁵⁷ Jack Vance, *The Dying Earth* (London: Mayflower Books, 1972), p.101.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.121.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.202.

master and overpower our world, our highest aim is to cheat it through sorcery.¹⁶⁰ This suggests a kind of fatalism foreign to Howardian sword-&-sorcery. In the stories of *The Dying Earth* are many lyrical references to the dying sun. However such instances tend to be more ironic in tone in the stories collected in *The Eyes of the Overworld*. The fact that the protagonist in all these later stories is Vance's anti-heroic Cugel may account for this in part. Moreover there are hardly any such references in *Cugel's Saga*.¹⁶¹ Numinous elements in this novel length Dying Earth story are sparing and not emphasised as 'other' – thereby producing a reduction in Howardian intensity afforded by milieu.

Returning to the earlier stories, there is a hint of the numinous envelope:

Guyal, tensing every muscle, leaned a little forward, head twisted, listening. There was a feel of danger on his cheek. The air was still, uncanny; his eyes could plumb not ten feet into the black. Somewhere near was death – grinding, roaring death to come as a sudden shock.¹⁶²

But this is merely an illusion: the Dying Earth stories take place in Mendlesohn's immersive fantasy milieu where no transitions between a naturalistic and a fantastic location take place.¹⁶³ In this sense the Dying Earth stories again approximate the Weird-S&S template, which tends to luxuriate in such immersive milieu from Smith onward. This similarity extends to Vance's protagonists, who tend not to be predominantly physical and are more often magic-users if not out-and-out sorcerers, though Turjan in the first story of the cycle is not unskilled with a sword.¹⁶⁴

If Vance's cool, ironic tone disqualifies the tales from identification as Howardian Epigone, it is also falls outside my Neo-S&S category, since unlike Leiber or Moorcock there seems to be no overt reaction against Howard's work¹⁶⁵ to be found in any comments or interviews given by Vance:

Has Vance ever mentioned Howard?

Not in my presence, and I don't recall any reference to Howard in all the past interviews and such that I researched for my JV literary bio. However, Vance was reading *Weird Tales* at the time REH was often published there, so he should be at least familiar with Howard. Considering the two men's divergent interests and styles,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p.127.

¹⁶¹ Jack Vance, *Cugel's Saga* (London: Granada, 1985).

¹⁶² 'Guyal of Sferé' in *The Dying Earth*, ibid. p.102.

¹⁶³ Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

¹⁶⁴ 'Turjan of Miir' in *The Dying Earth*, London: Granada, 1972), p.10.

¹⁶⁵ Although Vance's constant use of miosis, including litotes, is perhaps the opposite of linguistic hyperbole and thus a reaction to Howard by default if not intention.

however, I don't think any Howard influence could be possible. All Vance's protagonists are athletic but slim; he doesn't go for brawny in either his heroes or heroines.¹⁶⁶

When science and magic are conflated it often creates irony. Vance is not unique. Michael Moorcock's Runestaff science fantasy stories employ a discernibly lighter tone than his Elric fantasies:

‘What did happen to you, Oladah?’ Hawkmoon asked. ‘How could you survive the great leap? I imagined you dashed to death beneath the tower.’

‘By rights I should have been,’ Oladah agreed. ‘if I had not been arrested by ghosts in midfall.’

‘Ghosts? You jest.’

[...] Hawkmoon turned his head, gaping in astonishment at what he saw.

[...] ‘A ghost of a classic sort,’ Hawkmoon said.

[...] ‘So you have not deserted your city,’ Oladah said. But how did you attain this ... peculiar state of existence.’

[...] ‘By control of the mind, scientific experiment, by a certain mastery of time and space. I regret that it would be impossible to describe how we came to this condition, for we reached it [...] by the creation of an entirely new vocabulary, and the language I would use would mean nothing to you.’¹⁶⁷

Here the supernatural becomes an alternative science. In a reversal of Attebery’s claim that ‘The discourse of fantasy can challenge SF,’¹⁶⁸ here SF challenges fantasy. When science or science fictional terminology is brought into a fantasy milieu, no matter how peripherally, any numinous effect is compromised.

The Dying Earth sub-genre of science fantasy often works under a premise which inverts the structural sword-&-sorcery norm of the numinous as ancient magic and instead makes it contemporary, placing science to some degree in the past – but in doing so again implies that magic is another form of science and thus a logical system. The use and treatment of magic all too often is not only rationalized but systematized, and this approach is generally praised. Tom Shippey rehearses the subject of rationalized magic in its entry in *The*

¹⁶⁶ David B. Williams’s comment posted 8/16/08 on ‘Jack Vance Message Board – Discussion Archive 4: Vance and Robert E. Howard’ <http://jackvance.yuku.com/topic/3243/Vance-and-Robert-E-Howard> accessed 11/4/14.

¹⁶⁷ Moorcock, *The Mad God’s Amulet* (London: White Lion, 1973), p.22.

¹⁶⁸ Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). p.108.

Encyclopedia of Science Fiction,¹⁶⁹ but negatively comments on the less rationalized supernatural of the ‘virtually thoughtless romances of, say Robert E. Howard’. On the back cover of *Fantasy Tales* # 14, the blurb for Lyndon Hardy's *Master of Five Magics* promotes the novel as ‘one of the most logical detailings of the laws of magic ever to appear in fantasy’. In *The Magic Goes Away*, science fiction writer Larry Niven makes magic, ‘mana’, into virtually an alternative energy source. In Sandra Miesel's essay afterword to the novel, ‘The Mana Crisis’, she states: ‘Such mixtures of imagination and *hard logic* [my italics] have always been the special mark of Niven's fantasies’.¹⁷⁰ Even the bibliography of other stories set in the same world is listed ‘in logical order’. Christine Mains argues that science and magic are two forms of knowledge, which compounds the idea of magic as alternative science.¹⁷¹ However Jo Walton comments:

If I said ‘fantasy is about magic,’ that’s pretty much a tautology, and that’s not what I mean. By ‘the numinous’ I don’t mean magic as it can be codified in a magic system, I mean the kind of thing that genuinely makes you feel awe.¹⁷²

I will later examine how Howard’s irrational approach to the numinous in his sword-&-sorcery is crucial to its power.

high and epic fantasy

This sub-section now moves to the genre of high or epic fantasy. The first question to be raised is whether these two terms are interchangeable. Sullivan admits that the term ‘high fantasy is ‘pluralistic in meaning and therefore difficult to pin down with a neat or precise definition’.¹⁷³ One differentiation has been made that the former ‘is set apart mostly by its tendency to focus on characters rather than an epic scale of the events’, and that the focus tends to be on a single protagonist’.¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth Drake offers another differentiation between epic and high fantasy, maintaining that the latter, ‘is the catch-all term for medieval-esque fantasy that doesn't make it as epic or heroic fantasy/sword-and-sorcery, but contains magic

¹⁶⁹ Tom Shippey, *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (London: Orbit, 1979) pp.376-77.

¹⁷⁰ Sandra Miesel, ‘The Mana Crisis’, in *The Magic Goes Away* (London: Futura, 1978).

¹⁷¹ Christine Mains, ‘The Scientist/Wizard in Joan D. Vinge’s Hegemony?’, *Foundation*, 89 (2003), 56-65.

¹⁷² Jo Walton, ‘Fantasy and the Numinous’, www.tor.com/2009/07/27/fantasy-and-the-numinous [accessed 13 February 2017].

¹⁷³ C.W. Sullivan, ‘Children’s literature Part II Forms and genres 32. High Fantasy’, <http://schoolbag.info/literature/children/124.html> [accessed 22 January 2018].

¹⁷⁴ Megan Leigh, ‘Epic, heroic, urban... What’s the difference between fantasy sub-genres?’ <http://pop-verse.com/2015/05/13/epic-heroic-urban-whats-the-difference-between-fantasy-sub-genres/> [accessed 19 February 2018].

at some level'.¹⁷⁵ This allows stories with such a high fantasy sensibility to exist in short story form – something often found in the magazine *Scheherazade* a UK magazine subtitled 'The Magazine of Fantasy, Science Fiction & Gothic Romance' which was published from 1991 to 2008. However, returning to Attebery's comment that fantasy subgenres regularly emerge, merge, or disintegrate, the same might be said of the continuing attempts to demarcate such sub-genres, which have also multiplied since Attebery's assertion. The term epic fantasy has an implied connection with the ancient form of epic poetry, whereas high fantasy carries a connotation of superiority over, and an implicit admission of the antonymic existence of a 'low fantasy', a term sometimes given to sword-&-sorcery in comparison. Even a term 'low high fantasy' has been suggested.¹⁷⁶

Taking Attebery's cue again, from an assertion made in a review that 'Genres are not pigeonholes',¹⁷⁷ rather than become counterproductively enmired in ever finer second-hand distinctions of character, milieu, style, or plot, what follows is an examination of Robert E. Howard's short story 'Worms of the Earth' in comparison with a sequence from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Attebery argues that Tolkien, due to the popularity of his work, formed a 'core around which to group a number of storytellers who had hitherto been simply [...] "other writers" belonging to no identified category or tradition'.¹⁷⁸ This seems similar to the, albeit retroactive, process by which Howard's sword-&-sorcery became an Ur-text. And the two writers have often been yoked in critical analyses, usually favouring Tolkien as the more 'literary'. (Bonnie Bergstrom focuses on Howard and Tolkien. She identifies the greater scope for subtlety of character in high fantasy and paints the sword-&-sorcery hero as 'swashbuckling' with its previously suggested implication of less serious light-heartedness.¹⁷⁹)

In terms of differentiating between sword-&-sorcery and other fantasy forms, Steve Tompkins's 1994 essay, 'The Shortest Distance Between Two Towers', adds a note of caution.¹⁸⁰ Tompkins's essay is, he argues, an effort to show that '*LotR* was in part a sword-and-sorcery classic waiting for Peter Jackson to come along.' However the phrase 'in part' is

¹⁷⁵ Elizabeth Drake, 'Subgenres Demystified', <http://www.emdrake.com/for-writers/articles/subgenres-demystified/> [accessed 13 March 2007].

¹⁷⁶ Ros Kaveny, 'Dark fantasy and paranormal romance', *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 214-23 (p.216).

¹⁷⁷ Attebery, review of *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction* by Lucie Armitt, in *Foundation*, 67 (2006), p.118.

¹⁷⁸ Attebery, *Strategies*, p.14.

¹⁷⁹ Bonnie Bergstrom, 'From Lemuria to Lugburz: A Comparison of Sword and Sorcery and Heroic Fantasy' *Mythlore* (Vol.1 no.3), 23-24.

¹⁸⁰ <<http://www.Visions.Gryphons.NothingandtheNight.mht>> [accessed 7 August 2015]

crucial. Five or more times Tompkins pairs quotations from Tolkien's and Howard's work to illustrate that there is a more complex balance of similarity and difference between high fantasy and sword-&-sorcery than has been implied by the commentators noted above.

Sprague de Camp relates a conversation with Tolkien where he 'indicates' that he 'rather liked' Howard's Conan stories. Whether this comment was accurately recalled, it at least establishes that Tolkien was at least aware of Howard's work.¹⁸¹ 'The Silver Key: Sale offers proof that J.R.R. Tolkien likely read Robert E. Howard.'¹⁸² In light of this the two chosen narratives show striking similarities and equally significant differences. In 'Worms of the Earth', after witnessing one of his people crucified by the Romans, the pict king Bran Mak Morn makes a bargain with a race even more ancient than his own, a race that has degenerated into something inhuman, the eponymous 'worms'. In the sequence found in the third book of *The Lord of the Rings, The Return of the King*, king-in-waiting Aragorn also recruits a numinous force, a company of dead warriors. In both cases too a 'black stone' is instrumental in obtaining the aid. In both narratives a path is travelled and a door is passed through, symbolizing a passage into a numinous envelope. Both protagonists are warned of the danger of their course of action, a course described as 'madness'. The motivations of both recruiter and recruited is the first real difference. Although Bran cites his duty to his people as a reason for striking back at the Romans, vengeance is clearly his priority: 'I will have a vengeance such as no Roman ever dreamed of!'¹⁸³ Aragorn's motivation is to strike a telling (defensive) blow against the enemy in the war against the dark lord Sauron: 'I would not go gladly; only need drives me'.¹⁸⁴ The differentiation of character argued by commentators above that sword-&-sorcery protagonists are motivated by self rather than social concerns seems reinforced here. There is also in Aragorn's stance a hint of the high ethical purpose cited by Sullivan as a defining element of high fantasy: 'Only so can I see any hope of doing my part in the war against Sauron'.¹⁸⁵ This sequence combines the Howardian binary of violence and the numinous, but the Tolkien protagonists' attitude to the former is far from Howardian:

¹⁸¹ de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen* (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1976), p.244.

¹⁸² <<http://thesilverkey.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/sale-offers-proof-that-jrr-tolkien.html>> [accessed 14 September 2016]

¹⁸³ Howard, 'Worms of the Earth', *Worms of the Earth* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1974), p.146.

¹⁸⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), p.813.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.815.

War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend.¹⁸⁶

Rather, the primary Tolkien Ur-textual binary opposition is good and evil. The numinous element in *The Lord of the Rings* is equally arrayed on both sides: Gandalf and Saruman, Galadriel and Shelob, Bombadil and Black Rider, and so on. The dead warriors Aragorn recruits aid him willingly as an act of atonement, whereas the coerced but vengeful motivation of Bran's worms arguably mirrors his own. The good versus evil opposition found in Howardian epigone work is one of the criticisms of Don Herron's essay 'Conan vs. Conantics':

Carter's use of religion in the imitations is one of the major differences between Conantics and Conan, and one of the major flaws in an imitation of Howard. In 'The Hand of Nergal,' Carter presents the most simple religious conflict possible - Good versus Evil. A gigantic golden god representing the Heart of Tammuz battles a gigantic tenebrous god representing the Hand of Nergal. I asked Glenn Lord if Howard, in his outline of 'The Hand of Nergal', included the golden god-defender of the Heart of Tammuz. He answered 'no' in a letter dated February 2, 1974. This fact means the injection of forces for Good in Conantics stories must be Carter's idea - an idea he repeats with de Camp in *Conan of the Isles*, featuring another Good vs. Evil confrontation.¹⁸⁷

While Attebery conflates Howard and Tolkien fantasy, referring to both as sword-&-sorcery, if the two types are accepted as separate then the idea of two influential Ur-texts, two centres of two fuzzy sets, as suggested in my 'Storm of Shadow' essay, becomes plausible. And if so, then Tolkien's high fantasy has its epigones and 'neo' successors much as Howard's sword-&-sorcery does. Brian Stableford claims that with the publications of Terry Brooks's *Sword of Shannara* in 1977, and Stephen Donaldson's first *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* trilogy in the same year, fantasy became a formulaic commercial publishing area,¹⁸⁸ yet the two are very different, as Donaldson himself claims: 'Brooks never set himself the job of writing a good Brooks novel, he was trying to write a good Tolkien novel,

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p.698.

¹⁸⁷ Herron, 'Conantics', <http://www.donherron.com/?page_id:1539> [accessed 10 September, 2006].

¹⁸⁸ Brian Stableford, 'Science Fiction in the Seventies', *Vector: The Critical Journal of the BSFA* [British Science Fiction Association] 200, 1998, 21-24 (pp.23-4).

and that can't be done.'¹⁸⁹ But if this means that Brooks's Shannara books can be categorized as Tolkien Epigone, then Donaldson's subsequent comment places him into an epic fantasy equivalent of reactive-evolutionary Neo-S&S: 'Fortunately, I knew this in advance, and I used Tolkien to help me define what I wanted to do that was not Tolkien'. A potentially crucial part of what Donaldson means by this is suggested earlier in the interview regarding intensity:

The more intense the action gets, the less time he spends describing it. It's like he doesn't really want to deal with the intense emotions, the real fear, the real horror of what's going on. [...] I do not want to pull away from the intense stuff the way Tolkien does.¹⁹⁰

It must be remembered that this is Donaldson's opinion, and there are arguments to be made that the more elegant and distanced approach and lexis employed by Tolkien produces an intensity via restraint. Also the pervasive melancholic sense of beauty passing might be claimed as a subtler form of intense effect.¹⁹¹ This thinning is much less in evidence with Donaldson's milieu, and practically non-existent in Howardian sword-&-sorcery, though glimpses of past ages of their respective milieus can be found in the fantasy of all three. However the focus on intensity clearly invites comparison with Howard since this is the predominating perception of his sword-&-sorcery. Donaldson's prose is similar in levels of intensity, though it suffers occasionally from banal imagery: 'two women clinging together like children threatened by the demon of their worst dreams'.¹⁹² His prose is peppered like Howard's with active verbs: 'a memory of his wife *flared* in his mind'¹⁹³[my italics] or 'Her heart quailed'.¹⁹⁴ Comparable intensity is present in emotional content as well. Donaldson's emotional similes (he works almost always through simile, perhaps for clarity in a story where magic plays a 'real' role and the reality of Donaldson's Land is itself, at least initially, diegetically uncertain), though hit and miss, sometimes spark as violently as Howard's: 'As he stepped across the threshold, Covenant's nostrils were assaulted by a pungent reek, a smell like rotten flesh lying in a latrine.'¹⁹⁵ 'He rushed out into the hall and the contents of his

¹⁸⁹ Donaldson interview in W.A. Senior, *Stephen Donaldson's Chronicles of Thomas Covenant: Variations on the Fantasy Tradition* (London: Kent State University Press, 1995), p227.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.226-7.

¹⁹¹ For a fuller examination of this effect see W.A.Senior's essay 'Loss Eternal in J.R.R.Tolkien's Middle-Earth' in *J.R.R.Tolkien and his Literary Resonances* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2000).

¹⁹² Stephen Donaldson, *Lord Foul's Bane* in *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p.68.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.25.

stomach spattered over the clean walls and floor like a stain of outrage.’¹⁹⁶ ‘First, he found his old straight razor. Its long, stainless steel blade gleamed like a leer’.¹⁹⁷

Physicality is pivotal to both writers’ narratives, but unlike the exceptional vigour of Howard’s protagonists, Donaldson’s Covenant embodies the opposite:

He was impotent. In the decay of his nerves, his sexual capacity was just another amputated member. Even the release of lust was denied to him; he could conjure up desires until *insanity* [my italics] threatened, but he could do nothing about them.’¹⁹⁸

Such decay, particularly when linked with madness, is reminiscent of the gothic sensibility which characterizes Ur-text sword-&-sorcery. However with the latter the decay remains external whereas Donaldson takes it *into* Covenant's body, arguably making it more personal.

Another point of comparison is the nature of reality and belief across all three writers. As already mentioned, Howard’s sense of reality in character and milieu is vivid. Tolkien also, particularly in the depth of delineation of Middle Earth has been praised. However reality in Covenant’s reality becomes a crucial ontological issue going beyond a motif and becoming a central thematic and plot element. At least in the initial volumes, the *possibility* of Covenant's madness provides further intensity:

That's impossible. None of this is happening. In his confusion he tried to tell himself that what he heard was like the sensitivity of his nerves. Further proof of the Land's impossibility. But it did not feel like proof.¹⁹⁹

However, perhaps inevitably because of the length of epic fantasy narrative, the focus shifts from this source of tension. Senior points to Covenant’s unbelief moving toward the Todorovian marvellous, and becoming thus less intense.

Semantically high fantasy is long via precedent, epic fantasy by default, but storytelling pressures of variation are implicit in such length. *The Lord of the Rings* uses its large cast of characters to vary focus between characters and groups, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* initially eschews this technique but eventually succumbs to viewpoints other than Covenant. Ur-textual sword-&-sorcery emerged as a short story form and had no need to attend to such an issue. However during the fantasy boom of the seventies and eighties sword-&-sorcery novels proliferated, sometimes utilizing short story characters such as Howard’s Conan, Jake’s Brak, Zelazny’s Dilvish at book length. Problems of intensity,

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p.26.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p.30.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁹⁹ Stephen R. Donaldson, *Lord Foul's Bane in The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p.207.

usually yoked to either violence or alterity, were thereby inherited, something prefigured by Howard's only sword-&-sorcery novel, *Hour of the Dragon*. Leiber comments that:

The focus of the book is steadily and a little monotonously on Conan, who episodically fights a variety of enemies from grey apes and ghouls to sorcerers and kings in scenes which are not overdone, though they inevitably tend to repeat the duels in earlier stories.²⁰⁰

H.P. Lovecraft admits a similar concern over alterity in a letter to August Derleth:

It remains how successful this bizarrerie can be when extended to novel length. I am very fearful that Randolph Carter's adventures may have reached the point of palling on the reader, or that the very plethora of weird imagery may have destroyed the power of any one image to produce the desired impression on strangeness.²⁰¹

Such damage is less over the course of a set of linked stories than with a single continuous narrative. The quest as one particular form of narrative, found in science fantasy, epic fantasy and sword-&-sorcery, is particularly vulnerable to such an effect. Several of Burroughs's Martian stories take the form of John Carter's searches for his romantic interest Dejah Thoris; Hodgson's *The Night Land* is the protagonist's quest for his lost love; the heart of *The Lord of the Rings* is an 'anti-quest', not to obtain but to relinquish an object of desire; Donaldson's Covenant books form a sequence of quests. Farah Mendlesohn²⁰² posits the portal-quest as a genre in its own right. Clute, in his entry on the subject in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*²⁰³ bifurcates the quest into external and internal, and cites both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* as combining both elements, though Senior argues that the two writers approach characterization differently: 'Tolkien, ever the medievalist, works more traditionally with types and archetypes, classes of beings, while Donaldson takes the same figures and reworks them into individuals'.²⁰⁴ Ur-textual sword-&-sorcery, mediated almost exclusively through short story, lacks the opportunities for character and possibly milieu development afforded by epic fantasy length. Kull's metaphysical musings are an undeveloped theme running through this cycle, Solomon Kane and Conan seem largely unaffected by the events in an individual story at its end. (Though Conan might be said to mature over his depicted career from young thief to middle-aged king, albeit the

²⁰⁰ Fritz Leiber, 'Howard's Fantasy', in *The Dark Barbarian*, pp.3-15 (p.13).

²⁰¹ Letter to August Derleth, November 1926, quoted in De Camp, *Lovecraft: A Biography* (London; New English Library, 1976).

²⁰² Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

²⁰³ p.796.

²⁰⁴ Senior, *Chronicles*, p.75.

stories were originally written and published out of chronological order.) Moreover quests by their tightly focused goal-orientation tend to be delimited, whereas the length of a given cycle of Ur-textual sword-&-sorcery narratives tend to be open-ended. While attainment of both external and internal goals coincide in *The Lord of the Rings*, the endings of the original Covenant trilogy are less clear cut. Frodo and Aragorn and several other characters attain stature over the course of the former narrative, whereas the culminations of the latter, through Donaldson's fierce modernist delvings into the psychological state of his protagonist, are more ambivalently eucatastrophic.

grimdark

The most recently emerged related form contains elements of not only Ur-textual sword-&-sorcery but also the Donaldson type of epic fantasy: 'grimdark'. Sword-&-sorcery has developed several sub-genres of its own: these include the short-lived 'sword-and-mythos' which conflates Howardian and Lovecraftian tropes, and 'sword-&-soul', initially built upon the work of Charles R. Saunders, employing African and pseudo-African milieux.²⁰⁵ However 'grimdark'²⁰⁶ is the name given to a style of sword-&-sorcery which has gained in popularity over this century, particularly since the television version of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* began in 2011.²⁰⁷ It appears that Martin is the most credible candidate to form another Atteberyian fuzzy set 'core', but other prominent writers identified with this approach are Joe Abercrombie, Steven Erikson, and Richard K. Morgan. Grimdark, like post-Ur-text sword-&-sorcery, is found in both book and short story lengths, with an eponymous magazine currently published; in its deployment of familiar elements grimdark might be posited as a return to Howardian sword-&-sorcery intensity via Donaldson's epic fantasy.

In a Facebook entry under the title 'The New Sword and Sorcery', Abercrombie, known for novel-length fantasy series such as 'The First Law' trilogy, commented at length about sword-&-sorcery.²⁰⁸ He echoes the Strahan/Anders view that in recent years a sword-&-sorcery sensibility has attached itself to what he calls 'chunky fantasy', though his opinions perhaps need to be assessed in the light of his apparent belief that David Eddings was an influence on Tolkien! (Eddings admitted that Tolkien was a powerful commercial

²⁰⁵ A debate on grimdark's proper designation took place on the sword-&-sorcery forum of the Goodreads website. <https://www.goodreads.com/group/comment_search/80482-sword-sorcery-an-earthier-sort-of-fantasy?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=Grimdark> [accessed 20th January, 2016]

²⁰⁶ <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimdark>> [accessed 23rd December, 2015]

²⁰⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Song_of_Ice_and_Fire> [accessed 23rd December, 2015]

²⁰⁸ <<http://www.joeabercrombie.com/2010/01/14/the-new-sword-and-sorcery>> [accessed 18 April 2010]

inspiration for him. His first fantasy novel was not published until 1982.) He rehearses assertions made by other of the sources above, including sword-&-sorcery's capacity for humour and escapism, its protagonists' small-scale motivations. One interesting statement asserts that, after dwindling as a published short-story form in the eighties, sword-&-sorcery fantasy (which he characterizes as 'short, focused stories about small groups of seedy, wisecracking adventurers out for themselves') found a flourishing home in role-playing gaming. Other writers such as Erikson have claimed that fantasy gaming is as much an influence on the work of modern fantasy writers as any literary precursors.²⁰⁹ In a blog post, 'The Value of Grit', though at pains not to set out any kind of manifesto for the new form, outlines its primary characteristics, including realism. This claim echoes de Camp's in his sword-&-sorcery anthology introductions, though the latter lack the suggestion of literary seriousness found in Abercrombie's stance: 'I think there is a correlation between dirt both moral and physical and realism'. Besides realism and moral ambiguity of characters, other familiar ingredients include use of modern language, tight focus on characters, and particularly heightened violence.²¹⁰ However this vital relationship is by no means without elements of difference to Howardian sword-&-sorcery. Violence in grimdark tends toward, as Abercrombie posits, tightly focused viewpoint:

Logan had nearly tripped over the sprawled-out corpse of a dead Carl, righted himself just in time, flailed with his sword and hit nothing, reeled after it and felt something cut into his leg as he went. He gasped, and hopped, waving the sword around, all off-balance. He lunged at some moving fur, his leg gave under him and he piled into someone. They fell together and Logan's head cracked against the stone. They rolled and Logan struggled up on top, shouting and drooling, tangled his fingers in an Easterner's greasy hair and smashed his face into the stone, again and again, until his skull went soft. He dragged himself away, heard a blade clang against the walkway where he had been, hauled himself up to his knees, sword loose in one sticky hand.²¹¹

This grimdark example conveys disorientation through close, specific detail, but in my essay 'Berserker Synecdoche' I posit a more complex set of techniques to account for Howard's intensity of effect in dealing with violence:

²⁰⁹ <<http://jonathanstrahan.podbean.com/e/episode-264-glen-cook-and-steven-erikson/>> [accessed 3rd January 2017]

²¹⁰ <<https://joeabercrombie.com/2013/02/25/the-value-of-grit>> [accessed 25th May 2018]

²¹¹ Joe Abercrombie *Last Argument of Kings* (London: Gollancz, 2008), p.263.

The Tecuhtli, recovering from the first stunning shock of the surprise that had swept them back into the throne room and littered the floor with their corpses, fought back with an equally desperate fury, while the door-guards from the lower floors came racing to hurl themselves into the fray. It was the deathfight of rabid wolves, blind, panting, merciless. Back and forth it surged, from door to dais, blades whickering and striking into flesh, blood spurting, feet stamping the crimson floor where redder pools were forming. Ivory tables crashed over, seats were splintered, velvet hangings torn down were stained red. It was the bloody climax of a bloody half-century, and every man there sensed it.²¹²

This scene combines close details (blood spurting, feet stamping in blood, seats splintered) with generalized broad and/or poetic descriptive strokes (the floor littered with corpses, blades wickering, the deathfight of rabid wolves). The detail moves from general to poetic to specific, thereby increasing pace, then with the final sentence returns to the general. Arguably because of Howard's 1920s/30s zeitgeist, culturally and commercially, the passage despite its violence never dwells on the gross.

Another remark by Abercrombie is potentially even more telling:

Gritty fantasy is a reaction to and a counterbalancing of a style of fantasy in which life is clean, meaningful, and straightforward, and the coming of the promised king really does solve all social problems, and there are often magical solutions to the horrors – like death, illness, and crippling wounds – that plague us in the real world.

It may be that Abercrombie is cautioning against deus ex machina storytelling, but it is possible to detect a willingness to marginalize the numinous element in the grimdark form. This would attach it to one of the meanings of the term 'low fantasy', mentioned in 'Storm of Shadow'.²¹³

If this is the case, grimdark balances these two oppositions differently than science fantasy, high/epic fantasy, or indeed sword-&-sorcery. It is even possible to cite this difference as definitive, since all the genres discussed in this sub-section, crucially for the purposes of this thesis, encompass a relationship between violence and the numinous.

Congruent Genres: The Beowulf Hypothesis

²¹² Emery, *Dark Man*, 2016, pp.72-3. Passage from *Red Nails* (Rhode Island: Donald M Grant, 1975), pp.100-101.

²¹³ Emery, 'Storm of Shadow' in *The Shadow Cycles* (Stafford: Immanion 2011), p.228.

Continuing to attempt to identify definitive, if not exclusive, properties of the Howardian Ur-text, this part of the thesis employs a speculative symptomatic strategy, using elements of previous biographical and taxonomic approaches which equally serve the critical and creative components of the thesis.

creative influences

Coffman cautions: ‘Speculations on the origin of artistic inspiration, about the processes of imagination or the inception of a literary character or any other aspects of narrative creation should always be undertaken with care’.²¹⁴ Though in asserting that Howard ‘read widely and wrote wildly’²¹⁵ he possibly implies a connection between a writer’s reading and their output, alliterative or not... Though not infallible as a source, Howard’s reading tastes and habits seem a good starting place.

Howard gave an account of the former in ‘On Reading - And Writing’:

I read simply because I loved reading for its own sake alone. The printed page was like wine to me. Books were scarce in the country. I could not go into a library or bookstore and select what I wanted. I had to read whatever came to my hand [...] I was not critical; I never tried to analyze what I read; I was simply and sincerely grateful for whatever chance put into my hands.²¹⁶

Nevertheless Howard did develop particular literary interests and opinions, often expressed forcefully in correspondence. (Coffman opines that Howard uses differing personas in correspondence: one self-deprecating, another the tough Texan teller of tall tales.²¹⁷) His own library evidenced particular interests in fiction, history and poetry. All three are clearly factors in his own creative output. Rusty Burke documents:

When Robert was 13, his father took the family to New Orleans, where the doctor enrolled in a post-graduate medical course. While there, Robert sought out a public library and discovered a book on British history in which he learned of a small, dark race of Mediterraneans who settled in the British Isles before the arrival of the Celts. These people were called Picts, and they strongly appealed to young Robert’s imagination.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Coffman, ‘Barbarism Ascendant’, in Prida (ed.), *Conan Meets the Academy* (London: McFarland, 2013), pp.35-50 (p.36).

²¹⁵ Coffman, Shadow Singer Autumnal Equinox 2003 <<http://www.robert-e-howard.org/SSae03.html>> [accessed 20 July 2013]

²¹⁶ Howard, ‘On Reading - And Writing’, in *The Last Celt*, p.42.

²¹⁷ Coffman, ‘Barbarism’ p.44.

²¹⁸ Rusty Burke, ‘A Short Biography of Robert E. Howard’ <<http://www.rehfoundation.org/a-short-biography/>> [accessed 22 January 2018]

Not only was Bran Mac Morn, pict king, one of Howard's serial protagonists, but picts also featured in his Kull and Conan cycles.

As has been mentioned earlier, Howard placed emphasis on instinct and emotion in his writing process, and anecdotal accounts credit him with an exceptional memory:

Howard devoured books at an extraordinary rate, astonishing his friends with his ability to pick up a book and turn the pages faster than they thought anyone could actually read. Yet later he could remember what he had read with perfect clarity.²¹⁹

Burke actually slightly exaggerates. In the appendix to the sword-&-sorcery anthology *The Barbarian Swordsmen*²²⁰, a letter from Howard to Lovecraft quotes at length a poem by Alfred Noyes, 'The Parrot'. Here is Howard's remembered opening:

When the king and his folk lay dead,
And the murderous hordes had gone,
He gnawed though his cage and fled
To the swallowing woods alone;
But, after an endless age,
He was taken by man once more;
And swung in a sturdier cage
By a sun-bleached wine-house door.

And here the Noyes original:

When the king and his folk lay dead,
And the murderous horde was gone,
He gnawed through his cage and fled
To the sheltering woods alone.
But after an endless age,
He was taken by man once more;
And swung in a sturdier cage
By a white-washed ale-house door.

This demonstrates a remarkable but not flawless memory, which may account for how Howard, as many writers, was able to assimilate reading influences without perhaps fully conscious knowledge. Perhaps creating a creative mindset which draws equally on imagination (sorcery?) and literary tradition (sword?). Flynn argues that:

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ *The Barbarian Swordsmen*, ed. Sean Richards (London: W.H. Allen, 1981).

Although Robert E. Howard is often agreed upon as the founder of the Sword-and-Sorcery genre, its roots can be traced back thousands of years to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Odyssey*, the Norse tales of Scandinavia, *The Song of Roland*, and the Arthurian romances of Cretian de Toyes.²²¹

Were these part of Howard's 'wide' reading? He himself appears to confirm this, particularly in relation to a fascination with the Scandinavian.²²²

beowulf

On his death Howard's father donated his library to the Howard Payne Library, but this of course, together with his correspondence, only provides a partial record of his reading life, leaving an area of speculation for research, as Coffman does:

My suggestions [...] are [...] based upon what might be called "the missing shelf" -- the "shelf" not directly attested by textual evidence from Howard himself or reliable sources, but nonetheless more than likely [...] Most of the "leaps" I'll make below are educated guesses to some degree. Some are supported, if albeit tangentially, by Rusty's [Burke] own research into the bookshelf. Others are good conjectures by a school teacher and English professor with a pretty fair knowledge of what was available in Howard's day and which might be considered "common" reading, or "specialized, but likely" reading in REH's areas of known interest. [...] both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* would have been read by REH as standard fare -- at least in excerpt and/or synopsis -- for the high school upper classman of his era. [...] Another reference is Gildas -- one of the early writers on the history of the Britons after the Roman conquest and departure and the Saxon incursion. I think it highly likely that REH would have had access to and also ACCESSED such other writers on the subject as Geoffrey of Monmouth (early Arthurian material) and Nennius and [...] The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle -- available in several modern English translations in the early 20th century. [...] My greatest leap will be to suggest that Howard read voraciously in heroic literature in translation. This would include not only *Beowulf*, but, for my purposes, other European heroic-age epic poetry.²²³

²²¹ John L. Flynn, 'A Historical Overview of Heroes in Contemporary Literature Part Three: Sword and Sorcery'

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20071219035427/http://pages.towson.edu/flynn/swordsor.html>>

[accessed 21 December 2012]

²²² Howard, 'On Reading - And Writing', p.47.

²²³ Coffman, Shadow Singer Summer Solstice 2003 <<http://www.robert-e-howard.org/SSss03.html>> [accessed 28 July 2013]

Which brings this thesis to make a leap of its own which merges, or perhaps straddles symptomatic and intentional readings, to suggest that *Beowulf* may be exceptionally significant in the creation of sword-&-sorcery.

The question of whether Howard was influenced by this poem and if so how has been raised from time to time in Howard studies. Howard's poetic influences were extremely wide, and no copy of the poem is found in the listed contents of his library published in Herron's *The Dark Barbarian* (pp.186-200), but Howard references it in his story 'The Valley of the Worm'. Finn, in email correspondence of 2007, pointed out to me two mentions of the poem in letters to Lovecraft, one of which confirms that Howard had read it: 'the first Nordic folk-tale I ever read was Beowulf.'²²⁴

The epic poem set in Scandinavia, thought to originate somewhere between 975-1025 AD and written in England by an Anglo-Saxon poet, first called *Beowulf* in 1805 and first printed in 1815, had been published in numerous translations, both verse and prose paraphrases, before the twentieth century, and so would have been available for the voracious bibliophile Howard. A tale of monsters and battle, it is set in what Shamus Heaney describes in prefacing his translation of the poem as a "“once upon a time” that is partly historical",²²⁵ a description that strongly echoes the milieu of Conan and Kull. It is argued that the poem is set in the 'Age of Migration' which in itself would have attracted Howard, fascinated as he was by the process of migration, as evidenced by 'The Valley of the Worm' and 'Marchers of Valhalla' and in the pseudo-historical essay 'The Hyborian Age'.²²⁶ The eponymous protagonist is certainly a barbarian in that he is 'other', that he comes from elsewhere to combat the threat of the monster Grendel, a characteristic which he shares with several of Howard's protagonists, Conan and Kull in particular.

Tolkien analyses the poem in detail in his talk and essay, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics'.²²⁷ One striking contention is that: 'We must dismiss, of course, from mind the notion that *Beowulf* is a 'narrative poem', that it tells a tale or intends to tell a tale sequentially. [...] the poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily.'²²⁸ This suggests that the tale does not develop through plot and might therefore be said to be closer than epic or saga genres to the short story form with its licence to eschew development – the

²²⁴ Letter to H.P.Lovecraft, week of 10 August 1931.

²²⁵ Shamus Heaney, introduction to *Beowulf*, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p.ix.

²²⁶ First published partially in Donald A. Wollheim's fan magazine *The Phantagraph* in 1936, and subsequently in entirety as a booklet in 1938.

²²⁷ J.R.R.Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936).

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.29.

short story being the form Howard employed in creating sword-&-sorcery. It also suggests the manner in which Howard conceived the Conan stories:

I've always felt less as creating them than as if I were simply chronicling his adventures as he told them to me. That's why they skip about so much, without following a regular order. The average adventurer, telling his tales of a wild life at random, seldom follows any ordered plan, but narrates episodes widely separated by space and years, as they occur to him.²²⁹

Although often described as part of the epic tradition, Tolkien admits reservations that: 'It may turn out to be no epic at all'.²³⁰ Certainly the poem has a feel of several interlinked short stories.

An element of Howard's technique, short-story related, is brevity, often paired with vivid description, and this is another combination characteristic of and prefigured by *Beowulf*:

Breaking the bones; the blade sheered
through the death-doomed flesh. She [Grendel's mother] fell to the ground;
the sword was gory; he was glad at the deed.²³¹

This is reinforced by the poem's Old English alliterative measure, another Howardian trait in both his poetry and prose.

The oral characteristics of the poem are also relevant. In his introduction to his own translation of the poem, Michael Alexander argues:

Much of [its] characteristic power and beauty comes from what I take to be the traditional poetic and narrative forms of public oral performance. [...] *Beowulf* was composed to be projected in public performance – to be sung or spoken aloud.²³²

Howard had an affinity for Texas folklore and oral storytelling which is evidenced in his poetic output and the sonorousness of his prose. Finn notes: 'Since Robert frequently spoke (some would say shouted) his stories aloud [...] his fiction naturally carries the cadence of his voice, however consciously *or unconsciously* [my italics].²³³ Authority in Texas folklore Mody C. Boatright on frontier storytellers remarks: 'had they lived in a prescientific age, they might have produced an *Odyssey*, or more probably a *Beowulf*.'²³⁴

²²⁹ Letter to P.S. Miller, 1936, published in *Conan* (New York: Lancer Books, 1968).

²³⁰ Tolkien, *Monsters*, p.12.

²³¹ Michael Alexander (trans.), *Beowulf*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.100.

²³² Alexander, introduction to *Beowulf*, , p.9.

²³³ Finn, *Blood & Thunder* (1st edn.), p.67.

²³⁴ Quoted in *Blood & Thunder*, p.58.

Beowulf embodies a Northern pessimism which would surely have appealed both to Howard's personality and his admitted interest: 'The main part of my historical and traditional love and lore centres in the British isles. And why not? To the best of my knowledge every drop of my blood in my veins originated there.'²³⁵ Indeed Tolkien remarks of *Beowulf*: 'The characters do not understand heaven -- or have hope of it. They refer to *hell* -- an originally pagan word.'²³⁶ And a word constantly found in Howard's writing. Sprague de Camp weighs in with the opinion that: 'Tolkien, skillfully combines Christian optimism with northern pessimism.'²³⁷ Again, *Beowulf* can be recruited to expand the point. There are several biblical commentaries in the poem, breaking into an essentially pre-Christian narrative. These are clearly attempts to graft a Christian, a religious, a moral meaning onto the events of the story. These commentaries, in effect, attempt to convert a dark, amoral sword-&-sorcery tale into Tolkien's good versus evil high fantasy, though unsuccessfully, if Heaney is correct: 'It has often been observed that all the scriptural references in *Beowulf* are to the old testament. The poet is more in sympathy with the tragic, unredeemed phase of things than with any transcendental promise.'²³⁸ Tolkien, quoting William Ker²³⁹ on Northern mythology, makes a related argument: "'*The winning side is Chaos and Unreason*" - mythologically the monsters -- "*but the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation.*" And in their war men are their chosen allies, able when heroic to share in this "absolute resistance, perfect because without hope."²⁴⁰ The comment finds an echo in 'The Valley of the Worm' where the protagonist Niord lies dying after battling the 'worm': 'But I could not see the monster and I knew that I had won, even in defeat.'²⁴¹ This ambiguity is suggested earlier in the story where the lament of Niord for the deaths of his kin becomes almost transcendent: 'So now the personal grief I felt [...] was drowned in a deeper sea of grief and fury that was cosmic in its depth and intensity.'²⁴² There is no *Lord of the Rings* aesthetic melancholy here: for Howard even the emotion of loss can be violent.

Further on the topic of despair, Tolkien argues of *Beowulf*:

The shadow of its despair, if only as a mood, as an intense emotion of regret, is still there. [...] As the poet looks back into the past, surveying the history of kings and

²³⁵ Howard, *The Last Celt*, p.34.

²³⁶ Tolkien, *Monsters*, p.41.

²³⁷ de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen*, p.243.

²³⁸ Heaney, introduction to *Beowulf*, p.xix.

²³⁹ W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages*, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955.

²⁴⁰ Tolkien, *Monsters*, p.21.

²⁴¹ Howard, 'Valley', p.56.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p.48.

warriors in the old traditions, he sees that all glory (or as we might say ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’) ends in night.²⁴³

Though Howard’s avowed opinion of ‘civilization’ is a jaundiced one, this has parallels to the creed succinctly expressed at the end of the Conan story ‘Beyond the Black River’:

“‘Barbarism is the natural state of mankind,’ the forester said, still staring somberly at the Cimmerian. ‘Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph.’”²⁴⁴ In describing the theme of *Beowulf* as ‘Man alien in a hostile world, engaged in a struggle which he cannot win while the world lasts,’²⁴⁵ Tolkien equally expresses the grim sensibility of the Northern sagas and Howardian Ur-text.

Further, the milieu of that Ur-text is hauntingly reminiscent of that of *Beowulf*. Both are replete with night-time and chthonic settings. Howard’s Bran Mac Morn story ‘The Worms of the Earth’ in particular works through a *Beowulf*-esque landscape of desolate moor and fen and mere:

He [Bran] swam faster, not frightened, but wary. [...] Looking back he saw the waters swirl and subside. [...] He had discounted the ancient legend which made Dagon’s Mere the lair of a nameless water-monster, but now he had a feeling as if his escape had been narrow.²⁴⁶

In summary, there is convincing evidence that *Beowulf*, whatever translation he had access to, might have suggested to the young impressionable Howard a proto-sword-&-sorcery: lone exceptionally physically powerful protagonists, sonorousness economy of style, gothic supernatural menaces, and perhaps crucially, visceral physical and emotional violence yoked to this latter. As when the eponymous protagonist tears off the arm of the monstrous Grendel:

For Hygelac’s great-hearted kinsman
had him by the hand; and hateful to each
was the breath of the other.

A breach in the giant
flesh-frame showed then, shoulder-muscles
sprang apart, there was a snapping of tendons,
bone-locks burst. To Beowulf the glory

²⁴³ Tolkien, *Monsters*, p.23.

²⁴⁴ Howard, *Conan the Warrior*, p.192.

²⁴⁵ Tolkien, *Monsters*, p.27.

²⁴⁶ Howard, ‘Worms’, p.176.

of this fight was granted; Grendel's lot
 to flee the slopes fen-ward with flagging heart
 [...] The tarn was troubled; a terrible wave-thrash
 brimmed it, bubbling; black-mingled,
 the warm wound-blood welled upwards.
 He had dived to his doom.²⁴⁷

As a tentative but nevertheless poetic argument for the poem's influence on Howard, it might be noted that at the end of 'The Valley of the Worm', the dragon slayer-and-slain Niord is placed upon a cairn, even as Beowulf is, after immolation on a pyre. A resonance might thus be found in Howard's final literary act; minutes before his suicide he typed a last verse:

All fled, all done
 So lift me on the pyre.
 The feast is over
 And the lamps expire.

Robert E. Howard's Aesthetic of Violence

My preparation for writing *The Shadow Cycles* was to identify via two approaches essential elements in Robert E. Howard's original sword-&-sorcery form.²⁴⁸ My intention was to set down a number of conceptual motifs partly through an instinctual or experiential method based on decades reading the form, and partly through a more formally analytical one based on that same reading but informed by literary critical knowledge I did not have when I first encountered it. In this way thirteen motifs were arrived at by the conflation of personal and critical perspectives. As I wrote *TSC* their non-definitive wording allowed me to view them as 'live' and 'evolving' rather than clearly-defined conclusions. These were: 1. Sword-&-sorcery is intense. All else is subjugated to this effect.; 2. Sword-&-sorcery is potentially amoral; 3. Sword-&-sorcery is the combination of violence and the numinous: a double-helix of violences which entwine around intensity; 4. Sword-&-sorcery eschews explicit development of milieu or character or concept.; 5. Sword-&-sorcery is generally naturally a

²⁴⁷ Alexander, *Beowulf*, p.76-7.

²⁴⁸ A recent collection of Howard's fiction, *The Black Stranger and Other American Tales* (Lincon: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), attempts to draw Howard into literary mainstream respectability via an imaginative but possibly tendentious introduction by Steve Tompkins. More convincingly, John G. Cawelti, in his *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) simply asserts that popular formulaic fiction is still a valid artistic phenomenon (p.1).

short story form; 6. Sword-&-sorcery contains an element of deathwish in its sensibility; 7. Sword-&-sorcery has a Chthonic sensibility; 8. Sword-&-sorcery has a potential element of tragedy in its sensibility. 9. Sword-&-sorcery combines explicit and implicit horror; 10. The Sword-&-sorcery protagonist is a loner - a figure apart or other; 11. Sword-&-sorcery addresses the irrational through the very fact of its connection with the numinous effect; 12. Sword-&-sorcery is about power. 13. Sword-&-sorcery is highly 'visual' (either through the presence or the absence of the visual).²⁴⁹ The third of these motifs is the most important to what follows: 'Sword-&-sorcery is the combination of violence and the numinous: a double-helix of violences which entwine around intensity' - the most telling phrase being 'double-helix of violences', which the following is intended to explicate. The terms 'violence' and 'intensity' are interchangeable throughout. The term is particularly apposite when discussing Howard's work both in content and in style, given the wide acknowledgement of its importance to the writer in content and style, and simply in regard to the power he generates.

In this part of the thesis, I first examine the characteristics of Howard's treatment of violence and the nature of his engagement with the numinous, before going on to examine two stories in more detail with particular respect to both the above. I also touch on how Howard's method has acted as an inspiration or even template for other writers of sword-&-sorcery in order to demonstrate both its wide influence and its lasting utility for those working in this area.

howard's characters

Howard's violence encompasses the physical activities of his protagonists, their emotions, chiefly berserker fury and hate, though berserker fury might be more accurately described as a portmanteau condition compounding uncontrollable anger, lack of concern for personal safety or survival and a desire for killing. Berserker fury has a history of literary usage going back to Icelandic Saga and *Beowulf*. Hate, as discussed below, is more a rational 'gateway' into the berserker state. These emotions and the imagery typically used to convey settings, feelings and events all dovetail or entwine, with each complementing the others to produce a focus and intensity characteristic of and even unique to Howard and the form he created. This violence is in part cultural, but in part personal: there is no doubt that Howard's personality contributed to the violence in his writing. The chapter on Howard in Sprague de Camp's *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* characterizes him as 'a man of emotional

²⁴⁹ 'Storm of Shadow' in *The Shadow Cycles* (Stafford: Immanion 2011), p.248.

extremes and of violent likes and dislikes'.²⁵⁰ (Though it bears repeating that de Camp's work on both Howard's writing and his biographical commentary have since been criticized by more recent commentators such as Mark Finn, Don Herron and Frank Coffman.)

Howard wrote in the time of, and for, the American pulp market of the twenties and thirties, one dominated by various kinds of adventure genres, where violence, albeit generic, was simply part of the required mix of narrative elements. Nevertheless there are certain attributes of Howard's fiction which seem to take him beyond the expected ingredients and styles of generic obligation.

When Howard's virtues and faults as a writer have been set forth, however, there remains that curiously hypnotic grip that his narratives have upon many readers. Apart from the headlong pace and verve and zest of Howard's storytelling, as Lovecraft put it, 'the real secret is that he himself is in every one of them'.²⁵¹ Just how much Howard, or any writer, can be encapsulated by their work is open to speculation. However this thesis argues that in terms of the hypothesized Ur-text the persona rather than the actual person of the writer is a more important element.

Lovecraft's comment has particular relevance to the stylistic aspect of Howardian violence that is explicated below. Mark Finn points out that Howard witnessed both violence and the physical effects of violence in his young life as the son of a doctor practising in the Texas oil boom towns in the early years of the twentieth century.²⁵² This has obvious advantages for the writer Howard in providing an understanding of his largely male American readership in the aftermath of the First World War and the midst of the trigger-happy Prohibition era. Howard's own personal difficulties add another factor to his treatment of violence in his work. Joe R. Lansdale, in his introduction to *Blood & Thunder*, refers to 'the worm of darkness writhing about in his [Howard's] electric-sparked brain,' (p.2)

De Camp suggests:

The 'self' that Howard wrote into his stories with such burning intensity was a very - in fact fatally - flawed human being [...] This somber self, with its nightmarish view of a hostile, menacing universe, its irrational fears, hatreds, and grudges, and its love affair with death, comes across in his fiction.²⁵³

²⁵⁰de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen*, p.144.

²⁵¹ de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen*, p.169. Here de Camp quotes from 'Robert Ervin Howard: A Memoriam', published in *Fantasy Magazine*, 1936 and reprinted in *The Last Celt A Bio-Bibliography of Robert Erwin Howard*, ed. Glenn Lord (New York: Berkley Windhover, 1977) p.69.

²⁵² Finn, *Thunder*, p.35.

²⁵³de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen*, p.169.

howard's technique

Even at the time of his prolific eleven-year career the violence of Howard's material was noted. Whether it manifests in adventure tales, boxing stories, westerns or sword-&-sorcery, it is inherent and pervasive, physical, emotional and stylistic. In the first of these genres, even allowing for the historical givens of pulp fiction, there is a certain relish detectable in Howard's descriptions of mayhem. In 'Marchers of Valhalla', he writes:

I remember one huge warrior who came crawling up out of the defile like a snake, a crimson froth drooling from his lips, and the feathered ends of arrows standing out from his belly, ribs, neck and limbs. He howled like a mad dog, and his death-bite tore the heel of my sandal as I stamped his head into a red ruin.²⁵⁴

There is a vivid force in Howard's choice of verb, adjective, adverb and phrasing, though this choice can verge on the habitual or even formulaic. 'red ruin' above is a case in point, as is 'howled', and 'tore'. However Fritz Leiber defends Howard's use of cliché and near-cliché: 'Howard didn't use them like a hackwriter, he used them like a poet.'²⁵⁵ Howard's work demonstrates a strong sense of sonority and rhythm even in his prose. It is striking how alliterative his writing is. In my essay 'Berserker Synecdoche' I posit his use of such diction and phrasing as having a slingshot effect adding to the energy of his prose.²⁵⁶

In an appraisal of Howard's first published story 'Spear and Fang', the prolific Howard commentator Frank Coffman defines his prose technique as 'action packing' or 'hypermodification' – that is, an unusual, not to say unconventional density of adverbs and adjectives.²⁵⁷ This might explain why Howard's work was regarded as more violent than that of his contemporaries. In 'Shadows in Zamboula', for example, adjectives, verbs and adverbs again combine to emphasise the bodily damage inflicted in combat:

With a savage wrench he twisted Baal-pteor's head around until the ghastly face leered over the left shoulder, and the vertebrae snapped like a rotten branch.

Conan hurled the flopping corpse to the floor.²⁵⁸

In the space of two sentences Howard employs three adjectives, one adverb and an image, all violent, describing two actions, both violent. The confrontation itself lasts just over

²⁵⁴ Howard, *Marchers of Valhalla* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1972), 11-81 (p.46).

²⁵⁵ Leiber, 'Howard's Fantasy', in *The Dark Barbarian*, p.4.

²⁵⁶ Emery, *Dark Man*, 2016.

²⁵⁷ Coffman, 'The Promise of "Spear and Fang": A Close Reading and Commentary on Robert E. Howard's First Sale', <<http://www.robert-e-howard.org/crossplainsman/CPv2001n2archive.pdf>> [accessed: February 2 2013].

²⁵⁸ Howard, 'Shadows in Zamboula', *Weird Tales*, November 1935, reprinted in de Camp, *Spell*, 161-192 (pp.182-83).

a page and is reminiscent of an earlier test of strength in Howard's 'Blades of the Brotherhood' where Solomon Kane engages in a dagger fight with an enemy for two pages.²⁵⁹ The length of the struggles and their static nature suggests a kind of tableau effect (or even ekphrasis) which is a potentially defining element of Howard's style.

de camp's editing

To extend this point of stylistic violence, I examined a sequence from a Conan story, 'Drums of Tombalku' and compared the Howardian original with a Sprague de Camp version.²⁶⁰ In his introduction to *The Fantastic Swordsmen*, de Camp states that he 'made a few slight editorial corrections.'²⁶¹ However these changes were more extensive and instructive than the alterations he made with *The Hour of the Dragon*.²⁶² Many changes are indeed slight, to the point where the reason for them is puzzling: 'forged steadily' is changed to 'steadily forged', 'a touch of almost anger' becomes 'a touch of anger almost'.

Changes other than stylistic are usually elaborating the details of a room, for instance, changes which Howard may have instigated himself on redrafting. Surprisingly, given Howard's and his sword-&-sorcery's reputation, the early desert sequence in particular is more racist in tone in the de Camp version. Emphasis is placed on the black skins and negroid features of characters. Also, de Camp adds a vegetable patch to the decrepit city of Gazal (133). This is indicative of the de Camp/Carter tendency, who together and separately continued the Conan cycle after Howard's death, to systematise Howard's Hyborian milieu. The addition of mundane logical detail is something I feel detracts from Ur-text sword-&-sorcery and I've tried to avoid such 'domestication' of the fantastic in *The Shadow Cycles*.

This approach feeds into de Camp's modification of Howard's style. He has a tendency to smooth out some of the rougher, more staccato sentence constructions. To take one passage as example, Howard version first: 'One of the men, his face smooth and unlined, but his hair silver, was saying: 'Aquilonia? There was an invasion - we heard - King Bragorus of Nemedica - how went the war?'' (107). And now the de Camp version from the Sphere edition: 'One of the men, with a smooth, unlined face but hair of silver, said: 'Aquilonia? There was an invasion - we heard by King Bragorus of Nemedica. How went the war?'' (134). The difference in tone is subtle, and on other occasions it is de Camp who

²⁵⁹ Howard, 'Blades of the Brotherhood' in *Solomon Kane* (New York: Baen, 1995), 145-176 (p.164-6).

²⁶⁰ The Howard version taken from *The Pool of the Black One*, Rhode Island, Donald M. Grant, 1986; the de Camp version taken from *Conan the Adventurer*, London: Sphere Books, 1973 (rpt.). For clarity and ease, page numbers will be bracketed.

²⁶¹ de Camp, *Fantastic Swordsmen*, p.41.

²⁶² Howard, *Dragon*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977.

enlivens a stiff Howard phrase, but here we can see a definite diminution of energy at the raw level of sentence structure. This smoother version feels almost closer to Moorcock than Howard in this sense.

There is, too, a literariness about de Camp's alterations. 'There was no communication with the outer world' (Grant 111) becomes 'Thenceforth, there was no communication with the outer world' (Sphere 136). Such 'civilizing' of Howard's prose creates an unhelpful distance between the events and characters and the language used to describe them.

The comparison constantly suggests that, as Lovecraft argues, Howard was more 'in touch' with the characters and situations of his stories - something which clearly relates to the noted intensity and belief found in his work. Rhythm plays a part in this 'closeness' in the Tombalku sequence: 'The scent of dust and decay hung in the thick darkness. At times, what felt like broken tiles underfoot caused him to move carefully. At other times there was the softness of worn carpets' (Grant 109). de Camp changes this to: 'The scent of dust and decay hung in the thick darkness. Under his feet were sometimes broken tiles and sometimes worn carpets' (Sphere 135). There is a moment's hesitation in the first version after 'At times,' like a foot moving forward and not knowing what it is about to encounter. Splitting the tiles and carpets into two separate sentences also reinforces this hesitancy and tension, and suggests time passing more slowly which thereby adds an extra fraction of tension to the scene. De Camp's version feels flat-footed in comparison, perhaps close to the 'deadpan' effect I suggest mars Wagner's sword-&-sorcery stories.

Violence is the keynote of Howard's imagery and descriptive practice, even when not evoking battle. Thus, even when physical violence is not the focus, this imagery foreshadows it, combining (entwining) the stylistic and emotional violences: in 'Delenda Est', a character's 'heavy jaws came together with a snap that would have splintered lesser teeth than his.'²⁶³ Howard's vivid imagery (and choice of adjectives, verbs, adverbs) in fiction and particularly verse, usually takes its content from the milieu in which it is set, hence 'The stranger's voice was like the rasp of swords' in 'The Grey God Passes'.²⁶⁴ The inheritors of the Howard Ur-text have thoroughly assimilated this trait. John Jakes describes the course of

²⁶³Howard, 'Delenda Est', *Worlds of Fantasy*, vol.1 no.1, Galaxy Publishing Corporation, 1968, 89-95, (p.90).

²⁶⁴ Robert E. Howard, 'The Grey God Passes' (Pennsylvania: Charles Miller, 1975), p.2.

a river as cutting through a mountain range ‘like a wound left in raw flesh by a dagger.’²⁶⁵ Lin Carter and Sprague de Camp, in a collaborative Conan pastiche, note how ‘The sheer cliffs of dark stone closed about Conan the Cimmerian like the sides of a trap.’²⁶⁶ Roger Zelazny employed similar types of imagery when describing a ‘great archway’ that ‘gape[d] like a mouth frozen in a howl of pain and surprise, of death.’²⁶⁷ Such imagery is a particular proclivity of the short story, which can license a consistently pungent prose style that would become overwhelming or overbearing in a longer narrative. This is sometimes the case in Wagner’s Kane novels and also, perhaps deliberately, in Norman Spinrad’s satirical *The Iron Dream*.²⁶⁸

In his only sword-&-sorcery novel, *The Hour of the Dragon*, Howard manages to avoid this particular cloying effect by employing periodic sequences of sweeps of imagery which quicken pace and inject energy:

I journeyed in Zamora, in Vendhya, in Stygia, and among the haunted jungles of Khitai. I read the iron-bound books of Skelos, and talked with unseen creatures in deep wells, and faceless shapes in black reeking jungles. I obtained a glimpse of your sarcophagus in the demon-haunted crypts below the black giant-walled temple of Set in the hinterlands of Stygia, and I learned of the arts that would bring back life to your shriveled corpse.²⁶⁹

Admittedly, broad descriptive strokes, with their energizing effects on prose, have been part and parcel of many adventure genres well before as well as after Howard, and the convenience of convention has helped more than one hard-pressed storyteller. Cawelti states that formula fiction stresses intense and immediate kinds of excitement.²⁷⁰

‘An interesting feature of the storyteller’s art, and a mark of its high antiquity,’ write Alwyn and Brinley Rees, ‘is the use made of stereotyped descriptive passages or rhetorical ‘runs’’.²⁷¹ To these two descriptive traits in Howard’s writing is added the element of the tall tale folk tradition entrenched in his Texas. Some elements of this form include the teller’s self-investment (belief) in the tale, striking imagery, exaggeration, and an underlying realism

²⁶⁵ ‘The Mirror of Wizardry’ by John Jakes, in *Worlds of Fantasy*, vol.1 no.1, Galaxy Publishing Corporation, 1968, 7-39 (p.8).

²⁶⁶ Lin Carter and L. Sprague de Camp, ‘Conan and the Cenotaph’ (variant title ‘The Curse of the Monolith’), in *Worlds of Fantasy* (ibid.), 67-78 (p.68).

²⁶⁷ Roger Zelazny, ‘The Bells of Shoredan’, in de Camp, *Warlocks*, 236-255 (p.236).

²⁶⁸ Norman Spinrad, *The Iron Dream* (St.Albans: Panther Books, 1974).

²⁶⁹ Howard, *Dragon*, pp.23-4.

²⁷⁰ Cawelti, *Adventure*, p.14.

²⁷¹ Alwyn and Brinley Rees *Celtic Heritage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), p.15.

– all of which can be found in Howard’s sword-&-sorcery.²⁷² The tall tale is traditionally an oral form, as are the forms referred to by Rees and Rees, where the conventions and priorities regarding economy of style in prose apply differently. The way in which Howard describes violence, therefore, is informed by both oral and literary models.

berserker fury

As Schweitzer suggests, operating in an emotional landscape comprised entirely of extremes meant that ‘Howard could get himself into a frenzied state, and carry the reader through by the sheer force of it, whether the story made any sense or not,’ relying on either a constant succession of exciting events and encounters or powerfully evoked atmosphere to disguise or at least encourage reader tolerance of any loopholes in plot or repetitive phraseology. As he says, none of the many pastiches of Conan have the same drive as the originals because ‘they lack the same headlong emotional intensity.’²⁷³ This is certainly true of for example Lin Carter’s Thongor novels, in which Howardian sword-&-sorcery elements such as colourful imagery, pseudo-archaisms and recurrent character types are stiffly constant rather than dynamically-paced as they are in Howard’s own fiction.

The emotional violence in Howard’s stories combines with the physical in depictions of ‘berserker fury’, the surrender of reason that his protagonists, particularly Conan, can be prone to. In *Queen of the Black Coast*, Conan is possessed by ‘the fighting-madness of his race’ and carnage ensues. ‘[W]ith a red mist of unreasoning fury wavering before his blazing eyes,’ Howard writes, ‘he cleft skulls, smashed breasts, severed limbs, ripped out entrails, and littered the deck like a shambles with a ghastly harvest of brains and blood.’²⁷⁴ Such violence is often motivated by hatred, which might be seen as interfacing between potential and kinetic violence, motivating, shaping, and foreshadowing the latter. Schweitzer contends that ‘All Howard’s stories seem to be about hate’.²⁷⁵ Several other commentators, notably Leo Grin, examine the same motif.²⁷⁶ It even recurs in Howard’s often Kipling-esque verse. Several Kipling books were found in Howard’s library after his death, including a collection of verse, and the importance of Howard’s verse in analysing his output is echoed by Frank

²⁷² Finn, *Thunder*, pp.66-9.

²⁷³ Darrell Schweitzer, *Conan’s World and Robert E. Howard* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1978), p.7.

²⁷⁴ Howard, *Queen of the Black Coast* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1978), 11-82 (p.27).

²⁷⁵ Schweitzer, *Conan’s World*, p.52.

²⁷⁶ ‘The Reign of Blood’ in *The Barbaric Triumph*, ed. Don Herron (New Jersey: Wildside Press, 2004), pp.141-160.

Coffman in his essay ‘Barbarism Ascendant’.²⁷⁷ ‘Dead Man’s Hate’ has an almost paradigmatic title, harnessing familiar sentiments to a driving rhythm:

His lips were writhed in a horrid grin like a fiend’s on Satan’s coals,
And the men that looked on his face that day, his stare still haunts their
souls.
Such was the fate of Adam Brand, a strange, unearthly fate;
For stronger than death or hempen noose are the fires of a dead man’s
hate.²⁷⁸

Reworking Caligula’s infamous desire that the Roman people possessed only one neck, ‘Invective’ again emphasises the centrality of hate to Howard’s protagonists:

There burns in me no honeyed drop of love,
Nor soft compassion for my brother man;
I would indeed humanity possessed
A single throat a keen-edged knife could span.²⁷⁹

Suggesting Howard’s pervasive influence, hatred has frequently been used as the basis of character motivation and plotting in sword-&-sorcery. Even found implicitly and explicitly in his correspondence, hate seems fundamental to Howard’s personality and storytelling: a kind of sub-genre of intensity - one which his successors tapped into. ‘The Conan stories appeared in *Weird Tales* until 1936,’ explains Moorcock. ‘With their popularity a variety of writers was encouraged to submit similar stories to the magazine. Catherine L. Moore was probably the best of these.’ Jirel of Jory was, as Moorcock says, ‘an amazon driven to martial and occult practices to avenge her wrongs’.²⁸⁰ The motivation of Moore’s Jirel in the series’ first story, ‘Black God’s Kiss’ was hatred and revenge. ‘To wreak my vengeance upon Guillaume I would go if I knew I should burn in hell for ever,’ she says.²⁸¹

Vengeance is a facilitator of Howard’s hate leitmotif, the latter, whatever the inciting mechanism, producing an extreme emotional tenor to the form from Howard onwards, reflected by the style even between moments of physical violence. Such charged writing can easily tip into a stiff formulaic archness. Nevertheless there seems to be a reciprocal dynamic produced: the style is a result of story content/protagonist motivation, and story

²⁷⁷ *Conan Meets the Academy*, ed. Jonas Prida (London: McFarland, 2013), pp. 35-50.

²⁷⁸ Howard, *Always Comes Evening* (San Francisco: Underwood – Miller, 1977), p.24.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.75. See also ‘Hymn of Hatred’ in the same volume. Hatred is not always a blunt instrument for Howard. His poem ‘Retribution’ is built upon the familiar revenge-hate thematic, but is given an extra dimension, even poignancy, by the addition of despair; the revenge is unsatisfying.

²⁸⁰ Moorcock, *Wizardry*, p.81.

²⁸¹ de Camp, *Warlocks*, p.173.

content/protagonist motivation naturally encourages a charged style. The milieu Howard created for sword-&-sorcery is one of intensity; in a form punctuated by physical violence, emotional violence (hate or fear) is a linking effect that enables an overall intensity, all complemented by the aforementioned stylistic violence.

Rudolph Otto's Numinous

Howard's imitators deployed his typical mannerisms with gusto, but were usually far less ambitious in combining violence with an engagement with the numinous. Though I make no claim that he consciously incorporated the concept into his stories, Rudolph Otto's idea of a three-part pre-religious non-rational experience fits strikingly what Howard created in sword-&-sorcery.²⁸²

other interpretations

I also researched the work of other writers on the numinous or sublime, investigating possible links to Howard's work. These sources have included Arthur Machen's concept of 'ecstasy' expounded in *Hieroglyphics* (1902), René Girard's 'Violence and the Sacred', the writings of Luce Irigaray and Georges Bataille. I found Girard's ideas to have the most relevance to my research. For example the idea of ritual sacrifice as an inexact imitation of an initial act suggests an analogy with genre, which potentially connected interestingly with my observations of genre in looking at post-Howardian sword-&-sorcery, complementing references to Joanna Russ's model of genre decay and change. Girard's postulation of violence generating from sameness rather than difference/otherness and the consequent treatment of twins in some cultures touched interestingly on a sibling relationship at the centre of *The Shadow Cycles*. But I noted that his conception of violence did not appear to encompass linguistic considerations. Irigaray's work seemed generated predominantly with a concern with gender. Certainly Howard's writing seems only nominally (even contrivedly) interested in the female, as I touch upon in the 'The Frost Giant's Daughter' case study below – and sword-&-sorcery's socially conscious post-Howardian attempts to produce female sensibiltied models of the form (such as the 'Swords & Sorceresses' anthologies of the last century) have failed to produce a sword-&-sorcery Kathy Acker(!) My reading of Bataille was promising, particularly the idea of violence as a dual internal and external phenomenon. Yet Howard's physicality was not the sexual physicality addressed by both Girard and Bataille. Additionally, perhaps excepting Machen, all the above appeared to

²⁸² Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

approach the concept of violence from rational viewpoints – the concept of an economy of violence or violent energy inescapably suggests a logic, whereas my use of the concept when writing *The Shadow Cycles* has been from a non or pre rational base. In fact my central idea of sword-&-sorcery as *potentially* not just a yoking but a coalescing of violence and the numinous (a word not found, I believe, in the works of the above-mentioned theorists) seemed finally to fit most effectively into Rudolph Otto's concept.

otto's mysterium tremendum

Otto's components, which he collectively names the '*mysterium tremendum*', are 'overpoweringness', 'energy' or 'urgency', and 'awefulness' or 'unapproachability'. I would argue that Howard's most powerful sword-&-sorcery incorporates all three of these elements and that the stories which lack any of the three are less effective. It might even be said that these elements mirror the three Howardian technical violences. It would be unwise to push correspondences too far, but the violence and pungency of Howard's imagery could be regarded as plausibly analogous to Otto's 'overpoweringness', and his 'urgency' to the tautness and pace generated by the sonority and rhythm of Howard's prose discussed above. Content and pace of plot might also be seen as analogous to ideas of 'power' and 'urgency'. Power, if defined as potential as much as actual/kinetic violence, also equates with Howard's protagonists and antagonists who seek power, exude power or have the potential to enact it through arms or magic. Finally, the element of unapproachability or the supernatural, of otherness, is a key foundation of Howard's sword-&-sorcery. The supernatural, otherness and power often combine in Howard's protagonists.

Herron lists three major points of Howardian artistry which again form an analogue to Otto's three points of the numinous with 'narrative drive' paralleling energy/urgency, 'supernatural' elements analogous to the absolute unapproachable, and 'savagery and despair' equating to power.²⁸³ These characteristics again suggest that Howard's writing has its roots in the Gothic, with Gramlich arguing that his sword-&-sorcery tales are in essence a consequence of 'mining' the Gothic and 'mix[ing] it with history and fantasy' while at the same time imbuing the result with intensified 'horror elements'.²⁸⁴ Guillard's essay in *The Barbaric Triumph* also notes the affinities between 'heroic fantasy' and the Gothic, observing

²⁸³ Don Herron, 'The Dark Barbarian' in *The Dark Barbarian*, 149-181 (p.169).

²⁸⁴ Charles A. Gramlich, 'Robert E. Howard in the Gothic Tradition' in *The Dark Man*, number 8, pp.15, 17.

how ‘Violence in its most sensuous and unbridled aspects is one of the components that make up the frenzy common to both genres.’²⁸⁵

Otto sees the sublime as a lesser, paler version of the numinous.²⁸⁶ (It is plausible to regard such a differentiation as analogous to a differentiation between sword-&-sorcery and high fantasy, with the Howardian form, with its close ties to the Gothic producing a greater intensity of experience.) Nevertheless it is still useful to examine Edmund Burke’s ideas in more detail.²⁸⁷ Both Burke and Otto cite darkness, solitude and silence as evocative triggers of the sublime/numinous effect: ‘In *general* privations are great, because they are all terrible,’ Burke writes, listing ‘vacuity, darkness, solitude and silence’ (p.71). He also acknowledges violent emotion as an aspect of the sublime - ‘delightful horror’ as he calls it - and goes further: ‘Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime,’ he maintains (p.58). However Burke still rationalizes: his essay ‘is founded on reason’ and argues for the categorization of feelings ‘upon solid and sure principles’ (p.53). For Otto however, the numinous cannot be rationalized and this irrationality is crucial to the effect of Howard’s work.

I now intend to analyse two of Howard’s stories in specific relation to violence and numinous elements which not only combine but interweave into the predicated Howardian intensity. That is, physical, emotional and stylistic violence, and the numinous qualities of overpoweringness, energy/urgency, and absolute unapproachability. These are ‘Worms of the Earth’ (1932), which I consider the most successful, in fact almost archetypal as sword-&-sorcery and the Conan story ‘The Frost Giant’s Daughter’ (1976).²⁸⁸

worms of the earth

‘Worms of the Earth’, a story of Bran Mak Morn, king of the Picts, is my touchstone for defining Howardian Ur-text sword-&-sorcery.

After witnessing one of his people crucified by the Romans, Bran resolves to obtain revenge by striking a bargain with a race even more ancient than his own, a race that has degenerated into something inhuman, the eponymous ‘worms’. Here Howard’s

²⁸⁵ Lauric Guillard, ‘Barbarism and Decadence’ in *The Barbaric Triumph*, 79-94 (p.87) The essay is translated by Donald Sidney-Fryer.

²⁸⁶ Otto, *Holy*, p.41.

²⁸⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* ed. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

²⁸⁸ Howard, ‘Worms of the Earth’, *Weird Tales*, November 1932, reprinted in *Worms of the Earth* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1974) pp.133-184; ‘The Frost Giant’s Daughter’ in *Rogues in the House* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1976), pp.71-91. Page references in the case studies are from these editions and are given parenthetically.

characteristically powerful style is immediately present: ‘A rude cross lay flat upon the barren earth and on it was bound a man - half-naked, wild of aspect with his corded limbs, glaring eyes and shock of tangled hair’ (134).

In fact the opening scene (or, again, tableau) is a demonstration of the effectiveness of restraint. Bran remains outwardly passive even though his emotions boil inside. This demonstrates the power of ‘potential’ violence or emotional violence over ‘kinetic’ violence or physical violence, which Howard often favours: ‘he was an image of dynamic potentialities pent in with iron self-control’ (135). This might refer to the writer equally as much as the character, but of more interest is the way Howard employs Coffman’s ‘action packing’ in an opening that is broadly static, albeit punctuated by moments of physical violence. Howard’s vivid loaded imagery technique in a restrained scene adds tension. Emotional violence here is created through style as well as content, affecting the reader as well as the characters; in the sword-&-sorcery milieu created by Howard, all gaps between physical violence are emotionally violent through this device and foreshadowing. Such charged style sometimes falls away in the work of other/later/more literary S&S writers – particularly in the quieter, less physical parts of a story.

This introductory scene also employs an image which Howard uses time and again, the combination of fire and eyes. Madness, fatalism, darkness, are similarly typical Howardian elements/images:

He was dark, but he did not resemble the Latins around him. There was about him none of the warm, almost Oriental sensuality of the Mediterranean which coloured their features. [...] Not his were the full curving lips, nor the rich waving locks suggestive of the Greek. Nor was his dark complexion the rich olive of the south; rather it was the bleak darkness of the north. The whole aspect of the man vaguely suggested the shadowed mists, the gloom, the cold and icy winds of the naked northern lands. *Even his black eyes were savagely cold, like black fires burning through fathoms of ice* (134-5, my italics).

The final sentence again echoes the idea of restrained, potential violence, through the oxymoronic image of cold fire.

The three facets of Otto’s numinous effect are also present in the story.

Within the first three pages Howard mentions power and vitality, corresponding to the urgency facet of the *Mysterium Tremendum*. The same facet is found stylistically in the particularly energetic prose mentioned above which Howard employs for the story.

Otto's facet of 'overpoweringness' can be identified not only in his protagonist, as noted above, but also in the inhuman race which aids Bran's vengeance: 'He felt the gnawings of a strange misgiving, as if they had tampered with powers of unknown breadth and depth, and had loosed forces which he could not control' (177).

This possibility of loss of control is a frequent leitmotif in Howard's protagonists. Howard ends this same paragraph with the question 'Had They retained any of the attributes of humanity at all?' and this yokes 'power' to 'otherness' which is the facet of Otto's numinous most vital to the story: absolute unapproachability. In fact 'Worms of the Earth' is founded, style and plot, upon the idea of 'absolute unapproachability', in this case the idea that the phenomenon under consideration cannot be adequately described or directly encountered: "'Man, are you mad?' she asked, 'that in your madness you come seeking that from which strong men fled screaming in old times?'" (156).

This conflates, as cause and effect, hate and madness.²⁸⁹ The cause here is Bran's driving lust for vengeance: 'Hate and black passion for vengeance seethed in him' (144), and "'But it is madness,' cried Gonar. 'You will perish in the attempt you plan - you will go down to Hell and you will not return!'" (146). The rationalizing hate element of Howard's emotional violence is thus leading his protagonist toward an encounter with madness, the absolutely unapproachable which should result in insanity (the fate of Bran's antagonist at the end of the story):

If you meet any on the Road, you will die as no mortal man has died in long centuries. The stone is not guarded, as men guard their treasures... Perhaps They will be near, perhaps not... Beware, king of Pictdom! Remember it was your folk who, so long ago, cut the thread that bound Them to human life. They were almost human then - they overspread the land and knew the sunlight. Now they have drawn *apart*. They know not the sunlight and they shun the light of the moon. Even the starlight they hate. Far, far apart have they drawn, who might have been men in time, but for the spears of your ancestors. (160)

The same hatred, one of the two aforementioned aspects of Howard's emotional violence, is driven home via a use of Howard's proliferative eye/fire images: 'In the black eyes flared a red wave of unquenchable hatred;' (138).

²⁸⁹ In 'Storm of Shadow' I suggest that sometimes Howard utilizes hate as a conflation of madness and deathwish, and that sometimes he uses hate as a rationalized and rationalizing gateway into berserker fury.

Often the eye image and madness are connected. The eye is a symbol of perception - thus, if the eye is described as being insane or perhaps (as frequently) burning, the implications stretch beyond characterization and into ontological considerations. And while madness can be seen as analogous to Otto's 'absolute unapproachable', it also may be equated to the 'energy' aspect of his numinous - as can the heat/fire aspect of the eye image. This is a prime example of how the Howardian aspects of violence can mirror and interweave with the three aspects of Otto's numinous, thus focusing and enhancing the intensity of a story.

But it is the 'unapproachable' aspect in particular, in its interpretation of referring to something oblique or obscure, that drives home the intensity of 'Worms of the Earth'. This is the same withholding which provides the frisson of some Gothic novels, of the antiquarian ghost story, in more suggestive horror stories rather than the visceral gross-out variety.

Stephen King addresses this idea extensively in relation to horror:

What's behind the door or lurking at the top of the tower stairs is never as frightening as the door or the staircase itself. And because of this, comes the paradox: the artistic work of horror is almost always a disappointment. It is the classic no-win situation. You can scare people with the unknown for a long, long time [...] but sooner or later, as in poker, you have to turn your down cards up. You have to open the door and show your audience what's behind it. And if what happens to be behind it is a bug, not ten but a hundred feet tall, the audience heaves a sigh of relief (or utters a scream of relief), and thinks, 'A bug a hundred feet tall is pretty horrible, but I can deal with that. I was afraid it might be a *thousand* feet tall.' The thing is - and a pretty good thing for the human race, too, with such neat-keeno things to deal with as Dachau, Hiroshima, the Children's Crusade, mass starvation in Cambodia, and what happened in Jonestown, Guyana - the human consciousness can deal with almost anything...which leaves the writer or director of the horror tale with a problem which is the psychological equivalent of inventing a faster-than-light space drive in the face of $E=MC^2$.

There is and always has been a school of horror writers [...] who believe that the way to beat this rap is to never open the door at all.²⁹⁰

This 'school' is in tune with Burke's conception of the Sublime. A section of his examination on the subject deals with obscurity. 'To make any thing very terrible,' he states,

²⁹⁰ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London:Futura,1982), pp.133-34.

‘obscurity seems in general to be necessary.’²⁹¹ He goes on to develop the point, significantly for sword-&-sorcery, in addressing the effects of painting and poetry:

It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it *affecting* to the imagination. If I make a drawing of a palace, or a temple, or a landscape, I present a very clear idea of those objects; but then (allowing for the effect of imitation which is something) my picture can at most affect only as the palace, temple, or landscape would have affected in the reality. On the other hand, the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give, raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than I could do by the best painting. [...] In reality a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever. [...] So that poetry with all its obscurity, has a more general as well as a more powerful dominion over the passions than the other art. And I think there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than the clear. It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions.

King goes on to say that Lovecraft would open the door, but ‘only a crack’.²⁹² Indeed, ‘to open the door, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred,’ he admits, ‘is to destroy the unified, dreamlike effect of the best horror’.²⁹³ Nevertheless, he still maintains he would rather, ‘yank the door open at some point in the festivities; I’d rather turn my hole cards face up’.²⁹⁴

Many contemporary horror writers follow King’s line. However, Farah Mendlesohn, in discussing liminal fantasy, states: ‘To cross the portal is to confront the illusion, but confrontation [...] reduces rather than intensifies the fantastic.’²⁹⁵

Often Howard will open the door in his sword-&-sorcery; many of these stories manifest monstrosities, shifting these from Todorov’s ‘fantastic’ category into the ‘marvellous’.²⁹⁶ It is worth mentioning that Howard quickly abandoned attempts to write in the Lovecraftian ‘unspeakable unglimped’ horror style.²⁹⁷ Since the supernatural is a given in the sword-&-sorcery milieu, the transition lacks the sharp purity of the type of ghost story

²⁹¹ Burke, *Enquiry*, p.58.

²⁹² King, *Danse*, p.135.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.136.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.136.

²⁹⁵ Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics*, introduction XXIV.

²⁹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993, rpt.).

²⁹⁷ See Ben Solon’s ‘Howard’s Cthuloid Tales’ in *The Blade of Conan*, ed. L.S. de Camp (New York: Ace Books, 1979), pp.143-47.

where such a transition takes place – however Howard’s frequent use of the numinous envelope mentioned earlier means that some of the frictional/frissonal intensity of the Todorovian fantastic can still be reaped.

In ‘Worms of the Earth’ Howard actually uses the door metaphor: ‘no race, no form of life but is close-knit somehow, by some manner, to the rest of Life and the world. Somewhere there is a thin link connecting *those* I seek to the world I know. Somewhere there is a Door’ (147).

This suggests that the concept of ‘unapproachability’, interpreted as obliqueness or a form of anticlosure, can encompass both diegetic and extra-diegetic effects. Suggestion through obliqueness dominates ‘Worms’: ‘Clammy sweat beaded his flesh and he hastened to the best of his ability, ears strained for some stealthy sound to betray that fell shapes were at his heels’ (163).²⁹⁸

Bran could not see the limits of the place into which he had come:

‘Many caves in these hills,’ said Atla, her voice sounding small and strangely brittle in the vastness, ‘are but doors to greater caves which lie beneath, even as a man’s words and deeds are but small indications of the dark caverns of murky thought lying behind and beneath.’

And now Bran was aware of movement in the gloom. The darkness was filled with stealthy noises not like those made by any human foot. Abruptly sparks began to flash and float in the blackness, like flickering fireflies. Closer they came until they girdled him in a wide half-moon. And beyond the ring gleamed other sparks, a solid sea of them, fading away in the gloom until the farthest were mere tiny pinpoints of light. And Bran knew they were the slanted eyes of the beings who had come upon him in such numbers that his brain reeled at the contemplation - and at the vastness of the cavern. (168-9)

Atla’s speech strikes a significant chord in terms of the idea of suggestion as a potent effect in horror and other types of fiction. As noted above, the images of darkness, vastness, and (by focus on sound) silence are all listed by Otto as concepts or effects which suggest the numinous. All three pervade the story: ‘Into the *dim* fens of the west came Bran Mak Morn. A cold wind breathed across the *gloomy waste*’ [my emphasis] (151). This vital element of suggestion is fatally marred in the graphic adaptation of the story in ‘Savage Sword of

²⁹⁸ There is a suggestion of Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’(1798) here: ‘Because he knows, a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread.’

Conan' no. 19 and in the illustrations in the Grant edition of the Bran Mak Morn stories 'Worms of the Earth'.

There are numerous other instances of the use of suggestion over solidity in the story: Their low hissing speech floated up to him, and he shuddered as his imagination visualized, not a throng of biped creatures, but a swarming, swaying, myriad of serpents, gazing up at him with their glittering, unwinking eyes. (174)

He swam faster, not frightened, but wary [...] Looking back he saw the waters swirl and subside [...] He had discounted the ancient legend which made Dagon's Mere the lair of a nameless water-monster, but now he had a feeling as if his escape had been narrow. (176)

An obscure, shuddery premonition shook him, and he spurred the stallion into swift canter. (178)

He strained his eyes, trying to make out the shapes of those who ringed him. But he glimpsed only billowing masses of shadow which heaved and writhed and squirmed with almost fluid consistency. (181)

Just below this final quotation is another example of the recurring concept that to actually see the object or creature hinted at will result in madness. The target of Bran's vengeance, Titus Sulla, sees what Bran has only glimpsed: "They harmed him not!" Atla's hateful laugh slashed the sick silence. 'It was what he saw *and came to know* that broke his brain!' [my emphasis] (182). This also suggests the concept of seeing as knowledge, thereby linking knowledge and madness - madness as a form of knowledge, perhaps. This gives extra significance to Howard's frequent use of the eye as an image.

It may be that the frequent use of suggestion in the form is one reason why the word 'shadow' is almost ubiquitous in sword-&-sorcery fiction.

'Worms of the Earth' also takes place largely underground, exploiting the Chthonic sensibility listed in my 'Storm of Shadow' set of motifs, a sensibility both physical and psychical and often touched on in sword-&-sorcery. The chthonic can be seen as facilitating the six Howard/Otto violences. In terms of stylistic violence, the strangeness or awkwardness or freshness of style can create a sense of an unknowingness in the reader. In terms of physical/kinetic violence, the chthonic is found in the manipulation of vivid and suggestive imagery, particularly characteristic of Howard's deployment of kinetic violence. In terms of emotional/potential violence, for example dread, the chthonic's restriction of knowledge heightens the sense of unknowingness: not knowing what lurks at the top of the stairs, at the bottom of the stairs, within the cave, in the darkness. (It might be argued that the Balrog and

Shelob sequences in *The Lord of the Rings* - cited by some critics as the most effective parts of the book - are closer to sword-&-sorcery than high fantasy, because of that very chthonic element. A point that Steven Tompkins's 'Two Towers' essay overlooks in his comparisons between the forms. These are particularly intense parts of Tolkien's book –thus it may be suggested that sword-&-sorcery in its characteristically short form can achieve greater sustained intensity.) In terms of Otto's three numinous violences, the concept of the absolute unapproachable is an obvious and strong analogue to the chthonic. Urgency/energy, is facilitated by the speculative dynamic of anticipation/apprehension of the narrowing of knowledge characteristic of the chthonic. Finally, the numinous category of overpoweringness is enhanced by the chthonic through a different route; the narrowing of knowledge creates dual effects in the reader through anxiety: firstly, a sense of the reader's own lack of control and the sense of the alterity of some power beyond the reader. This otherness can be focused on the character(s), or milieu, or plot causality (where contrary to established storytelling good practice, improbable twists can be beneficial).

the frost giant's daughter

With its central numinous envelope in the form of an ambiguous dream-like chase, 'The Frost Giant's Daughter'²⁹⁹ again demonstrates the double helix of violences that entwine around Howardian sword-&-sorcery narrative. (In fact chase sequences perhaps uniquely conflate potential and kinetic violence.) Stylistically the prose has the same energy which 'Worms of the Earth' evokes - but there is a different balance between potential and kinetic violences, with WOTE containing more potential violence than TFGD.

The story's primary characteristic, even what the story is about, is energy, manifested stylistically and diegetically by Conan's urgent drive toward the mysterious girl who is finally revealed as Ymir's daughter:

Before him, swaying like a sapling in the wind, stood a woman. Her body was like ivory to his dazed eyes, and save for a light veil of gossamer, she was naked as the day. Her slender bare feet were whiter than the snow they spurned. She laughed down at the bewildered warrior. Her laughter was sweeter than the rippling of silvery fountains, and poisonous with cruel mockery. (74)

²⁹⁹Howard, *Rogues in the House* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1976). To repeat, all following references to this story relate to this publication. The story has a complicated history. It was rejected by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright in 1932. Howard rewrote, altering the protagonist, and it appeared as 'Gods of the North' in the amateur magazine *Fantasy Fan* in 1932. Subsequently Sprague de Camp edited the story, restoring Conan as the protagonist, and published it several times, first in the collection *The Coming of Conan* (New York: Gnome Press, 1953). The Grant edition is the first time the original unedited version was published.

Sex is a part of this drive, however Howard's female protagonists, though sensual, are not sex objects *per se*. Rather they are channels for the numinous, none more so than Belit, the pirate in 'Queen of the Black Coast', whose introductory description is full of sensuous, engaged imagery:

Belit sprang before the blacks, beating down their spears. She turned toward Conan, her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing. Fierce fingers of wonder caught at his heart.³⁰⁰

And she danced, like the spin of a desert whirlwind, like the leaping of a quenchless flame, like the urge of creation and the urge of death. Her white feet spurned the bloodstained deck and dying men forgot death as they gazed frozen at her.³⁰¹

There is clear energy and violence here; even bosoms 'heave'. These are not only characteristics of Howard's writing, but also key into Otto's numinous triad. When Conan comes across a mysterious female he seems hypnotised - or rather fascinated - as with Belit, the frost giant's daughter Atali, and even, more subtly, Akivasha, the immortal princess from *The Hour of the Dragon*: 'He hesitated, then made up his mind; after all, he was as much in her power as she was in his.'³⁰²

Schweitzer mentions the sado-masochist element in some of Howard's writing:

What did Howard think of the sadism in his stories? He understood the climate of the times as well as anyone. He was more interested in making his stories 'as bloody and brutal as the ages and the incidents I was trying to depict actually were.' [...] Howard didn't care for torturing girls in his stories, but did so because he felt the readers demanded it, and editor Wright allowed it to go on because he thought so too.³⁰³

In the list of books in Howard's library appended to *The Dark Barbarian*, there are two books on the subject of flagellation.³⁰⁴ It is possible to view this as an indication of a personal interest in the subject or equally evidence of 'research' by a writer who recognized the commercial value in incorporating such scenes into his work. But to dismiss this element in such stories as 'The Slithering Shadow' as no more than commercial calculation might be a little facile - certainly the transgressive element in such sequences fits into a conception of

³⁰⁰ Howard, *Queen*, p.28.

³⁰¹ Ibid., p.31.

³⁰² Howard, *Dragon*, p.216.

³⁰³ Schweitzer, *Conan's World*, p.33.

³⁰⁴ *Barbarian*, pp.183-200.

sword-&-sorcery as being a ‘storm of violences’ with emotional perversity not particularly out of place, and points to another possible link with the Gothic.³⁰⁵

Howard’s female characters are often no more than objects of plot-device desire, but there is a sense of wonder and otherness to Howard’s descriptions of more significant figures. Both Belit and Atali have bare feet which ‘spurn’ deck or snow.³⁰⁶ Belit and Atali, whom Conan pursues over a northern waste in the aftermath of a battle, can easily be viewed as manifestations of a Howardian deathwish, but Atali in particular equally well fits the bill as an embodiment of Otto’s ‘*mysterium fascinans*’, that part of the numinous which might be seen as the antagonistic concept to the effect of ‘absolute unapproachability’:

The qualitative content of the numinous experience, to which the ‘mysterious’ stands as form, is in one of its aspects the element of daunting ‘awefulness’ and ‘majesty’ [...] but it is clear that it has at the same time another aspect, in which it shows itself as something uniquely attractive and fascinating.

These two qualities, the daunting and the fascinating, now combine in a strange harmony of contrasts, and the resultant dual character of the numinous consciousness [...] is at once the strangest and most noteworthy phenomenon in the whole history of religion. The daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time is no less something that *allures with a potent charm*, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it, nay even to *make it somehow his own*.³⁰⁷

The analogy with the situation in ‘The Frost Giant’s Daughter’ is by no means exact - Conan is by no stretch of the imagination cowed - but there are striking similarities of effect. Entwined with Howard’s physical/emotional/stylistic violences defined above, the numinous markers of emptiness and silence are present from the opening of this story, where Conan and one enemy are the only survivors of the battle:

The clangor of the swords had died away, the shouting of the slaughter was hushed, silence lay on the red-stained snow. The bleak pale sun that glittered so blindingly from the ice-fields and the snow-covered plains struck sheens of silver from rent corselet and broken blade, where the dead lay as they had fallen. The

³⁰⁵Howard, ‘The Slithering Shadow’ (variant title ‘Xuthal of the Dusk’), *Weird Tales*, September 1933. Republished under the latter title in *The Coming of Conan* (Random House).

³⁰⁶Howard, *Queen*, p.31. *Rogues*, p.74.

³⁰⁷Otto, *Holy*, p.31. My italics.

nerveless hand yet gripped the broken hilt; helmeted heads, back-drawn in the death-throes, tilted red beards and golden beards grimly upward, as if in last invocation to Ymir the frost-giant, god of a warrior race.

Across the red drifts and mail-clad forms, two figures glared at each other. In the utter desolation only they moved. The frosty sky was over them, the white illimitable plain around them, the dead men at their feet. Slowly through the corpses they came, as ghosts might come to a tryst through the shambles of a dead world. In the brooding silence they stood face to face. (71-73)

‘I have seen the hoar-frost glittering in the sun,’ she answered. ‘I have heard the wind whispering across the everlasting snows.’ (78)

Equally, if not more, importantly, the premise of the story encapsulates Otto’s numinous element of unapproachability. Conan does finally catch Atali, though this has seemed impossible early in the narrative, adding to the ‘power’ of the character. However, she is immediately whisked away from him in a passage which encompasses not only Howard’s three violences but also Otto’s three numinous violences of unapproachability, overpoweringness and energy – and additionally demonstrates how the two combine or intertwine:

Conan was leaping forward, arms spread to seize her, when with a crack like the breaking of an ice mountain, the whole sky leaped into icy fire. The girl’s ivory body was suddenly enveloped in a cold blue flame so blinding that the Cimmerian threw up his hands to shield his eyes from the intolerable blaze. A fleeting instant, sky and snowy hills were bathed in crackling white flames, blue darts of icy light, and frozen crimson fires. Then Conan staggered and cried out. The girl was gone. The glowing snow lay empty and bare; high above his head the witch-lights flashed and played in a frosty sky gone mad, and among the distant blue mountains there sounded a rolling thunder as of a gigantic war-chariot rushing behind steeds whose frantic hoofs struck lightning from the snows and echoes from the skies. (86)

The conflation of heat and cold (icy fire, cold blue flame, icy light, frozen crimson fires) are a typical Howardian stylistic juxtaposition, producing a violent contrast. ‘Threw up his arms to shield his eyes’, though not delving into Conan’s inner life, implies emotional violence experienced by the character, and also suggests Otto’s unapproachability. Madness is a Howardian stylistic and thematic leitmotif and, in its implication of failure of reason or the natural, concomitantly touches again upon unapproachability: ‘sky gone mad’. The ‘gigantic war-chariot’ is an intense image, violent in stylistic power and content, and highly suggestive

of Otto's concept of overpoweringness, while 'frantic hoofs struck lightning' describes a physical violence, and also carries a suggestion of Otto's numinous component of energy/urgency.

Although Atali is seen (and pursued), and her two giant brothers are even more physical, their father, the god Ymir, is only manifested indirectly in this passage. Yet his power and energy are arguably greater because of this oblique manner of (non) appearance, his unapproachability. It is this blend of 'approachable' and 'unapproachable' facets of horror that mark out a potentially distinctive Ur-textual sword-&-sorcery territory. In effect, there is a 'two-door' system operating in the story: the first door is opened fully to reveal the giants – however the second, behind which is Ymir, is only opened fractionally.

There are elements of 'The Frost-Giant's Daughter' which work against the strongest frisson of horror (or the numinous). A dreamlike effect characterizes much of the story. For example, Conan feels no sense of amazement when Atali's two giant brothers appear and confront him: 'He did not wonder at the strangeness of it all, not even when two gigantic figures rose up to bar his way' (82). However this sentence points to an awareness of the strangeness of events on the part of the narrator, a type of distance often found in stories containing dream sequences. Howard's James Allison stories typically afford this dualistic form of distance: 'I must speak of what I saw not alone as Hunwulf, but as James Allison as well.'³⁰⁸

'The Frost-Giant's Daughter' is possibly more lyrical in style than 'Worms of the Earth' and contains much of Howard's characteristic alliteration: 'His mailed feet broke through the frozen crust; he sank deep in the drifts and forged through them by sheer strength. But the girl danced across the snow light as a feather floating across a pool;' (80). The overall effect is possibly more dream, or nightmare-like, than the other story. However 'The Frost-Giant's Daughter' is more concentrated in one important respect, being a vignette: de Camp describes it as a 'a plotless little sketch'.³⁰⁹ In it, plot is reduced to a single incident, with an atmospheric opening and the momentary diversion of Atali's giant brothers. This removal or at least drastic reduction of the cause-and-effect dynamic of conventional plot, actually moves the story structurally closer to the idea of the non-rational which is at the heart of Otto's conception of the numinous.

A valuable additional benefit of comparing the de Camp and Howard versions of this story, as well as 'Drums of Tombalku' mentioned earlier, is how the comparison verifies

³⁰⁸Howard, 'The Garden of Fear' (*The Garden of Fear* booklet, Los Angeles: Crawford, 1945), p.9.

³⁰⁹In de Camp's Howard biography *Dark Valley Destiny* (New York: Bluejay Books Inc.), p.271.

Lovecraft's comment that Howard invested much of himself in his writing. It shows too how de Camp's prose, although more conventionally 'literary', lacks Howard's sensitivity to sound and rhythm. This reinforced for me the hypothesis that a sword-&-sorcery that taps into the Howardian Ur-text has the best chance to reinvigorate the form.

SECTION TWO

THE SHADOW CYCLES

"Blood, and darkness, and fear."

Chapter One

This night, after the day's battle, the swordsman sits in a tavern and broods over the blood.

#

Presently a second swordsman came over and stood over the table of the first. The muzzy conversations about the room all went still.

"Are you Gemmored, of the ice-wastes of Karnath to the north?" asked the second swordsman. He was rangy, and assassin-faced and wore a long cloak that splayed down to show sleekly fashioned armour hauberking his chest.

Gemmored took another solemn draw of his ale and looked nowhere.

"You have a name for skill," the second swordsman smiled. From his side he pulled free a warsword. The stillness in the tavern began to fidget.

"Tomorrow the siege of this city will begin again," said Gemmored. "Have you not had death enough until then?"

The second swordsman smiled again, this time with only half his mouth, and with the tip of his warsword tapped the pale leathern scabbard laid across Gemmored's thighs. "Some say it's the sword that possesses the skill."

Gemmored looked down and lifted the weapon onto the table. He stroked the blade free and laid it beside the scabbard, but did not take his hand away.

It was massive. Longer and broader in the steel than it was natural for a sword to be. There was not so much as a single scratch or nick marring the fluid chevroned watering of its sleek grey flats. The hilt was carved antler bone. At the end of the hilt was a smooth, perfectly round ruby. Gemmored stared at the sword. His eyes were the same colour as the steel.

"There is some truth to that," he said.

At the centre of the gem was a flaw, a particle of blackness. It gave a flicker. Something in the other swordsman's face tightened and he blinked.

While he sheathed his own weapon and left without another word, while the not quite so muzzy talk gradually started up again through the tavern, Gemmored continued to stare at the sword.

Finally he stood. He too was massive. Brutal with muscle. Tall enough for a dark mane to brush the roofbeams. He pulled around his shoulders a cloak of the white pelt of the northern bear and with a mournful slowness resheathed the sword.

Someone shrieked somewhere as he stepped outside. Perhaps an injured soldier losing a limb to the crude skills of a physician.

The city was flared with restless lanterns, people making the most of one more night free, one more night alive. Forges were pounding and glowing, repairing weapons. Beyond the walls the dark plain was riddled with campfires as the besieging forces did the same. Countless fires. They charred the air. As Gemmored had said, there would be death enough tomorrow.

He looked up to judge how far away the sky might be from daybreak and saw a crack of flaming brilliance rifting between stars and void.

#

For a moment he thinks it a fireball catapulted over the walls. But this fire does not rush through the night - it hovers - above him. Nor does it shed light beyond itself. It has a shape which flickers and flurries restlessly and Gemmored feels a kind of fear that is always different and yet the same each time he feels it.

Then the rift plummets and the swordsman is engulfed in a burning which is not pain or anything else he has words for.

Chapter Two

Sstheness ceased undulating on the stone floor. In the hunched hollow centre of Leviathan's petrified heart only the dimmest echoes of teeth snapping together could be heard, yet she raised her head. She twisted out of the foetal and flung her naked body against the wall, clinging, listening.

Her quickening breath came through parted lips. She drove herself harder against the wall, thighs and belly and breasts and cheek. Listening.

#

Then she feels it. The vibration. Leviathan's sullen ghost of a heartbeat kneading her own.

#

Her fingerstalls - long, wicked, part-claws part-sigils - twitched. A breath darted in and she dug them into the stone and drew them down, a stairway of gasps jerking from her throat.

She slipped back from the concave chill of the wall and watched, trembling. Something swelled from the scores and oozed down to pool on the floor.

She eased down in front of it, crossed her legs. She wrapped her arms around herself in defence against something other than the cold. Her sigil-thorns began to twitch again, this time cutting into the flesh of her shoulders.

#

Bleeding. Sstheness loves the bleeding. The sweet familiar bleeding. Every part of her is covered with scars, remembrances of pain. But even they can't comfort her now.

#

The pool of discharge from the inner wall of Leviathan's heart congealed quickly into a wafer of slick.

#

Sstheness sniffs and from the quality of foetor knows it to be ready.

#

One hand unwillingly left her crimsoned shoulders and slid its sculpted appendants beneath the wafer. It made a gently tearing suck of a sound as Sstheness levered it up.

And over.

A stigmata began to resolve on the exposed glistening underside. A pictogram.

A sword.

Chapter Three

Ruddy ravines of dawn still lingered in the sky and the seamews wheeled and moaned.

Zantalliz stood on the reef beyond the isle, head bowed and dreamlost. His raywing cape was still damp from his swim and clung to his back. The storm in the night had left some of its rage behind. Foaming waves worried at his feet and winds spat salt into his hair and exquisitely boned face.

Finally he raised his long slender brows and strange eyes to watch the war-ships approaching.

#

They surge their high broad prows over the nameless sea. Zantalliz knows that no sooner will they anchor off the reef than boats will be dropped and heaved over the coral, then rowed fiercely across the clear green lagoon. Then the first of the warriors will leap down and stride ashore. They will be helmed and mailed, grim jawed or shouting, malicious grins ripping their faces, teeth the colour of scar-tissue, sword or halberd or bow or death of some other shape in hand. Zantalliz imagines them stamping onto the coral. Imagines them coming toward him. Wonders what the pierce of iron feels like. His stomach hardens but some kinds of fear are acceptable. Some kinds of fear are not tainted.

#

Zantalliz walked forward. Polyps and sponges and anemones swelled above the water to meet his steps. Bright shimmering little shoals darted around his feet. He stopped at the edge of the reef.

Zantalliz raised his arms from beneath his cape and in them rested a large scallop. He breathed on a lockless nacre clasp and before the bloom of moisture could shrink away the clasp loosed itself. The two halves of the shell spread out over his forearms and hands. Fastened at the hinge were translucently fine pages covered in symbols and shapes. His thumbs stroked the furrowed backs of the shell as if it were in need of calming. The diaphanous pages rushed over as if struggling to escape their binding. Then, although the wind was as gusting as ever, they stopped.

Zantalliz brought his eyes down again and began to read. His lips moved slowly at first, then more quickly, tracing the symbols on the page with murmurs. The symbols began to stir. By the time he moved onto the opposite page the sky was overcast.

The symbols on the second also stirred, sluggishly at first, stretching, contracting, pulling apart, weaving into new patterns, changing from curving rolling shapes to sharp daggerish slashes.

By the time Zantalliz reached the end of the page the clouds had clustered out the new day.

#

As he reaches the end the page whips over and he glances up. Still the ships come. Their sails now wrestle with the strengthening wind, but still they come. The sea is no longer ocean but sail. Even calling back the storm will be useless. He will die. All his race, waiting on the isle, will be slain. All their books bound in scollop shell or driftwood, shelved within caverns and honeycombs and grottos of reef coral, browsed by rays and sharks, wandered by sea stars and crabs, every precious one of them will be dredged up from the sea. Will be rent and spat upon and burned. Zantalliz feels something rear in him which is unacceptable, and returns to the book.

#

The symbols on this page feverishly rilled about as he spoke. Darting and rippling like the shoals at his feet. The wind shrieked and tore at his cape. The first lightning cracked across the sky like jagged spite.

#

And now there is the deep fear which always comes in the performance of such a task as this, the fear that beckons to the heart and can always be recognized but never known. Zantalliz feels laughter bubbling up like maniacal vomit as he shrieks back into the wind.

#

At first it looked like another rip of lightning. But it crackled crimson, and had a flickering horizontal span edged with blue. And it streaked down at Zantalliz not in a blind crooked path, but straight, as after prey.

Chapter Four

In the heart of Leviathan, Sstheness again pressed her body against the wall. She listened again to the ghostly monstrous pulse, felt it lumber through the twisting tendrils of passages, felt it shiver the icy harshness of the wall.

One of her sigil-thorns smoothed a damp curl of hair from her eyes, carefully incising her brow in the same delicate act, before it joined the other fingerstalls sinking into the wall and again sliding down the stone.

Her gasps were louder this time.

#

While she waits for the discharge to pool on the floor, a pearl of blood trickles from her brow and past her temple and cheekbone. Her tongue tip curls out and pricks it. But Sstheness quickly tires of the aching effort of delicacy. Again her claws cross and reach and saw at her naked shoulders until the wafer is ready.

This time the stigmata on the underside of the congealant forms into a pictogram of a book.

Chapter Five

They pulled through the darkness. Smoothly straining on the oars... glistening, sinewy men and women... hauling another stroke of dark ocean behind the triremes...

Pulled. Backs curling over... pushing the oarhafts down and forward... lifting the oarhafts... plunging the blades into the sea...

Pulled. Each long, disciplined breath as one... each bank of straining arms... each spine bending, hunching, arching... another oarstroke further... another oarstroke nearer...

Pulled. Each dragonreme... under the guiding stars... under the darkness... over the darkness... through the darkness...

The time had come. The Phoenix was choosing her prey. Soon they would arrive and the galleys must be there to meet them.

Chapter Six

The spider paused one final moment on the palpitating chest of the prince who was stretched taut across the wheel. It crept along the snapped body and over the eyes that glared like mad cinders at the ceiling of the torture vault. It dropped to the floor among the gloomy shapes of braziers and chains and racks. It scuttled for the steps.

The iguana squirmed its way swiftly up the steps. The cries from the city above grew louder in its ears as it climbed.

They were louder still as the raven fluttered from the palace balcony into the vermillion sky.

#

The city is turmoiled with screaming. The raven knows that the streets below are surging whorls of panic, but doesn't look down. It glides with cold satisfaction on the updraught of the horror above sacrificial teocallis and between agate spires that elbow their angles into the twilight.

#

From time to time an arrow hissed up past the raven's wings, but never near enough. A curse came with it. And sometimes a name. Both falling away like the arrows.

The raven alighted on the dizzying gatearch set into the city walls. It looked over the pampas. Behind it the city still howled. Men. Women. Children.

#

But it doesn't look back.

The realm called Aftermath knows only twilight, but twilight is enough to see what it leaves behind, what is turning the entire city into a torture vault. It's the sight which is turning them mad.

#

The raven fluttered down toward the skittish mare waiting at the base of the wall. The old tatterdemalion of a rider urged the mare away from the city of angled agate spires. The battered feathers of his ragged manta riffled behind him like wings.

#

The tatterdemalion's name is Harnak. He rides from the gate on one of the five roads that stretch their paving towards mesas reduced to rubble by distance. It was along another of these roads that he had led the madness to the city.

Perhaps another yet would take him away from the seething red and yellow and blue light appearing in the sky? The light whose shape is as undulating as his own. The light which travels as straight as any road. The light whose speed is faster than any horse.

Harnak pauses.

Even if there is no escape he could at least spur back to the city and witness its final throes? Return to the palace for a last glimpse at the broken corpse of the prince?

But it's too late even for that.

Chapter Seven

Leviathan's heart was clammy with sweat and blood and Sstheness' teetering breaths. The underpeal of the next slick wafer was a spider... no, a cat... no, a bird... no, a man... no...

She staggered up and again clawed at Leviathan's heartwall. This time, from the new wound, not one but two rivulets began to flow.

Chapter Eight

The shouts of the navigators, one standing on the bowsprit of each dragonreme, their sole duty to look into the sky, go up almost in unison.

Almost as one the banks of oarcrew pause. Their arms drop out of the cadence of urgent strain.

Many twist on their benches, turn and lift their heads to see. At last. Some sit stiffly, staring over the sterns across the dark vastness behind the ships.

When the Phoenix chooses its prey. The words have come to mean 'perhaps never' over the generations. Or perhaps 'in my children's time, or my children's children's'. But now...

They're afraid.

They're all afraid; the oarcrew; the Sword-Mariners, men and women in jerkins and breeks of tight otherworldly mail; the oarmasters, one to each ship; the helm, one to each ship's rudder-vanes; even the navigators. But the fear of the first ones who turn and look up is different from the fear of the others. It beckons their eyes. Then the first cries and mutters of astonishment and awe go out and all the rest of them, every last one on every ship, looks up.

#

A flame flickered down between the stars, arcing and falling, a blue coma waked by red and white and yellow flurry.

#

The first choice of the Phoenix.

Chapter Nine

The desert was littered with bloody stains. Flies already swarmed over the battlefield, seeking the open wounds of the slain before the suns could burn them dry.

Only two figures rose above the charnel layer of hoods and blades and jihad swaddlings to throw shadows.

#

One is a squat, capering, mewling form. The followers of Geemass, lord of ghosts, always bring such a mind-shattered token into their battles. He scampers over the sand, twirling and slobbering. His sandaled toes stab and stagger between bloodstains in a dance that insanely veers, step to step, from delight to terror.

#

Only two figures rose above the charnel layer of hoods and blades and jihad swaddlings to throw shadows.

One was a squat, capering, mewling form.

The other...

#

Gel stands on a dune of sand and blood and corpse. Tall. Unhooded. The yawning hollows of his cheeks. The cruel jut of the bones. His hair is lank and copious and ethereally fine, so fine that the dome of his skull would be plainly visible beneath even a single sun.

#

He stood with his hands grasping his labrys just below the twin steaming heads. The end of the haft rested on the mound. It was as tall as he. The sweeping crescents of blade were red. Not streaked or splashed - the colour flushed the metal as if from within. No fly came near it.

#

For Gel killing is a sensual pleasure, but aftertasted with guilt and self-pity. His eyes are closed, the trembling lids shutting all three in.

#

The mewling talisman of the lord of ghosts continued to dance.

The labrys to flush.

Gel's eyes remained shut, blind to a new sun that appeared in the sky, burning differently than the others, more frantically...

Chapter Ten

Some of the Sword-Mariners of the first dragonreme to reach Gemmored sent down a rope and hauled him up out of the sea. He rested on hands and knees on the deck for a moment, breathing deep. He pulled the great white pelt on his back more firmly across his shoulders and stood.

The first of the five to plunge out of the sky.

The first choice of the Phoenix.

A cuirassed giant. Dark-maned. Taller and wider than any Mariner. It had taken seven, nine to pull him aboard. And the scabbard at his side held a sword twice the length of their own, even if it had not been straight but arced like theirs. Its pommel was a smooth, perfectly round ruby.

Another shout came from a navigator on another dragonreme.

Another flame speared down through the stars. The second choice of the Phoenix.

Then another shout, but this one different. Eyes dragged away from the sky or from the giant and looked across the sea.

More ships were coming. Sitting lower, rising a bank of oars higher than the dragonremes. Quinqueremes. Catapults and spiked boarding planks craned out of their decks. Cold, anxious murmurs broke out.

Below the decks of the dragonremes the wolves had begun to howl.

Chapter Eleven

Rorn walked slowly across the silica viewing floor, steel-studded boots echoing through the cavernous hall unchallenged. A mordant smile kinked his lips as he looked down into one gigantic crucible after another.

So. It was true.

#

He's visited such exalted rooms before, and always, as now, without permission. But those few who sometimes walk outside the Beckoning Mansions are forbidden no way or chamber within them.

The kind who walk outside, Rorn's kind, usually feign respect for petty laws and lawmakers. They observe tiresome edicts they could break at will without punishment. Rorn, though, prefers honest disobedience, relishes the looks of affront and reproach.

#

"Waste-Ranger!" someone called. "What brings you to the prophecy vats?"

"To see for myself," said Rorn, turning. "Or rather not."

It was a young man, a scryer, so young that he could be hardly more than an apprentice. The affront was there, and the reproach too, on the smooth intent face. But at Rorn's words the scryer's expression collapsed into uncertainty, blinking like a child trying to understand dread.

Rorn turned his back, hooked his thumbs into his belt, wandered across the floor looking down at one vat then another.

"So it's true."

#

Rorn remembers his last visit. The vats were lambent, winding umber and magenta and cyan and ochre and celadon, entwining the spectra of possibility.

#

"Come here."

The young scryer uncertainly walked over and stood next to Rorn. He looked ahead, at the great quartz wall of the hall, rather than down. Rorn kept staring through the transparent floor into the vats. The magma of prediction was stilled and black.

"It's as the rumours say. The future's at an end."

"Is word spreading?" asked the scryer.

"All over the mansion."

"What of the other vats in the other mansions?"

Rorn's lips soured. "Questions must feel odd in a scryer's mouth."

"This is not the fault of the scryers. Some will no doubt blame us but –" Rorn swung about, his shoulder roughly jolting the scryer, and stalked away. He came to a window in the quartz wall and looked out across the realm of Nightwake.

The scryer steadied himself and reluctantly peered down. "It may not be so." His voice was strained. "It may be that the prophecy vats still show us what's to come."

"You mean darkness?" Rorn laughed like a slap. "Darker than this?"

#

He looks across a wreckage of utter unending night, unsullied by moons or stars, prowled by things suited to blindness and ruin. A realm where man clings to survival in impregnable noctilucous mansions. Only a few can and do step outside these to take messages of possibility and comfort across the dark.

#

"Waste-Ranger!"

Rorn spun and ran as the scryer shouted.

"The vat!"

Rorn ran, skidded, almost fell coming to a halt. There was a stirring of light in the magma of the vat directly below. But this was a different light. Not glowing but flickering. Not swirling but growing. As if something on fire, or perhaps of fire, was swimming up through the blackness, about to burst out.

Chapter Twelve

The Phoenix does not burn Gel. The yawning hollows of his cheeks. The cruel jut of the bones. Hair lank and copious and ethereally fine. The Phoenix holds him fast. Its flame is all around him, blinding him. It rushes and buffets and he senses speed and distance beyond imagining, but he does not burn.

Then he's falling, still blind, still penumbraed in fire. But this is a different kind of flame. Smoother. Not alive in the same way.

Then there's no fire of any kind about him, and he starts to burn. He has plunged into blackness and the cold of it sears. He gasps with the sharp shock, but his mouth takes in nothing. This is not air or water around him. There are no seas in Gel's home realm, the realm called Gnomon, but he recognizes a similar kind of shifting oceanic quality to the presence about him. Subtle turgid continents of icy flux. Currents of immensity pressing against him. Also, he feels himself being lifted, floated. He kicks in that direction. The

burning chill on his skin makes it hard to be certain, but he senses his chest beginning to pain for breath.

His head breaks the surface of the blackness and sees sky, a crisper, star-flecked darkness far above his head.

Looking down he sees that the blackness he was swimming in stretches away in all directions like a horizontal abyss. Ships move across it.

#

The dragonreme nearest Gel, rowed closer. Two of the other kind of galley, the bigger quinqueremes, also approached. One followed the dragonreme, one came from another direction. The prow of the dragonreme came almost above Gel's head. A voice yelled out and the banks of oars on either side paused and lifted and the prow shifted.

#

Gel understands the words even though they're not spoken in his own tongue. A rope spirals urgently down. Gel grasps it with his one free hand. The hand not still clasping his labrys.

He's neither forgotten nor remembered that he holds it, part of him as it is, part of it as he is.

#

Gel twisted his arm around the rope and the strength of many arms hauled him up. He skipped his feet against the pale plates of the galley's hull, in time to the hauling. Even before he reached the deck another shout went up and a flute began to urge a brisk tune. The oars dropped back into the flat black sea and picked up the same forceful rhythm.

The quinquereme rowing behind was almost within a ship's length. The other pursuer was surging down on the dragonreme from the side, plainly intending to ram. But within a few oarstrokes Gel's craft began to pull away. Orders were yelled on the ramming ship. It began slowing and turning across the black surface, almost slewing into the other quinquereme as it frantically tried to alter direction.

#

Gel is on deck now. Around him are men and women in jerkins and breeks of tight, scaled, otherworldly mail which is neither metal nor leather, finned morions on their heads and short arc-bladed swords in their belts. One of them bows, says something to him. He again understands the words, but not their meaning. A greeting of some sort?

#

He unwound his jehad swaddlings from his gaunt body but thrust away the blanket offered.

Rillings of the oceanic darkness still clung to his skin in burning-cold gulleys, no matter how hard he rubbed himself. They disappeared under the chaffing then reappeared when his palm moved on.

#

He wonders, is the cold dark or the dark cold?

#

The dragonreme pulled away further from the towering prow of the remaining pursuer and Gel turned to look forward. Ahead were many more ships. A circle of galleys similar to the one he stood upon were hemmed about by the bigger quinqueremes.

He turned back. Both kinds of ship slid over the blackness in a wafting velvet motion. Their hulls did not dent the skin of the dark, nor push through it. Their keels clove it without wake. And no shimmer of it clung to the oar blades as they lifted up. The bigger craft had a certain surging power, but the smaller had a grace and swiftness that made the bigger seem ponderous in comparison.

So far back was the pursuing galley that the shouted command barely carried to the dragonreme. In response a trembling hazy gobbet of dark, like a bolus of the oceanic dark that the ships raced across, catapulted from the quinquereme's prow across the stars. It curved down just short of Gel's craft. On the narrow deck, the Sword-Mariners in their otherworldly mail ground out low tense murmurs amongst themselves. The helm at the dragonreme's stern tightened his grip on his craft's twin vanes and called for yet more speed. The oarmistress beside him picked up the rhythm of her flute to even greater pace.

#

Gel notes that no flute sounds from the larger ships. The quinqueremes are paced with drums.

#

The dragonreme rowers responded. There was no wind, but Gel's long ghostmist of a mane streamed in the draught of the speed.

The catapult arm on the pursuing ship snapped again, and another gobbet of dark flew for the dragonreme. This time the trajectory was higher.

#

Gel watches the wearers of otherworldly mail edge about.

#

They scattered as the gobbet landed on the narrow deck. It landed silently, amid their yells, splintering no planks. Its hazy sphere flattened and scuttered about crazily in tentacles of fluid dark.

#

More dark. Gel snarls. This realm is full of darknesses.

#

At the sides of the deck the rowers winced and swayed their torsos and scowled in alarm, but none of them left their oar. Sword-Mariners stamped at the tentacles, cursed at them. The helm shouted again, and again the oarmistress' flute upped its frenzy.

Another gobbet spat from the pursuing ship.

#

Gel hears it named in the shouts around him.

"Shadowfire!"

And Gel realizes what the sea is at last, what the ships are sailing through like dreams across obsidian.

The sea is shadow.

Chapter Thirteen

Sstheness trembled as she peeled away the next rivulet to congeal. The shape darkening on the underside of the wafer was an ax.

Chapter Fourteen

The dragonreme carrying Gel arrowed through the outer rim of quinqueremes, severing a boarding plank that bridged one quinquereme and a dragonreme. The impact sent the dragonreme askew and its prow glanced a gouge in another quinquereme's side before slipping into the protective inner circle of dragonremes.

Many of the quinqueremes had dropped their hinged boarding planks onto the decks of dragonremes, the end spikes digging deep into the decks and locking the ships together.

Corsairs swarmed over the bridges, catcalling and laughing. In contrast to their quinqueremes they were outfitted lithely, in leathern breeches and boots and jerkins, all blood red. Their blades were narrower and straighter than those of the dragonreme Sword-Mariners, and they swung them with an abandon that contrasted with the disciplined swordplay of their counterparts.

#

All of the Phoenix Prey, Gel, Gemmored, Zantalliz, and Harnak, all stand on different dragonremes.

Gemmored, the swordsman, of the ice-wastes of the realm called Darkling, fights by the side of the Sword-Mariners of his ship. A supple cuirassed bear-pelted jokul. He arcs and thrusts and angles his huge warsword, sometimes two-handed, sometimes one, moving to the great weapon's weight, guiding it. The Corsairs besiege him but fall back time and again in splashes of shrieks and blood.

He swirls and stabs and slices open torsos and sweeps away heads from necks. Sometimes he fulcrums his swordstrokes against his wrist with the unfaceted ruby pommelling the bone hilt. The dark core to the gemstone flickers.

And as it flickers the grim pride in Gemmored's eyes, eyes the grey of frosted steel, dims. Twists.

And as it flickers the blade becomes lighter in his hands and heavier inside him.

#

Zantalliz still holds his book. He has kept it clasped to him since the Phoenix snatched him from the reef of his doomed isle. He wrapped his arms around it on the burning journey from his own sea-swathed realm of Voyage to this. He crushed it to his chest as he plunged into another, very different sea, and was pulled from drowning in darkness onto this dragonreme's deck. He has clutched it even as dragonreme crew have carefully removed his Shadow-soiled clothes and draped blankets over his slender shoulders.

All around him the Sword-Mariners fight. Protect him from the blades of the Corsairs who strive to reach him. But the sharp, stretched rasp of swordmetal against swordmetal is a distant sound in his thoughts where waves purr on faraway coral.

He has opened the scallop and the pages turn over without touch, one after the next. He stares down at them, strange eyes hardly blinking, even as a Corsair blade almost cleaves his head.

Every book in the caverns of his people's isle held every moment of their history, beliefs, arts - the grammar of their being. The properly fashioned wish would lay open the appropriate page. The correctly spoken bidding would shape the words and grammalogues into knowledge or fluent rituals of shape and symbol.

But now.

Each page slowly curls, one after the next, each a pale, blank leaf...

#

Harnak stands on the deck of another dragonreme, still in the feathered rags and the old-man shape in which the Phoenix took him. The rags have lost some of their stench in the fire or the journey. Harnak does not like this.

The battle is different on this galley. Harnak's form is smaller than Gemmod's, not such a beacon for the Corsairs. The fighting is wider-spread, as with Zantalliz' ship. But Harnak is not dream-stranded as Zantalliz who stands oblivious and ringed by defenders. He has taken a sword and has quickly decided ally from enemy.

This realm is different from Aftermath, his own. Both the Sword-Mariners and the Corsairs are different in clothing and face than any he's known before. Their words are different, though he can understand them. This night is different and covers the sea as well as the sky. And somewhere wolves are howling. But at least...

He parries a Corsair's attack and skilfully slips his own sword through the man's throat.

But at least there is blood.

#

The force of the Corsair boardings had faded and slowly the Sword-Mariners were forcing them back toward their own ships. A few of them turned their blades to the oarsmen and women. But these were dragonreme crew, not chained slaves. They had their own blades which they pulled from beneath their benches.

Back the Corsairs went, curse by curse, backstep by backstep across the dragonreme decks and edging along the boarding planks. But as they went they began flicking glances skyward and their shouts became taunts.

The dragonremers followed the glances and they too saw the movement below the stars. The first warning shout came from a Sword-Mariner.

"Pitspoor!"

They came down onto the dragonremes like taloned rain, their pads thudding onto the decks, eyes lambent with malevolence.

Again the Sword-Mariners set to. More blood splashed the decks. A bitter smell wafted. Shouts. Cries. Hissing. Gnars. Shrieks.

One Sword-Mariner slipped, his blade sailing from his hand and spinning into the sea. The Mariner yelled in horror, jumped to his feet and charged for the galley's rail. Ignoring the Pitspoor he'd been facing, ignoring the gouge it ripped from his arm as he ran, he dove overboard.

The sword had vanished into the Shadow as soon as it touched. The Sword-Mariner plunged into the blackness at almost exactly the same place. A few other Mariners and oarcrew glanced after him, but were too engaged in the battle to watch.

Shouts. Cries. Hissing. Gnars.

The Sword-Mariner slid to the surface again, his morion gone, his mouth open and spouting blackness. His otherworldly mail gave a kind of strange buoyancy but he struggled to keep afloat. One arm, the wounded arm, was aloft, and it held the blade.

No one threw a rope. No one had the moment.

The Mariner struggled a moment longer, gasping, fiercely scanning his dragonreme for hope. Finding none he swung the blade around his head. His mouth dropped into the Shadow again, came up sputtering dark. He scanned the dragonreme again.

Shouts. Cries. Hissing. Gnars. Shouts.

He swung the blade with a yell of defiance and despair, sent it spinning and clattering onto the dragonreme's deck as he slipped down into the Shadow.

The Sword-Mariners' mail, which had armoured them well against the Corsair's steel, gave little protection against the Pitspoor.

The deck of every dragonreme was slick with blood. Whatever came from the Pitspoor's veins joined it after splattering and jumping along the Mariners' blades. But mostly, there was blood. The Pitspoor were overwhelming the dragonremers, clustering mostly on the ships carrying the Phoenix Prey.

Then the wolves were loosed.

They were brought up on decks by a new kind of dragonreme crew. They wore neither the vestments of Sword-Mariners nor oarcrew. They wore simple breeks and jerkin, a leather gorget around the throat and a gauntlet on the hand that held a wolf's leash. Their eyes held something of their wolf's eyes - something not lost but missing, something more, an indifferent intensity, a glimmer of ice.

#

Gemmored recognizes the glimmer. He looks up by instinct. In the ice-wastes of his birth, carrion birds follow wolves. He looks up for ravens.

#

Though these wolves are different to those he knows, Harnak smiles.

#

Gel has never seen a wolf. But he also smiles.

#

Zantalliz stares into his book.

#

The wolves on the dragonremes were mostly black. Sleek. Their movements were fluid and dangerous without suddenness. As soon as they set eyes on the Pitspoor they stopped howling.

The handlers hunkered down beside them, faces close to muzzles, and slipped the leashes off.

They moved forward slowly at first, as if their bodies were stalking their snouts. Then their muzzles began to curl, unsheathing their teeth. They moved with a speed similar to the Pitspoor, blurred in a way that had nothing to do with velocity, or time, as if they obeyed slightly different laws of being. Snarling, they wove easily between Sword-Mariners and Pitspoor. Their jaws flashed.

And soon the battle turned again, juddered without clear advantage to either side, like two struggling tides meeting.

Then, above the shouts and cries and hissing and gnars and shrieks, a wail.

In the sky the Phoenix flared again, and again a pennon of flame arced down toward the sea.

Both dragonremes and quinqueres erupted in a wild new urgency. Savage, desperate orders roared out. Oars plunged down and raked through the Shadow below. The Pitspoor took to the air, some hauling wolves fastened on them, and vanished in echoes. Those ships locked together strained to break free. The decks of dragonremes were torn like throats by the wrenching away of boarding spikes.

Every galley struggled to make for the place in the sea where the flame trail had ended. Some of the dragonremes were already pointing toward it and already one or two had disentangled themselves from the carnage and were picking up speed. These pulled ahead with lunges of rowing, arrowing wakeless across the obsidian.

Then a last cry - from the fastest dragonreme - a cry of realization that not all the Corsairs' galleys had laid siege to the circled dragonremes. Quinqueres loomed everywhere, all over the Shadow. One had almost reached the point where the flame had fallen. Breath slumped from the dragonreme oarcrew as the quinquere let down a rope.

Chapter Fifteen

The last rill from Leviathan's heartwall, the last squirming, liquid, medusa-lock had slid to the floor and pooled and congealed into a last wafer.

Nausea-weary, Sstheness had judged the fetor and peeled the scale of slick and watched the stigmata darken into a scar.

#

A scar.

#

Then amid the echoey hollow of Leviathan's heart she heard a vast new gossamer tremble. She crushed the last wafer against her breasts and belly, scraped its crumbling shreds against her skin. She rolled back and undulated her raked shoulder blades and spine and buttocks and legs against the dank floor.

And laughed.

Chapter Sixteen

After the final member of the Phoenix Prey had been taken by the Corsairs a stillness settled across all the ships. The quinqueres turned away. The dragonremes followed them, rowing with dejected steadiness, falling further and further behind. Though they had taken only one of the five, yaps of Corsair laughter drifted over the Shadow while the dragonremers lapsed into solemn silence.

Gel finally snatched at one of the blankets proffered him and slung it over his back. "We could easily catch them," he barked at a Sword-Mariner standing near him. Gel gripped his labrys fiercely. Its two sweeping bladeheads were dry but they flushed - almost

pulsed - deep colours. The colours of Corsair and Pitspoor woundspillings. His skin before the battle had been wan. Now it was deep with colour.

The Sword-Mariner looked at Gel with a wariness that was more and other than respect, and shook his head. "You are Phoenix Prey, and too precious to risk."

On another galley Harnak finally shrugged off his tattered manta and wiped his sword on the rag. "Was the Phoenix the fire that brought me here?" he asked a Wolf-ward who was kneeling on the deck leashing his charge.

On a third galley Zantalliz asked nothing. He still held the book open. The pages still turned over without touch. He blinked at each one, each still a blank translucent leaf, some newly flecked with blood.

"And where has the Phoenix gone now?" intoned Gemmored, his great bare blade still dripping on the deck of his galley. "To where we go," someone called from the bank of oars just below the swordsman.

The rower's back curled over... skin stretching over the knots of the spine... pushing the oarhaft down and forward... lifting the oarhaft... wearily pulling another stroke... another stroke...

The navigators, all silent throughout the battle, began to murmur to the helms at their sides.

Eventually, long after the quinqueremes had vanished over it, part of the horizon rose - a mass growing steadily larger like a pupil in the dark.

"Land?" murmured Gel to the Sword-Mariner who had remained by his side. But the Sword-Mariner said nothing.

The galleys closed the distance. The mass was broader at the top, tapering slightly as it descended to Shadow level.

But Harnak soon noticed as his galley pulled nearer that it tapered not with the smoothness of something built or crafted, nor with the natural unevenness of rock.

Just before the mass touched the Shadow there was a wide glittering line of jagged light.

"There," urged another galley's helm to Zantalliz who still stared at turning empty pages. The helm pointed to the light. "There! The Beckoning Gate!"

Finally, when the mass loomed like a mountain before the flowing galleys, Gemmored could make out on the very top twin colossal stelae, and below them the two hollow orbits like vertical amphitheatres, and below them, at the end of the snout, the flickering crimson-yellow flames between the bared teeth the size of spires. It was a face set in its own death-mask. What had once been bone, the horns and the teeth, were now chalcedony. And the skin, with scales almost the width of galleys, was no longer green flesh but solid jade.

"This is where the Phoenix went," murmured Gemmored, staring at the Beckoning Gate, the eternal snarl of chalcedony and fire.

"The Phoenix is part of the dragon's breath," called another of his ship's rowers.

"Dragons were before land," sang the rest of the oarcrew.

"Dragons were before land," chanted the ship's navigator, who still looked only at the stars. The ship's helm, Sword-Mariners, even the wounded and the dying joined them.

"Dragons were before land," the song was taken up by the other galleys, one by one.

"Dragons were before land, when the world was only sea and sky."
And the pages of his book stopped turning and Zantalliz looked up.

#

As the galleys approach the Beckoning Gate each of the Phoenix Prey expects the jaws to open. What then? Death by the dragon's fire? Return by that same fire to their own realms? There seems no reason for either outcome, but as the chalcedony teeth tower over them and the flames behind those spires roar out in heat and sound, the expectation rears into spate and drowns reason.

Then the first galley swings to the left of the jaws.

Then the second to the right.

And so they go, to left and right, one or more at a time.

The Gate beckons, but does not admit.

The galleys row across the face of the dragon, as wide as an isle. Then they turn down the sides, raise oars and drift on the Shadow. For the first time the Phoenix Prey realize that not only have they moved toward the dragon but the dragon has moved towards them. Its scaled length, seemingly worming back to the horizon, is clearly sliding past the ships.

Eventually the galleys on both flanks come to an immense pucker running along the jade just above sea-level. Stone ripples and wrinkles fall into the dragon's sides. Each pucker yawns up above the height of a dragonreme and down into the Shadow, and the Phoenix Prey know they have come to the real gates.

#

The helms on the ships plied their rudder-vanes and each galley veered into the yawn. All the ships carrying one of the Phoenix Prey had turned to the same side of the dragon and entered the same gate. The Shadow sea was there already. Once inside, each ship lowered oars and gently stroked the Shadow. All were silent except for the moans of the wounded, and even these were muted.

Above was a vaulted cavern, ahead a dock. Each galley manoeuvred into a lock, formed of rhyolite groynes jutting from the quay into the Shadow. A silent staring throng was gathered on the quayside.

Dockers clambered up derricks affixed to the locks and swung booms over the galleys. From these hung hooks at the ends of chains which oarcrew caught and slipped through iron hoops fastened to the bulwarks.

Once a galley was secured by these, other dockers hauled closed its lock's gate.

As soon as this was done the trapped Shadow vanished - not drained like water but swiftly fading like cast shadow which loses its sun - leaving the galley swaying in mid-air by its chains.

A young woman, sleek, tuniced, with long auburn hair, strode from the crowd which seemed to part with special respect. She stood on the edge of the quay. Her thumbs loitered in her belt.

The galleys carrying the four Phoenix Prey were the first to extend gangways to the dock. Each of the four was invited to be first to disembark and each was brought together with the other three. A blanket was reverently placed around the naked shoulders of Harnak, similar to the blankets now draped around Gel and Zantalliz. They looked at each other,

plainly none of them belonging where they found themselves. They looked out over the throng. They were mostly in light chitons and himatia, the young in tunica - all in sandals. All those close enough stared at the dark-maned giant mantled with the great white pelt who still held his huge sword bloody and unsheathed. They stared at the almost equally tall but gaunt figure with hair like mist, propping a two-headed poleax on the dock.

Already one or two voices were murmuring, "When the Phoenix chooses..." And others were starting to take it up.

The throng stared at the blood-stained tatterdemalion whose gouged old face was the least haunted of all four of the Phoenix Prey, whose lips even possessed a subtle kink of amusement. And they stared at the smallest, most exquisitely slender-boned of the four, who clasped a large scallop shell to his chest, and whose strange eyes looked without seeing, like a child in darkness.

The young, sleek, tuniced woman with auburn hair watched. Face still. Almost cold.

The captured and wounded and dead were disembarked. The captured Corsairs jerked and mocked and spat as they were led away. The dead and severely wounded were gently laid on quayside pallets. Names were called. Cries of concern or anguish went up. Eddies of movement disturbed the crowd as people struggled to reach the pallets.

Almost suddenly the scene slid into turmoil. The chanting went on, "When the Phoenix chooses..." but individual jeers were also shouted - the four Phoenix Prey glanced from each other to the crowd to each other. The last of some of the galley crews, the oarcrews, disembarked. The last dragonreme was enclosed in its lock. The Shadow evaporated beneath it and it swung on its chains. "When the Phoenix chooses..." The Shadow beyond the locks remained - still and flat and pendent and stretching back to the puckered portal in the dragon's side.

The sleek, tuniced young woman with auburn hair now knelt by one of the wounded laid on the quayside and spoke intently to the Sword-Mariner who tended him. "When the Phoenix chooses," she said. Then she slipped a wavered-bladed knife, a kris, from her belt. She glanced over to the Phoenix Prey, a look too full of emotions to fix a clear expression. The crowd again parted. A small body of swordsmen and women came forward, hawk-helmed with faces between wide beak-jaws. Each wore a sleek gambeson with a dragon design across the chest. Each had an empty sword scabbard hanging from a belt. The woman made an impatient gesture and they moved to the Phoenix Prey, bowed deeply and led them back toward the crowd.

It parted with as much readiness and deference as for the woman. The corridor of stares and caught breath stretched into the distance, allowing Harnak and Zantalliz to see what the far taller Gel and Gemmored had already glimpsed over the heads of the multitude. A city.

The crowd turned and followed as the Phoenix Prey were escorted away. They were taken along a wide dolerite-paved avenue, sometimes edged with colonnades, regularly passing under great crescents of petroglyphed arches, past regular wynds, up or down gently sloping ramps or flights of steps. They went past or glimpsed buildings of various shapes. Some tall, some wide, some angular - houses, cisterns, bathhouses, gymnasia. Roofs were either flat or unaccountably sloped.

All was stone.

When high on the tells, courtyards could be seen. And trees. And gardens and plazas. There were cropfields beyond the city at the very sides of the dragon. It was a realm within itself.

The buildings were dolomite or granite or rhyolite. And they were not of brick, no more than the roads were flagged. There was a smoothness to all – as though hands had cupped it, stroked, moulded, sculpted it.

The march went on. Zantalliz stared unseeing into the backs of the escorts' gambesons. Gel cast about left and right, taking everything in. Harnak did the same, but only with his eyes. Gemmored still held his sword unsheathed. And the crowd, the citizens followed, like a spellbound tide returning, still murmuring "When the Phoenix chooses..."

Through arch after arch they went. And all the way was lit by great copper braziers. And the vaulted roof-sky was porphyry. Purple porphyry ribbed with rainbows. Emerald, garnet, spinel, sapphire, ruby, opal, chrysoberyl, topaz, amethyst, jasper, a hundred other precious crystals.

Finally the escort passed under a last high-finned arch, crossed a vast esplanade, went up a final approach of steps, and entered a majestic porticoed building, by far the tallest in the city, a spire of bluestone.

#

They were led into a vaulted atrium, layered above with traceried cloisters honeycombed with arched entries into darkened passageways. They went up basalt stairs and over tegular floors of turquoise and amber. Between the third and fourth levels of cloister the escorts showed them to a table and chairs positioned on a mezzanine jutting out over the atrium well.

#

Gel is impressed despite himself. The table is onyx. Onyx is a precious stone on Gnomon. Something only for the walls of palaces.

#

Harnak notices too. It reminds him of his own realm, though the pattern of onyx is more regular than the bands through the agate spires of his own city.

#

There the escort left them, and there they sat silently. Zantalliz laid his book on the table but took neither hands nor eyes from it; Gel slid his labrys onto the table and restlessly alternated between impatience and amusement; Harnak sat back and folded his arms impassively; Gemmored stood, staring out over the well, his hand still fused on his antlerbone swordhandle, until a sleek figure entered the atrium and strode to the stairs.

#

None of the four recognize the woman as the sleek young woman from the dock until she nears the table. Her long auburn hair has been unskillfully cropped close to her head. It changes her face, sharpening her bones. Her face seems paler.

#

She took a chair and sat, resting for a moment, then swung a foot onto the chair and hooked her arms around her knee. She appraised the Phoenix Prey with a look different from any the crowd had given them. Cool. Quizzical.

"What is this place?" asked Gel.

"I'm Phariane," she said, "and this is Dragonkeep."

"And you are its queen?" asked Harnak.

She smiled. "Dragonkeep has no queen."

"So this is not your palace?" asked Gemmored.

She huffed. "This is no palace. This is an archive."

"A warehouse of stories," said Gel, running a fingernail impatiently along the haft of his labrys.

"Of documents, of manuscripts," replied Phariane. "Chronicles, annals, pandects, scytales..."

For the first time since the Phoenix dropped him into the Shadowsea, the haunting receded from Zantalliz' strange eyes. He looked up from his book.

"And is the story of Dragonkeep here?" asked Harnak.

"Of course," said Phariane. "And you may hear it later. There's time. Though perhaps not much, now that you have arrived."

Now Gemmored turned from the atrium well. His great white pelt mantling his shoulders was still matted with Shadow. His face was fierce and weary, helpless and malevolent, immanent with pain.

#

Gemmored has carried the sword since the battle on the dragonreme. It has no weight in it now, to weary his arm. With every slaying it made on the ship it grew lighter. With every slaying his arm grew wiser. With every slaying a familiar burning flowed into his body. The killing of a Corsair was bad enough, the killing of a Pitspoor a hundred times worse. The dark core of the gemstone pommel flickered ever more wildly.

Now it dances like a flurry of madness. Stains, both red and otherwise, neither wet nor dry, rivulet the blade flats like cracks.

Gemmored's voice is an ominous purl.

#

"I am Gemmored of Darkling," he said to Phariane. "I ask your permission to sheath my sword."

"You may have sheathed it at will," said Phariane.

"It is something better done privately," said Gemmored.

Harnak glanced at Phariane.

She paused, then said: "Each of you has been chosen by the Phoenix. You are one."

Gemmored stared, decided, and lifted his sword as if forcing it through the air, finally dragging the tip to the lips of the pale scabbard at his side.

"My ax is called Bloodbane," Gel said to him. "Is your weapon named?"

Gemmored nodded without looking up. "Doom."

He slid it quickly into the scabbard. As he did so a throatless scream broke and crescendoed, echoing through the atrium well and dying as the sword sank to the tang.

There are echoes.

From darkness he has been torn by fire, and plunged into more darkness - a sea of Shadow, only to be torn from this also, by a laughing taunting galley crew in blood-red leather.

Only to row again into darkness.

Rorn of Nightwake, the Waste-Ranger, now walks dim passages lit by puttering tallowy warts and quivering with echoes. Hard echoes and softer. Bone echoes and meat echoes.

He walks only with aid. Since disembarking, two muscular Corsairs have held his arms. The act is part support, part restraint. Rorn is now a vague creature in thought and body, aware only of the echoes, and of the rills of the Shadow still chilling his skin like slashes of ice. So, since restraint is unnecessary, the harshness of the Corsairs' grips can only be malice or mockery. Something about the Corsairs reminds him of himself - perhaps that?

Now two others appear before them. They are longer, sleeker figures than the Corsairs, with blades like sickles. Unlike the Corsairs they wear casques. These casques enclose their entire heads. These casques are shaped like skulls. And seeing them, Rorn realizes what some of the echoes are.

Skulls.

Rorn droops his head, looks back.

Skulls.

The floor is strewn, carpeted by skulls whose jaws gape and snap, gape and snap... In his fogged awareness something spins. Something closes around his breath.

#

The two skull-casques took Rorn's arms from the Corsairs and yanked him onward. The exchange was made in silence, with hostility between the two pairs bristling in the wordlessness.

They took him deeper into the labyrinth. They went through scabrous twisting passages with bowed stillbirth walls. Weeping umbilicals stalactited down, some of the longest sliding across Rorn's face.

#

There are more echoes. Some, he realizes, are laughter – he's taken so long to recognize the sound because of how hard it is to believe in such a sound in such a place.

#

Through yet more passages they took him, branching, snaking, gloomy passages.

#

Rorn's stomach is too weak to turn at the stench.

#

Sometimes others passed by singly or in groups. Sometimes they spat on him. The skull-casques took no notice. Their grips on his arms were as powerful as the Corsairs' holds had been, but less harsh.

#

There is something about the cool, steady skull-casque grips that makes Rorn miss the harshness.

He is almost thankful when they pull him to a stop.

Before him is a glistening black barrier. Some kind of growth? Some kind of goitre? A knot in the depths of the scabrous labyrinth. And now he knows what the other echo has been. The one neither hard nor soft, the one haunting all the others. Unlike the skulls, or the voices, this is not so much a sound as a pulse.

#

The knot distended. Two lips appeared top to bottom and spread - like a splaying gateway. The skull-casques threw him forward and he slipped through the opening into yet more darkness.

He landed hard on elbows and knees and sprawled on cold, slick stone. The opening closed behind him and sealed in the new darkness. It was somehow transpicuous. There was no light in the cell, not even the pathetic tallowy gutterings of flame of the labyrinth. Yet he could see clearly, with a livid vision that did not penetrate but rather fed on the dark.

Someone moved, leapt beside him and he turned his head to see. Young. Naked. Seethingly feral. With long straggly auburn hair and bared teeth. And talons longer than her fingers. And scars, some still bleeding, across her shoulders and breasts and arms and belly and legs. She lay beside him. Her face was a breath's width to his face. She stared into him and he recoiled sluggishly,

#

groping for desperation or anger or humiliation – for anything to sting his mind and body into quickening, to wrench it from this sucking, shambling morass of a state.

#

He rolled away, until he reached the convex wall of the cell.

He struggled against it, forcing himself against it to climb to his feet. And then she was behind him again, pushing her body into him. It was bony with power. Fierce ribs and knees and hips pinched him against the wall. Her taloned hands somehow grasped his wrists. Her jaw dug into his neck. Words seethed in his ear.

"Welcome, Rorn of Nightwake, Phoenix Prey, to Leviathan."

She spun him round and pitched him back against the wall. He leaned on it, gasping, watching her.

She watched him in turn. She reached out a palm and laid it softly on the side of his face.

Rorn's eyes strained sideways.

#

The talons are fingerstalls sculpted into half-sigil half-claw.

#

She slightly lowered her hand and touched the tip of one fingerstall against his cheek. It sank a delicate fraction into the skin and drew a slow shallow of indent. As the talon passed, a needle of crimson swelled into the channel.

Rorn stayed rigid, arms free but still stretched out against the wall as if pinioned. Rills of Shadow began to stir. He could feel them - gelid slithers slowly inching up his body. Over his chest. His neck. They clustered there, melding into one icy burn, then flowed up

onto Rorn's face and into the newly opened wound. The glistening slit quivered as the Shadow entered, as if swallowing.

Chapter Eighteen

"This is the throat of Dragonkeep," called Phariane to the Phoenix Prey. She stood next to the four of them, but the roar of the fires was loud.

She had led them out of the archive and across the city again. Again the throng followed them, again murmuring.

"When the Phoenix chooses..."

She led them along another wide and straight avenue, perpendicular to the one they had taken from the dock.

More vaulted arches to pass through - these again petroglyphed with sinuous and angular stories, unknown but familiar. More braziers cupping bright yellow flames. Again the Phoenix Prey glanced to the roof of Dragonkeep... glittering streaks of green and blues and dashes of white or yellow or blue or red or green or violet among the porphyry.

Gemmored's sword was sheathed at his side. His walk was lighter, but his expression still clouded.

Eventually the avenue came to a long shallow stairway, each tread several strides, finally entering a cavernous entrance in the cliff that ended the city.

The throng waited at the foot of the stairs. Gradually their chant mixed with, and then was lost in, the roar growing from ahead. A roar like molten havoc. A roar like volcanoes breathing.

"And this," shouted Phariane at the far end of the tunnel, "is the mouth of Dragonkeep."

The Phoenix Prey stepped onto a bridge, a gneiss causeway stretching through a roaring forest of fire. But just as the Shadow was shadow and not shadow, so the fire was fire and something more. Huge columns of flame licked into the air, white or yellow or red, furious or serene. Liquid, streaming, fluttering, quivering stabs of blaze, brilliant but somehow not blinding. Yet although the cavern was hot it was not a burning heat, at least not upon the bridge. Along the way, workers in ephods were busy extending crucibles on long poles over some of the white flames, or pouring the molten contents into moulds. When they saw the Phoenix Prey they stopped their work and stared.

"The white fire is used as forge heat," shouted Phariane as she led them forward. "The yellow we take for the braziers that light Dragonkeep." She turned and faced them. "But the reason I've brought you here is the red fire." Cantilever strips of jet curled off the main causeway – like forks in a tongue. They led into the hearts of some of the red flames. "This," she said, "is used for cleansing."

"Cleansing?" called Gemmored.

"Perhaps not unlike your scabbard?" smiled Gel, leaning against his labrys.

Some of the crew from the dragonreme ships were emerging from some of the red flames. Their figures glowed crimson for a step or two as they made their way back to the gneiss causeway.

Pharlane indicated several of the cantilevers." The red flame cleanses Shadow."

#

The Phoenix Prey exchange looks.

They have all been touched by the Shadow. Plunged into it. They remember its gelid burn. Still feel it.

#

Gel smiled again, the same fierce scorn of teeth as always. He yanked off his blanket. His body was almost as gaunt as his face. His colour had lost most of the unnatural flush it had held after the galley battle. The ribs and muscles cut ridges under the whitening skin. Wormings of Shadow clung to some of those ridges. Still keeping hold of his labrys, he strode onto one of the cantilevers and without hesitation into the red flame at its end.

Expressionless, Harnak removed his blanket and picked away one last unfeathered shred of maguey manta clinging to his skin. An old body, furrowed, wrinkled and veined, and also veined with Shadow. He looked down at it, then chose another cantilever.

Gemmored tugged off his white bear pelt. It was matted with Shadow. Then he unbuckled his cuirass, vambraces and other armour. The nearest flame-workers looked at each other, open mouthed, then edged forward, knelt, stroked the armour. "Iron is rare in dragonkeep," yelled Pharlane.

Swaths of Shadow weaved among the other scars on Gemmored's huge body. Finally he unbuckled his belt and laid his scabbarded sword on the causeway. No one made to touch that.

As he crouched he looked to Zantalliz. "Well?"

Zantalliz made no movement. His blanket hung on his shoulders. His strange eyes were still lost.

Gemmored looked at Pharlane. She gave no sign. He went over to Zantalliz and lifted off his blanket. Zantalliz' arms were still wrapped around his book, pressing it against his smooth chest. Then Pharlane was there. Her guarded expression subtly changed, both hardened and softened. She gently eased the scallop shell from his arms. They unfolded without willingness or resistance. The long, fine fingers slid against the ridges of the shell, the nacre clasp. For a moment his eyes sharpened from dream to concern. Then the oval tips of his fingernails lost touch. His arms slipped to his sides.

Shadow stained him too, serpentine his skin.

Gemmored stepped onto one of the jet cantilevers and turned. "Come," he called to Zantalliz. "Come with me."

But Zantalliz stayed still.

The cores of the flames chosen by Gel and Harnak gave shrugs of undulation.

Gemmored looked back to Pharlane, but her face was turned away.

Gemmored came back, lifted Zantalliz without effort, and walked back into his chosen flame.

#

Pharlane looks at the roof of the cavern. Something blazes there. Hovering. Unnoticed. It flickers with the same colours as the flames licking up and around the causey. White so bright as to be silver. Yellow so bright as to be gold. Red equally as fierce.

Unlike the flames below, all mingled in a restless iridian plumage. And there's a fourth colour. Blue, as brilliant as the others, edged the shape's undulating span.

As Gemmored steps into his flame, it swoops, still unnoticed. It vanishes with a melting grace into the fires below.

"When the Phoenix chooses," says Phariane.

Even if the roar of the dragonmouth had faded to nothing her words would still have been lost.

#

Emerging from the throat of Dragonkeep, the Phoenix Prey wore fresh, simple himatia. Gel still held his labrys. Gemmored had girt back his sword. They found the waiting throng thinner. Waiting at the foot of the shallow steps, were four horse-harnessed chariots.

"Why were we made to walk, before," Gel asked Phariane, "if you can provide these now?"

"To show us to the people," said Gemmored.

Phariane gave him a quick, tight smile like an ironic nod. "Just so." She took the reins of one of the chariots from the driver and gestured at Zantalliz. He seemed more alert since leaving the flame, his book restored to his arms, but still kept silent. "I will take him."

But he stood still and for a moment they all did - the other Phoenix Prey, the remaining crowd, Phariane with her arm out and the gesture frozen.

Finally Zantalliz' head tilted and his lips parted. "I have lost many things," he said, in a voice soft but clear, "but not my hearing."

Phariane smiled again. This time without the tightness. "Will you come?"

Zantalliz climbed onto the chariot beside her.

Gemmored took the reins of another chariot, as did Gel, but Harnak allowed himself to be driven back to the archive.

#

There was a meal of bread and meats and fruits and wine and other drinks of such variety that all the Phoenix Prey were able to take something.

Then, on the table over the atrium well, lit by a small brazier of yellow flame, Phariane laid out a book. It was larger than Zantalliz', with heavy boards of wood. The front was skilfully incised with an Uroboros. Inside were sown pages of parchment. Phariane stroked the first page. "This is the book of Dragonkeep."

She began to speak in a different tone and rhythm.

"The Shadow reached our realm hundreds of years ago. The sky clouded with darkness, cowlng the sun and the stars. Eventually the darkness began to rise on the seas, over the isles and archipelagos, on the lands, over the fields, the plains, the valleys, the deserts, the tundras, the moors, marshes, fells, forests, jungles, fjords, fens, over the greatest of cities, over the highest mountains."

#

When Phariane speaks of a waste it becomes a moor or tundra or desert or whatever word and place the ear of each of the Phoenix Prey will recognize from the character of their

own realm. When she speaks of a forest the word becomes a wood or a jungle or a marsh. And so on.

#

"When the sky cleared only the stars were left, and some said that even they were not the same stars, or at least that the patterns they formed were changed. But the seas and land were all Shadow."

Pharlane paused, head bowed, arms leaning into the table on either side of the book. No one else spoke.

"But the Shadow had risen slowly enough for peoples to consult and search out old knowledge. Only wyrms could float on Shadow, so quests were begun. Most fell. Ships were drowned. Companies broke apart or were simply lost. One found the last sky-wyrm, flightless, dying on the peak of a mountain. The word went out. Expeditions set out for the place, while the discoverers set about what had to be done.

" They cut their way into the wyrm. When a sky-wyrm enters the death-state its bone and flesh and vitals turn to rock."

"What of the blood?" mused Gel, almost too softly to be a question.

Pharlane went on as if having heard nothing. "The sky-wyrm's skin turns to jade. Its innards to granite, rhyolite, basalt, gneiss, to amber and sardonyx – but slowly. They sculpted. No common tools were allowed. Only hands and a few venerated instruments were deemed honourable enough to mould the petrifying innards into roads and arches, plazas and buildings... into a city."

"Leviathan!" The shout came up from the floor of the archive. "Leviathan is sighted!"

Pharlane lifted her head and something behind her face went taut.

"There's still much to say, but tomorrow."

She turned her head and some dozen arrivals in plain linen shifts appeared on the cloister behind her.

"These are Dream-ward," she said. "Choose one to guard your sleep."

Gemmored held out his huge hand to a girl with a slender neck and long fair hair trailing down the back of her shift.

Gel held out both hands and took the hands of an older, dark-skinned Dream-ward. Her bristling hair was jabbed with silver.

Harnak laid his hand on the shoulder of a young tow-haired lad with an eager face, then made a gesture inviting him to lead.

Zantalliz merely nodded to another young woman, sallow-skinned and sloe-eyed, nervous and swallowing.

The unchosen bowed their heads solemnly.

Each chosen Dream-ward led each of the Phoenix Prey to a separate chamber on the cloister above. The other three couples entered, but Zantalliz stopped on the threshold. He sent his Dream-ward away, tearful and bewildered, with another nod.

Only one of the Phoenix Prey saw Pharlane slip urgently away.

In the transpicuous darkness Sstheness licked Rorn's ear, murmured into it. She lay at angle to him, he on his back, she her belly, on the cold floor.

"They found the last sea-wyrm rotting aground an atoll," she said. "Some say in lost waters, some say in forbidden.

"The Shadow was rising over the sea and was lapping at the gigantic carcass. Sure enough, as the tale tells, the wyrm was lifting off the rocks, buoyed by the darkness, proving that the lore was true. That only wyrms could float on Shadow."

Rorn turned his head away but Sstheness lovingly wound her fingers into his straggled hair and pulled it back. Her lips brushed his ear again.

"The fleet of questing ships were already sinking into the Shadow, but many reached near enough for the crews to make fall on the reef and cut their way into the wyrm. They knew there was nothing else to be done.

"They knew that when a sea-wyrm dies it dies forever, its boneless body locked between life and death, mouldering without becoming dust. They knew what they would find inside it. No bones. No vital organs. Not even blood. They found labyrinths."

Rorn shifted uneasily. The slick floor allowed his shoulder blades to slide.

"Rotting, foetid, weeping labyrinths," she said. "A city of labyrinths."

An urgent echo ushered into the chamber.

"Dragonkeep!" it called.

"Dragonkeep is sighted!"

And Sstheness was gone.

Chapter Twenty

Harnak walked into his chamber. It was lit and warmed by another tripod of yellow fire. It was furnished simply but well - the style of Dragonkeep. A bed, a draped settle, other drapes on the walls and edging a window.

Harnak turned before his tow-headed Dream-ward could close the door and raised his arm.

"If you call out or leave this room I'll kill you."

The Dream-ward showed surprise, but not alarm. He nodded. "You are Phoenix Prey."

He watched as Harnak's old head wizened even more, the skin and bone of face and skull drawing in and sinking into the neck of his robe, the robe itself sucking in on itself and dropping to the floor, as a sleek dark cat darted from beneath the hem and out of the door.

The cat sleeked down the stairways to the floor of the atrium. Without pausing, it slipped through the narrow gap between another door, this one bronze and ornate, and its frame.

#

Gemmored's chamber is laid out no differently to Harnak's. He unfastens his scabbard and lays it on the bed.

He remembers the reaction of the flame-workers in Dragonkeep's mouth when he laid his sword on the causeway - the expressions of hungry fearful reverence. He remembers something more. During the battle on the Shadow. The young Sword-Mariner he saw give his life to retrieve a sinking blade. He knows now the reasons for both actions. Steel. Dragonkeep has an armoury whose weaponry from before the Shadow fell is stored and guarded. There are no ores of iron to be mined from Dragonkeep. Steel is worth more than life here.

#

He lifted his eyes and stood looking out of the window.

He could see the avenue he and the others had walked to Dragonkeep's mouth. Another procession was travelling it now. Men and women carried pans of yellow flame, steadily, surely. Others joined them from side ways, all carrying flame.

"May, may I help?" asked the young Dream-ward.

Gemmored did not turn. "Pharlane says we will talk again tomorrow, but are you allowed to answer questions?"

"You are Phoenix Prey," she said. She edged forward and stood beside him, watching the yellow line gleam toward Dragonkeep's mouth.

"They have the careful pace of an important duty," said Gemmored, "but not the slowness of ritual?"

"Every night the flame is collected and returned to the mouth," she said. "Every morning it is taken back into the city."

"So the taking and returning gives you day and night," nodded Gemmored.

"It, it is a ritual." The Dream-ward laughed, but the laugh contained the same tight anxiety as her words. "The task isn't usually so purposefully done. But your coming has changed... Your coming has changed everything."

"When the Phoenix chooses," said Gemmored. "What does that mean? What happens when the Phoenix chooses?"

#

Harnak pads soundlessly and surely down the bronze treads in darkness. The caracol winds down through vault after vault. Even a cat's vision can barely make out stone walls and the shapes of amphorae. The air is dank here, something he has not felt before in Dragonkeep. He can smell grains, seeds, soil, and other smells he can put no names to. There are not only words stored in the archive. This is no museum. No flame has lit these vaults for a long time, if ever. This darkness is settled, like dust. He can taste it. So the things stored here, the seeds of crops, of trees are not for exhibit. They can only be intended, someday, for sowing...

Harnak is not curious. It is one of many traits tortured out of him as a child. Or so he believes. But if that's so, why is he following Pharlane?

She descended these treads just moments before. Harnak had watched her from the corner of his eye even as his Dream-ward had led him to his chamber, had seen her stride across the atrium and slip through the bronze door. Harnak wonders how she moves so swiftly, as swiftly as a cat, in the darkness.

#

"What happens when the Phoenix chooses?" said Gel. "What does that mean?" He wound his hand into the Dream-ward's wiry silver-scattered hair and prized her face to look up at his.

"It's for Phariane to say," gasped the Dream-ward, without rancour.

Gel bent his head down to her. "Why are we here, the swordsman and the old man and the little one with the book?"

"I'll answer whatever you wish about Dragonkeep, about -" he twists harder, "- about Leviathan, but the Phoenix's purpose is for the archivist to explain."

#

She speaks not only without rancour but without fear too, Gel observes. That angers him, amuses him.

He's curious about Leviathan.

He grins into the Dream-ward's face, pulls her onto the bed. He will ask about it later.

#

Harnak reaches the end of the winding stairway. Not in darkness. Nor in light. It's silvered, this cavern. The walls are incised with deep mysterious glyphs laid bare by the glimmering shed.

A fountain is set in the middle of this cavern, a bowl with a single delicate thread of silver arcing and falling back into the pool. The source of the glimmering shed.

On the edge of the bowl sits Phariane. Her carelessly shorn hair for some reason appears a little longer in the silver. She leans over the pool, hands cupped and raised to her mouth.

She sings or whispers to whatever she cups, or at least does something similar to singing or whispering. The soft sound is on an edge between breath and voice. There is pain in it. On her face too. As if what she holds stings. As if it burns.

Then her lips pause and her tongue licks them. "Harnak."

Harnak wills a change. He feels his blood begin to run in new patterns beneath his skin, feels his cat bones begin to flow.

He is a woman this time. Not old but young. With clumsily shorn hair. Another Phariane. The real Phariane doesn't even look, just resumes breathing or whispering or singing to her cupped hands. Then she stops again.

#

"When Dragonkeep was made," said Phariane, "the sky-wyrm's bone and flesh and vitals turned to stone."

"Granite, chalcedony, porphyry, jet," said Harnak. Even her voice was like the real Phariane's.

"But not the blood," said Phariane. Then she pursed her lips and blew again into her hands.

Harnak came closer.

The silver in the pool was clear, as much light as liquid. And there seemed no system to propel the thread which still glittered up and fell back.

Phariane's hands held a cupping of the same silver held in the fountain. The silver lusted her face as she pursed her lips. The cupped pool rippled as did the pool below.

#

Harnak wonders if he should kill Phariane. There's much he doesn't understand since the Phoenix chose him, and assassination is a cool touchstone of what he does know, what he is. He has never needed a reason to kill, only an order. Finally, finding he needs not even that, killing has become a token of freedom. But Harnak also thrives on change, of many kinds. Against the familiar sour despair that patinas murder he balances something new. Something different. He considers, while Phariane continues to sing or whisper or breathe into the cupped burning wrym'sblood, sending urgent ripples across the silver bowled in her hands.

Chapter Twenty-One

After the woman is gone Rorn lies in the darkness, listening to dim shouts and laughter and the even fainter snapping of skulls' jaws. His mind turns back, with the drowsy unease of a troubled sleeper, to the Shadow.

He begins to remember the ponderous oceanic shifting beneath its surface, nuances of darkness eddying across the desolation. He finds it unnerving. The darkness of his own realm Nightwake is solidly simplistic in comparison. Rorn tries to pull away from the memory of the Shadow. He feels it pulling at him in return. But his thoughts are starting to sharpen and with them awareness of the now. Of lying on the cold floor of Leviathan's heart. A heart which is not really a heart. A heart which does not so much beat as shudder beneath his spine.

He listens to the dim shouts.

"Dragonkeep..."

That was the word...

"Dragonkeep!"

It spits into his ear this time, like hissing acrimony. The woman. She's returned. The taloned woman.

#

She pulled him to his feet and dragged him to the wall of the heart chamber.

"Dragonkeep!"

She slapped a hand against the wall, curled her fingerstalls against it, then clawed sideways. The stone split open again like flesh. She shouldered through the vertical rip and pulled Rorn after her, bruising him on the stone-hard edges already sliding back together.

"Dragonkeep!"

She strode furiously through the labyrinths. Her hand still clasped his wrist. She pinched it, the fingerstalls scything harmlessly beyond the fingers. But the grip was unbreakable.

"Not this time, Dragonkeep..."

She pulled him through distorted slimed passages. She was robed now.

"...but soon."

They passed men, women, a child once, all scowling or smirking at him. Sometimes in the narrower passages he would brush against them and they would make no

effort to move aside, allowing elbows and knees to jab against his bruised body. The woman would pay no heed to this but merely yank him on.

"Soon," the woman said again. Still striding on, she turned to Rorn. "It will be soon. You, my lovely, are proof of that."

Some of the passages were strewn with skulls. Though they left the woman alone they snapped at Rorn's feet and ankles.

"Leviathan's time is coming... The twisting and twisted worm..." Her words echoed.

#

She stops before another of the wounds they have passed in the labyrinths, vertical slashes in the stillbirth walls, all rusted shut. She lays her hand on the scar, as she did on the wall of the heart chamber, and sweeps it open. Gateways, Rorn now realizes, to other chambers. And not rusted shut. Sutured with dried blood until the next time the wound is opened.

This chamber is different to the other. Much larger. Canded dimness, like the passages, not the transpicuous not-light of the heart chamber. And not bare. Furnished with a seat.

The woman talks lovingly of it. Its back is the spine bone of some massive deepsea beast, swallowed ages past by Leviathan when it still lived and fed in oceans of salt water not Shadow. The beast's ribcage has been prized open a little to allow access to the spine. More like a throne than a chair. A serrated throne.

#

Three figures awaited Sstheness and Rorn. Two skull-casqued warriors held a leather-jerkined Corsair between them. He was shorter. A well-trimmed beard over a powerful jaw.

Sstheness mounted the throne. The space between the thing's ribs was still too narrow to allow passage without pain. She wrenched Rorn after her, gouging him on the cage as she had been. The scores on her own ribs were laid over older marks – almost ruts. She thrust him beside the seat and nestled her back with relish against the harshly jutting knobs of vertebrae. She still clasped his wrist.

#

Rorn is not sure, but believes that this is the moment when he begins to hate the woman.

#

Between the throne, slightly raised on a dais, and the three men, was a pit. It was a rectangular-hewn cavern which fell into gloom at an unnaturally shallow depth.

"Sstheness," said the Corsair.

The skull-casques wrenched his arms but he twisted a grin out of his grimace.

"Mistress Sstheness."

#

Sstheness. Rorn has a name for the woman now, a title for his enmity.

#

"Five of them, captain," hissed Sstheness. "Five chosen by the Phoenix. I gave you the command, told you where to take your quinqueremes, guided them to the place

where the Phoenix would shed its prey one by one. Even sent the Pitspoor to aid you. Five."

The Corsair kept his grin, but there was something in his eyes which kept glancing at the pit even when he was not looking into it.

"Five Phoenix prey, captain," she went on. "And how many do you see here?"

#

The woman lifts and twists Rorn's arm. Sstheness lifts and twists his arm. Bitch.

#

Something about the Corsair went quiet. He looked at Sstheness steadily. His voice shrugged with a cold resignation. "Better one than none, Mistress, eh? Or doesn't this one satisfy you?"

Sstheness' head drooped. Her face took on an absurdly poignant sadness, then lifted again. Her free hand drifted to her shoulder and the talon fingerstalls gently rubbed against her robe.

Then the movement stopped and one talon lifted.

#

Rorn wonders if it might be the same talon that laid his cheek open.

#

The skull-casques pulled the Corsair forward a step to the very brink of the pit.

Sstheness turned and bent and Rorn found her mouth on his, her tongue in his mouth, slowly licking. It gave a last squirm and Sstheness withdrew. "He satisfies," she said. The Corsair made no cry as he was thrust into the plunging cavern. "But not enough..."

Rorn craned subtly to look into the pit. There was movement deep within, slithering, juddering. There were gristly sounds, suckings, rippings. There were stiff, leprous-white shapes darting.

"But there's comfort in the darkness," said Sstheness, "the darkness that writhes and devours, the twisted and twisting worm."

#

The cut on Rorn's cheek stings coldly. He can feel the Shadow under his face.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Pharlane wearily climbed the caracol through the vaults with Harnak following. Harnak no longer looked like Pharlane, but was still a young woman. Pharlane's steps had the heavy determined rhythm of someone drained in more than physical strength, and when she spoke, eventually, near the top of the stairs, almost at the bronze door leading to the atrium, her words had the same dull and negligent quality.

"What did you expect to find?"

Harnak's voice as well as her form was now young and female. "Perhaps a torment chamber," she said.

Pharlane continued up without pausing or looking back, but her next step was slightly heavier still. "Why?"

"In my experience it's the way of things that such chambers are often found at the bottom of darkened stairways."

Then they were in through the bronze door and walking across the floor of the atrium. Most of the flames lighting the archive had been removed. A single remaining tripod glowed soft yellow that washed rather than lit them. No more words were said between them.

A young sallow-skinned sloe-eyed woman, one of the Dream-ward, hurried forward to Phariane as if she had been waiting anxiously. She murmured to the archivist tearfully. Harnak went up to the room where she'd left her own Dream-ward.

She opened the door to find the young eager man sitting on the bed - not lying, sitting straight-backed, waiting. He ran a hand uneasily through his hair. Stood. There was wild puzzlement in his eyes, which he kept unerringly on Harnak's young woman's eyes. He said nothing. Harnak smiled, more to herself than to the Dream-ward, and made a cat's meow. She slipped herself into the bed and closed her eyes.

Phariane carefully entered Zantalliz' chamber to find him gazing out of the window onto Dragonkeep.

"Your Dream-ward is distressed that you sent her away," she said.

Zantalliz said nothing. Phariane came and stood by his side, looking out with him. His strange eyes looked over the spearing avenues and narrower side roads and even narrower winding lanes, over archways and buildings and gardens and plazas. The procession of flame had ended. Only a few quiet pulses of yellow light remained. Night.

"This is one of the ways we tell time here," said Phariane. "How we mark one day, one moment's moving to the next."

Zantalliz kept silent. Phariane sighed. Her voice was still flat with tiredness but struggled to offer something in its tone.

Zantalliz's strange eyes lifted to Dragonkeep's sky roof. The porphyry had darkened, swallowing the purple mottling into a deeper lightless hue. Now and then something glittered star-like.

"Not rainbows," said Zantalliz.

Phariane looked across at him. She was half a head taller.

"The colours in the roof," he went on.

Phariane smiled thoughtfully. "Bone and flesh and vitals to granite, basalt, jet, bluestone... To jade, amber, chalcedony..." She glanced up through the window again. "But the dragon's ribs became crystal..." Her voice had become calmer reciting the names. "Emerald, garnet, spinel, sapphire, ruby, opal, carnelian, topaz, amethyst..." Still tired but softer.

"I presume it has something to do with death."

Phariane looked back sharply to Zantalliz.

"Why we have been brought here - the swordsman Gemmored, the one called Gel with the ax, the one who appears to be an old man,"

"Harnak," said Phariane.

"The lost one, taken by the other ships." He went on. "We've been summoned to thwart death, or give death, or perhaps be given death."

#

Zantalliz turns to her and for the first time Phariane notices that he doesn't hold his book in his arms. It lies, closed, on the chamber settle.

Phariane's voice hardens again, her effort to reach Zantalliz turning sour.

#

"The Dream-ward have trained all their lives to perform their duty. To guard the dreams of a Phoenix Prey would be the highest honour. To have that privilege offered and then torn away, as you've done..."

"I have no need of a guard for my dreams."

Phariane stared at him for a moment, then stepped away, not bothering to close the door after her.

#

Zantalliz knows that what he has done to the sallow-skinned sloe-eyed Dream-ward is cruel, but there is no sympathy in him now for any living thing. All he can do is mourn. He will not sleep.

END OF BOOK ONE.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"In order for evil to express itself it must take action," Phariane had said the next morning at the table over the atrium well - the table of convocation as she called it. "Thus Leviathan chases Dragonkeep."

"How long has that been?" said Gemmored.

"Since the Shadow drowned the highest mountain in the realm and became a sea, leaving only Leviathan and Dragonkeep above it."

"How many years?" Gemmored persisted.

Phariane gave a sniff like a jibe, her voice equally sarcastic. "Years fall from seasons. We tell time here by day and night, and generations. Generations of waiting."

"Awaiting what?" said Gemmored.

"Awaiting you," said Phariane.

She led the Phoenix Prey out of the archive and through Dragonkeep. Pure silk robes had been provided for them that morning. A number of the hawk-helmed and gambesoned Blade-ward followed behind.

#

Harnak is aware that again their scabbards are pathetically empty. Iron is rare here, Phariane has said, and thus steel also. Warriors without blades. Harnak could kill them all.

She sees that Gel carries Bloodbane behind his ghost-maned head. Across his shoulders, wrists dangling from the haft.

She also notes that Gemmored's scabbard, strapped over his gown, is full.

And Phariane still carries her wavering-bladed kris in the belt of her tunic.

#

The city was, if not busy, not deserted. People stopped and looked at the Phoenix Prey as they passed, but there were no cries and few mutterings of "When the Phoenix chooses..." Faces still held reverence, but a pensiveness had crept in.

Pharlane led them a short way, zigzagging through diorite-paved streets less wide and long than the dolomite avenues that had taken them from the docks to the towering archive or from the archive to the dragonmouth. The buildings were smaller here. Houses were of rhyolite. Walls were seamless, smoothed by the hands of Dragonkeep's ancient founders. The copper braziers they passed were again alive with light-giving yellow flame.

Pharlane eventually guided them through an arched gateway into a vast amphitheatre. They stood in the centre before the rising curve of seating. They had thought it empty before they entered, but every iota of space on every tier was taken by men and women in chitons and himatia, and even children. Each one silent.

"The Phoenix has chosen," pronounced Pharlane. And the roar started.

A storm of gestures erupted. The audience jumped to their feet. The people of Dragonkeep were various. Most shorter than Gemmored, many taller than Zantalliz, some darker than Gel - now the flush infusing his skin from the galley battle had entirely abandoned him, some paler than Harnak some not - though his colour now as a young woman was less bronzed than as a leathern old man. The architecture of their faces was as subtly varied as the styles of their homes. Questions were shouted, both down at the arena and across the theatre, all partly or wholly lost in the din. There was confusion, but excitement, even laughter, but resentment also, and something else. A bristling susurrus of anticipation. As much in the breath as in the shouts of the audience.

Pharlane calmly held up a hand and soon the clamour subsided, almost to the silence before. One or two of the children sobbed. The susurrus still hung in the atmosphere. But if the Phoenix Prey were treated with awe, Pharlane was given a respect which almost reached awe.

One woman, from the high back of the amphitheatre, called out her question. "Where is the other one, the one with the ax?"

It was a question Pharlane herself had asked earlier that morning, in the archive. "Where is Gel?"

No one knew. Even his Dream-ward, who had slept with him in his bed, whose own sleep was trained to be light, had woken to find him gone.

Other questions were easier to answer.

The three Phoenix Prey in the amphitheatre.

Gemmored of Darkling.

Harnak of Aftermath.

Zantalliz of Voyage.

They each gave their names and the names of the realms from which they had been taken. Even Zantalliz spoke. He no longer carried his book.

More curiosity was centred on Harnak's appearance. Many of the audience had seen a weathered old man the previous day. Now he was nowhere to be seen, and the Phoenix chosen were joined by a young woman much like Pharlane. Who? Mutterings finally surfaced in a shouted question from a broad-shouldered man. Harnak gave no answer. Her lips smirked uneasily. But no one repeated any question. No one demanded answers.

Some questions expected no simple answer and were aimed at Phariane.

How important was the loss of the fifth Phoenix Prey.

Are the Blade-ward ready?

How soon will the end come?

These questions sparked responses from others in other parts of the amphitheatre. Arguments curved back and forth across the vast semi-circle. Authorities were cited. Scholars disagreed. Disagreement turned to insult. Shouts became louder. Harsher.

The Blade-ward shifted and leaned and murmured to one another. Phariane half raised an arm again. Patches of audience calmed. Hands were placed on shoulders of some who had angrily stood again.

Then another shout. Fierce. And then nothing could quell the roar, louder and more bitter. A new Blade-ward entered and ran across the arena and shouted into Phariane's ear. She nodded, turned to the Phoenix Prey, and saw something no one else had seen.

Gemmored stood motionless, towering, looking down. A bloom of red was spreading across the silk of his robe, a knife thrusting from the rampart of his shoulder.

Phariane yelled to make herself heard to the Blade-ward. She gestured at the Prey. Take them back to the archive. Tend Gemmored's wound.

She ran from the arena.

#

She reins the chariot to a stop. Its wheels are wood rather than metal and no sparks fly from the brake. But they squeal. A waft of burn catches Phariane as she jumps from the car onto the plaza's sardonyx floor.

The masque is in full, swirling progress, or at least the performers are trying to execute their parts. Barefoot, in long gauze-silk drapes of black or white they dance. In exquisitely fashioned and painted masks they speak.

Phariane knows this masque. She watched it once as a child. It is rarely performed. A very special, elaborate performance of dance and song and poetry, intended for the most important occasions. It would be unusual enough in itself, but never before has it been executed without an audience. Those who might watch are either in the amphitheatre, or for whatever reason chose to have nothing to do with the arrival of the Phoenix Prey.

It is the largest of all masques. Dozens of dancers in black gauze frantically weave in and out of each other, occasionally weaving into an inner circle of fewer white-gauzed dancers who move in a simpler, counter circle. Masks ending just above the lips, the outer dancers hum a harsh monotone as they move - the inner dancers voice a softer, open-mouthed, swaying, souging sound.

Between the two sets of dancers, at places throughout the circle, stand chanters. These are draped in crimson. "Blood and red slaughter." As the dancers eddy around them in precise sinewy movements they utter their cry.

"Blood and red slaughter,
Wield spear or blade,
Blood and red slaughter,
Against my rage,
Blood and red slaughter,
Furnish my hand,

Blood and red slaughter,
 With a burning red gage,
 Blood and red slaughter,
 Blood and red slaughter and death,
 Blood and red slaughter,
 Wield spear or blade,"

... and round again, all in gauze and masks, all in harmony.
 Or at least most.

Because at this layer of the masque's complex warp and weft of movement and sound,
 is Gel.

He swings left and right, twisting and darting, moving more wildly than the dancers. His movements disturb the flow of the masque's pattern. Dancers falter, half-trip, bump against each other. But no one raises a complaint or so much as looks askance at the tall, ghost-maned figure, one of the Phoenix Prey they perform to honour. He wields his labrys as wildly as his gaunt body. What was it he called it? Bloodbane. He spins its twin blades, sweeps it deftly in short and swift and weaving arcs, among the bemused dancers. He laughs as he does this, and the cackle is as wild again.

Pharlane feels a deep, prowling thunder gathering inside her and walks forward into the outer black-gauzed circle.

The dancers adapt their steps to allow her progress - yet more disruption of the pattern, but only slight. After all, she is the archivist, perhaps the most respected citizen of Dragonkeep. Since as a child she was chosen as such she has known unrivalled deference. That is why she's resented the coming of the Phoenix Prey, resisted the awe that most of the city feels. And now, also, as she moves through the circle, she knows that she must earn that deference as no archivist before her has needed to do.

In the very centre of the dance two masquers stand back to back, a man, a woman, arms linked at the elbows. The woman keens "The twisting and twisted worm..." The man then sings "The twisted and twisting worm..." with as much joy in his voice as the woman had sorrow. Then the woman sings again, "The twisting and twisted worm..." but this time with joy, while the man then repeats "The twisted and twisting worm..." with sorrow.

Then the whole antiphony again, only with the woman and man exchanging phrase.

Then again, exchanging phrases again.

And on and on...

Even as the rest of the masque falters, even as Pharlane reaches Gel and stands before him.

"...twisted and twisting worm..."

"Go on!" she shouts, not at Gel but at the masquers. Bare soles push on sardonyx. Uncertainly, haltingly, the circle begins to turn again, leaving a whorl of space around Pharlane and Gel.

"Yes! Go on! Go on!" Gel shouts to them. Then he turns back to Pharlane, breathing hard through a ferine grin. He leans on the long helve of his labrys. The silk robe he wears is streaked and clinging with sweat, yet his long lank hair does not slick to his skull

but remains a wispy mass, drifting at the slightest movement of his head. "They dance prettily, do they not?" he says. "Though why they should dance is another thing..."

"...twisting and twisted..."

Pharlane cups her anger and her fear and speaks with low, staring calm. "You left the archive this morning before we could talk. There was a meeting - an important gathering."

Gel whisks his fingers and sends the twin heads of his labrys spinning beside his face. "And what did you talk about at this meeting?"

"The future," says Pharlane.

"...twisted..."

Gel laughs again, and makes a deep, sweeping bow. A dancer almost stumbles sidestepping his arm. "Come then, archivist Pharlane! Lay wide the future like some worm-infested grave. Tell me my destiny!"

"There are no augurs here," she says. Gel stops Bloodbane spinning, one razored blade cante a fraction from his cheek.

"The only place there are no augurs," he says, "is a place where there is no future. Is that why we're here? Myself and the others?" He kinks his head with the last question. Filaments of white mane shift and rise.

Pharlane stares at him, and hates him, and thinks back to Zantalliz' words last night. 'I presume it has something to do with death. Why we have been brought here.' For a whiplash terror of a moment she wonders if these are, indeed, the true Phoenix Prey. But the books say that they will come, and they have. But far from comforting or calming Pharlane they have the opposite effect - for this is all she knows. She has no idea who or what the five chosen are. Even telling Harnak in her new shape was only observation and guesses - the way his or her face is always subtly in flux, the cheekbones, eyes, lips, nose, skin, shading in shape or colour. For all Pharlane's skills, all the words in the archive only reach this point in history. The chaotic roar of voices she left in the amphitheatre still echoes in her ears. She feels young. Very young. And afraid.

Gel's mouth is still drawn into a grin, but now it's fixed. As much a mask as any around them.

"A tide of shadow is washing over the universe," she says. "You have been brought here to turn it."

"So," he says, "there is to be war."

"Yes," says Pharlane.

"And blood," says Gel.

"Yes," says Pharlane.

Gel's grin stretches back to life.

#

The evening procession returning dragonfire back to the dragonmouth had begun before Pharlane returned to the archive. The day had been filled with duties less intense than her confrontation with Gel but equally wearying and portentous in their ways. She climbed the steps and moved through the portico, nodding to the extra watch of Blade-ward she'd ordered.

#

Within the archive, even at this late hour, there's more activity than Phariane has ever known.

#

Scholars hurried about. Each carried a small lantern holding a small precious tongue of dragonflame. They were checking their old studies, looking to confirm their old opinions. Others had been drawn here by the arrival of the Phoenix Prey, not even to read, just to walk through the cloisters, to look at the shelves of scrolls and tablets and books. Each visitor had a Blade-ward escort as Phariane had also ordered.

She went to Gemmored's room. He was lying on his bed as she entered and swung to sit on its edge. Phariane knelt before him and eased down his robe to his waist. The knife wound had been dressed but seepings of blood had still soaked through the bandages. She carefully unwound them. The wound still glistened.

Phariane took the kris from her belt. She lifted her free hand to the head of auburn hair that had almost grown back to her shoulders in the space of a day. She ran finger and thumb along a single thread, stretching it out. She lifted the kris and guided the waving blade against the thread near the scalp. She cut. Bringing down kris and thread, she held the blade upright, the hair just above it. She watched. Metal and thread both sheened. The blade began to pulse. The undulations of its shape became undulations of movement. The movement was always upward, craning toward the hair. The top of the blade lengthened, thinning as it stretched. It became a fine needle – a second sheening auburn thread.

Phariane's gaze went from the needle to Gemmored's wound, then back. She lifted the hair a little higher. The needle responded, reaching higher, becoming even finer. When it touched the hair the tip parted, enclosed the end of the hair like an eyelet, sealed around it. Now needle and hair were one. Only the stiffness of the needle betrayed where they met. It came away from the rest of the kris.

Phariane brought the thread close to her parted lips. She drew it sideways until the whole length of needle and hair had moved through her breath.

Then she carefully if not gently put fingers and thumb to each side of Gemmored's wound and drew the edges closer. As the needle passed through the edges the muscles around Gemmored's eyes, the grey of frosted steel, twitched.

"So Dragonkeep runs from Leviathan..." he said.

"Since the Shadow rose over the world."

"But soon now the chase will end..." His words were steady. There was no trace of flinching in his voice. His chest rose and fell a little more slowly and deeply. "It will end in a battle called the Uroboros..."

Phariane continued to ease the needle and thread back and forth through his skin. "You all learned much from the debate in the amphitheatre? Good. That's as had been intended."

"Was this intended?" Gemmored's hand closed over Phariane's - needle, wound and all. For the first time since she began stitching she looked him in the face.

"There are those who don't believe you are what you are," she shrugged. "Or perhaps want you to be what you are."

"Phariane?" said Gemmored. "Are we gods?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next morning Gemmored wakes, eases his Dream-ward from him, and looks down. Weakness, there still is - he wonders if the blade might have been poisoned? - and a faint tickle of the pain that should still be jabbing into his shoulder. But he is not surprised to look down and find no trace of his wound or the auburn thread that had been woven across it.

His Dream-ward, who came to him last night as Phariane left, sleepily pulls her long fair fan of hair into neatness and smiles at him.

Through the window Gemmored hears shouts from outside the towering bluestone archive and lifts himself on his elbow. Taking Gemmored's movement as a signal the girl slides from the bed and stands. A smear of his blood colours her shift just below her breast.

He did not take her on their first night together, nor last night, though it's clear that he might if he wished. He wonders if it is part of the Dream-ward's duties. The look in her eyes seems more than duty.

Does she think on him as a god?

#

"What are the gods?" said Phariane that evening, at the onyx table of convocation.

The day had been spent in different ways by the Phoenix Prey. Gemmored had rested as Phariane had requested, sleeping under the protection of his Dream-ward.

Harnak and Gel had each gone out into Dragonkeep to explore the city. They had gone separately but both, even Gel, had agreed to a single member of the Blade-ward as an escort-come-guide.

Zantalliz spent the day alone, still mostly silent, wandering the dim recesses of the archive.

But Phariane, herself busy about the city with councils and other duties, had asked that they all return for this meeting.

"Zantalliz," she said. He seemed not to be listening. "Zantalliz? What are the gods of Voyage?"

He seemed distracted by the activity around them. As last night scholars and others were moving about the cloisters and in and out of the rooms of racks and shelves.

"Once there were gods in my realm," he muttered, "then only my people and man. And now..." he lapsed back into silence until Gel yawned, "...only man."

"What are the gods of Gnomon, Gel-a-Volquanon?" Phariane asked sharply.

"What is the purpose of all this?" he said. "If we're here to fight a battle, why not begin it and have done with wasting time?"

There were shouts coming from outside again. All day, groups had gathered to throw insults or threats or questions that might be construed as both - or even stones. Each group was dispersed by the Blade-ward, but soon another would gather.

"Before the Uroboros there must be four convocations," said Phariane levelly and carefully. "This is only the first."

Gel rocked back in his seat, setting a foot against the table edge. If not for the prop of his labrys he would have toppled. Restive breath pushed through his teeth. "The gods of

Gnomon are young and fierce. There is Theedren the Hawk, Mareek the Spider Goddess, faceless Sarada, Geemass Lord of Ghosts, Tassess the Deathgiver... None of them have any love for mortals, or for each other. They're forever in theomachy and they use men to fight their wars." His voice dipped thoughtfully. "They give men power in order to gain advantage, damning them as they see fit..."

"The gods of Darkling are not so young," said Gemmored. His hands were clasped on the table and his head bent to stare down at them. "...And men have learnt to bargain or trick or wrest power from them... And damn themselves."

Harnak seemed about to speak. He was an ugly olive-skinned man now, with thick brows and full lips. As they parted Gemmored spoke again. "Is it truly necessary to postpone the Uroboros?" The shouts outside had grown louder. His voice was also raised.

Phariane's was slower but somehow also impatient. "There are ways to prepare for when Leviathan and Dragonkeep finally meet, laid down in many of the texts here. As archivist it's my duty to interpret and judge how to proceed."

"So Leviathan chases, and Dragonkeep runs." There was a rumbling bitterness growing like a wave through Gemmored's sentence. It broke into contempt on the final word.

In a lull in the shouting outside someone jeered. The yell resounded distantly through the atrium.

"But you control Dragonkeep, command its movements through the Shadow." Harnak smiled at Phariane. "I've seen you do it." Gel and Gemmored both looked at her. "That's what it was, wasn't it, by the pool of blood in the deepest part of the archive."

Gel's eyes narrowed and his grin was curious this time. His own words overlapped the rest of Harnak's. "So you could stop this chase now? Bring this huge, man-hollowed eschar to a stop? Even set us on a course for this Leviathan?" Gel's words were more taunts than questions. Edging close to laughter, each was louder than the one before. A cloaked scholar with lantern emerged from one of the archive chambers into the cloister near the mezzanine. She paused as she passed near the table. Gel, still leaning back on his labrys, swivelled her a glance and she scurried on along the cloister. Gel darted his attention back to Phariane.

"The Uroboros will come soon enough," she said.

Gel was on his feet before his chair rocked back to four legs. He still grinned, but something about his lips had shifted. The shouts from outside now clashed with shouted orders from the Blade-ward. "For you, perhaps," he said, and strode away.

The next moment Gemmored pulled himself up, chair rumbling back, and also walked away.

Then Harnak.

Phariane suddenly stood and called after him. "Harnak!" And again.

#

"Harnak of Aftermath," says Phariane, waveringly clutching at self-possession, "what are your gods?"

Harnak turns. It's impossible for her to tell if the vagueness of his shape is entirely the gloom of the cloister. "They're dying," he shrugs, and slips away.

#

Pharlane sank back into her chair. Silence uneasily returned. Her fist slammed the table.

Zantalliz had not stirred since his speaking. His head slightly bowed, looking down so that his lids and lashes hid his eyes, forearms laid on the table, hands cupped one over the other.

Yellow castings from dragonflame lanterns dimly nudged from some of the chambers off the cloisters. Some scholars were still about but none of them ventured out after Pharlane's shouts.

The disturbance outside had faded away. There was a listening silence throughout the archive, greedy, ready for the slightest echo.

Pharlane's hand uncurled and slowly moved toward Zantalliz' hands. Long palms and fingers. Nails rounded and delicate. The skin looked silken. The veins hardly disturbed their smoothness. As Pharlane's fingers reached them Zantalliz instantly pulled them away.

There was a listening silence throughout the archive. Greedy. Ready for the slightest echo.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Long after Zantalliz has left the table, Pharlane sits. She dwells on his hands. Not so much the pulling away but the manner of the pulling away. There was bitterness in the movement. Pharlane has heard bitterness in his voice before. But what robs her of sleep that night is how sharply he reacted. Anger is something she had not suspected in him before.

Thus, when the call comes in the night that a Shadowfast had been sighted, she finds herself welcoming it. She frowns. Another token of strange times, of the approaching Uroboros. To welcome the sighting of a Shadowfast.

A party gathers at the archive, a dozen or so: two families, two men and a woman. They're petitioning Pharlane, wanting to leave Dragonkeep for a new life on the Shadowfast. She does not ask why, perhaps afraid to. Perhaps some of them blame her for the coming of the Phoenix Prey, for the coming Uroboros. She's been honoured ever since she was chosen archivist as a young girl, and blame is a frighteningly unfamiliar thing to see in faces and hear in voices.

So she agrees. And she will go with them, to at least watch over their safety a while longer. She orders a dragonreme prepared and feels guilty for wanting so eagerly to leave Dragonkeep, if only for a while. She has spent the last few days in meetings with the various councils which regulate life in the city. Factions have erupted. Old racial and religious enmities not thought of since the Shadow came have reemerged. In the archive there are many works on the coming of the Phoenix Prey, even more on the Uroboros. But now Pharlane realizes that there is little mention in any of them of the space between - the gap between the end of one world and the beginning of the next. So when councillors ask her what to do and she hears the fear in their voices, she answers questions with questions or prevaricates in a dozen other ways to avoid saying or screaming - I do not know.

So she lets the guilt fester and welcomes the sighting of the Shadowfast.

But even as the dragonreme glides toward it, a high rocky scar thrusting out of the Shadow, Phariane stands on the bowsprit and still dwells on Zantalliz' hands.

#

Behind her the twenty petitioners sat on sacks of possessions and provisions or stood on the deck, restless, staring at the Shadowfast or talking in whispers or casting anxious glances back to Dragonkeep. A child started crying, was scooped up and comforted.

A wolf and its ward were also on the deck. Phariane had summoned them as an escort for the petitioners. The wolf was one of the hoar-greys – sturdier and thicker pelted than their black cousins.

#

This one looks up at the stars. Something howls somewhere in its eyes, but only its eyes.

#

The ward, in jerkin and leather gorget, had his thumbs hooked into the waist of his breeks. He looked now at Dragonkeep, now at the Shadowfast, now elsewhere, without particular interest in anything. His eyes skimmed but never drifted.

#

When he boarded, Phariane looked at him for a moment, trying to decide if he was one of the Wolf-wards she has slept with.

#

Although there was a gauntlet on the hand that loosely grasped the wolf's leash, the leash was never taut. As the ward moved or stopped, so did the wolf, without bidding or signal.

Phariane had also brought one of the Phoenix Prey.

#

She recalls making the decision. Weighing fire and ice - the different brutalities of Gel and Gemmored. Mulling over the elusive nature of Harnak. Searching her instincts, brooding over the Prey's actions, words, miens since arriving in Dragonkeep. Refusing even to consider Zantalliz.

#

"Where are they kept, the wolves?" said Harnak.

Phariane turned to him.

"I've hardly seen any about in the city," he went on.

"They may go where they will," said Phariane, "but they prefer the forest."

"Forest?"

#

Harnak has wandered Dragonkeep, usually at night as suits his assassin's instinct. He has flitted silently through the streets, past bathhouses and gymnasia and stables, and across plazas. He even knows of the cropfields that border the city on two sides. But a forest?

"It lies at the tail of Dragonkeep," says Phariane.

Harnak wonders what it might be like. He looks over to the wolf and ward on the dragonreme deck. Both somehow remind him of himself. Not their eyes that stare both

outward and inward - Harnak's are far too guarded to stare. Their eyes hint at something lost while Harnak's merely suggest something missing. And although there is comparison in the sleek way of moving, what Harnak recognizes is something else.

It is the eyes. He remembers seeing a wolf and Wolf-ward walking in the city. The citizens of Dragonkeep looked on them with something of how his own people looked on Harnak. If the Dragonkeepers' eyes lacked the hatred, the contempt, if their eyes didn't spit on the wolf and Wolf-ward, they yet contained the same distrust.

The realization does not trouble Harnak. If anything it bores him. He turns to the looming Shadowfast. He draws a long breath and feels his robe swell about him, an enfolding tower of silk which is softly collapsing around him even as he darts up.

Up into the sky with only stars to distinguish its darkness from the darkness of the sea of Shadow below. His tiny wings drone, beating even faster, carrying him higher, until he halts, motionless, hovering.

Far below, for the first time, he can view the whole of Dragonkeep, poised as it is near the Shadowfast. He can view its enormous, sleek length, tapering gently into a tail and narrowing more sharply into a neck at the other extreme before swelling into a head. He can glimpse a sharply curved lace of crimson and yellow glimmer which is the chalcedony and fire of its mouth.

It lies on the Shadow, neither floating nor inhered, more still than any ship on any natural sea.

He can barely make out the far smaller speck of the dragonreme stroking toward the Shadowfast. And even the wooded top of this scarped tower of an isle is far below where Harnak hovers. His wings still blur to keep him aloft. He considers pivoting from the shape of a hummingbird into a bird better able to glide down onto the isle. A petrel? Or a poorwill? But no wind blows over the Shadow. There are only the shifting movements of illimitable distance playing on the senses, against the ear, the mute murmur of immensity...

Immensity does not trouble him. His own realm of Aftermath is swathed in vast pampas and tablelands. But Shadow does. The sky of Aftermath is without sun or star, only a sheet of dim crimson light, sometimes streaked by lighter vermilions or darker purples. Aftermath is always dusk. Shadow in Aftermath is a petty thing, carved by cressets out of the darkness only found in windowless chambers and dungeons. Harnak has been trained for such darknesses, to seek it, but Shadow reminds him of that training. It reminds him of shadows cast by hot coals porcupined with branding irons, cast by hanging strips of chain, cast by the coiling flickerings of whips. He relishes night but loathes shadow. But here, looking below, looking above, he cannot distinguish between the two. Sea, sky, everything is darkness and everything is shadow.

An uneasy realization.

He abandons it and plummets for the Shadowfast, still in the rainbow-plumaged hummingbird form.

#

Harnak scouted the top of the scar as Phariane had asked him. He zigzagged through the trees that choked the plateau. Some were thickly boled, others more narrow. The thicker trees splayed out serrated, leafy boughs. The others shot out furred and twisting branches, tipped with clumps of pricking buds. The branches and boughs sometimes

entwined and Harnak had to hover, wings droning, making short dodges in the air, searching for a gap through the matted foliage.

Beneath there was no undergrowth, no wildflowers or underwood. Sight was poor. The deformed canopy strangled out most of the starlight. All Harnak could make out was a floor of dark detritus, runneled with what might be roots or lichen. Or darkness drooling.

#

There are few trees in the city of angled agate spires, but Harnak has slipped through Dragonkeep's gardens, even sampling fruits from some and finding their tastes familiar.

Yet even the substance of the Shadowfast trees, he notes, is totally other. Their rinds are less like wood than some kind of diseased crust. Almost as if the trees are no longer trees but the shells of that disease.

Pharlane has told Harnak that the Shadowfasts were thrown up, barely ahead of the rise of Shadow, by practitioners of powers gained from old knowledge.

"But such powers are close to madness and the Shadowfasts mirror such closeness..."

#

The cliff of the Shadowfast is not quite sheer, and is rucked and cleaved.

Pharlane climbs steadily. The sweat filming her springs from effort and concentration, not nervousness. She looks down at the dragonreme. The sweet stench off the tarnished scar is sickening, but she's almost at the top. She looks down at the dragonreme. Do they really want to make a home here? Is their fear so great? Has she failed them so completely?

A piece of the brittle yellow-grey face comes away at her touch. It skitters past the Wolf-ward who is climbing after her. His movements are less steady, less confident, but there's no alarm in his face as he looks up.

Looping each of their bodies, from shoulder to opposite hip, is a winding of silken rope. Once on the plateau a rope will be lowered and the harnessed wolf hauled up.

The three of them, four with Harnak, will scour the plateau until Pharlane is sure of its safety.

As Pharlane has told Harnak, the Shadowfasts were thrown up, barely ahead of the rise of Shadow, by practitioners of powers gained from old knowledge.

But such powers are close to madness, and the Shadowfasts mirror such closeness.

#

Harnak sees something.

#

It is night in Dragonkeep. Again he has stolen out of the archive. The Blade-ward are no challenge, more concerned with preventing entry than exit. And although he lacks the advantages of Harnak, he has the same stealth.

Also like Harnak, though less at ease within it, he loves the night. It comes only once in a generation to his realm. Darkness is treasured, hoarded in cool windowless chambers, but night, true unfamiliar night, is both worshipped and mistrusted.

He slides into it because he must. Because the hunger demands it. It begins beyond the fingers, then through them and the hand and the arm, and eventually the hunger soaks him. It feels like despair.

He restlessly prowls the city. Through streets and porticos and gardens, past water cisterns and over ramps and stairways. Passing motionless querns dotting deserted plazas. Stabled horses snort. He is crossing one of the few tells, the highest places in the city other than the archive and the amphitheatre, when he sees the glimmer.

There is meant to be little of that in the nights here. Light means dragonflame and dragonflame is a sacred thing. It's not darkness but day which is treasured here, and the flame gives it to the city. When the braziers are returned to the dragonmouth each evening few tongues of illumination are suffered to remain. The archive, because of its revered status, is allowed several. The Blade-ward in the present times of unrest, are also given possession. But he can see, as he steals closer, that these figures are not Blade-ward. There are some twenty, twenty-five, standing by one of the city's many arches. Only one holds a lantern. This is not one of the fine, silver cages in which flutterings of yellow flame are usually ported. This is a rough copper can. The light seeps from crude punctures. To steal dragonflame is sacrilegious, to keep it in such a vessel doubly so.

The figures carry long rods, and he waits, watches to see what they do with them. But his curiosity is already dwindling. He runs his fingers along the edge of something as sharp as the hunger. The expected sweet panic begins to bubble through his senses. He tastes blood, but not with his tongue.

#

In the unchanging night beyond Dragonkeep, beneath the Shadowfast's forest's thick, twisted canopy, on the runneled mulchy ground, Harnak sees something humped. Something of stone. Or rather something of stones, lumps of what looks like greisen, piled on each other. A cairn.

Even with his sharp sight, Harnak might never have noticed it in the canopied gloom, if not for the movement. As he hovers in his hummingbird form, a second stone slides off the cairn. Harnak feels the hooded beat of an emotion he has encountered before. He darts away.

#

The children have stared unmoving since Phariane pulled herself up onto the top of the Shadowfast. While the Wolf-ward joined her. While he let down his rope and hauled his harnessed wolf up the cliff. It's only now, with the wolf freed, that they step forward.

They're some ten years in appearance, a boy and a girl. Their loins are hairless. Their smooth skin delineates their bones softly. Their eyes are dull, depthless, and Phariane doesn't believe they could ever be haunted.

The child figures come forward. The hoar-grey's hackles stir. Its ward places a steadying hand on its head. They come forward and Phariane and her companions have no way to move back. Instead they skirt sideways at the Shadowfast's edge. Wolf and Wolf-ward now return the child figures' stare as Phariane has done since her head lifted above the cliff. Feet and bodies feel inconsequential in comparison, as if the five are circling where their eyes meet. Phariane hopes her gaze has been as firm and unchanging as the child figures'. But there is a crushing sensation in her heart as she realizes that their gaze is changing. Something in their faces is sharpening. Something is stirring. Something is coming.

#

No wind blows over the Shadow. Harnak has accepted as much. But now something is following his hummingbird as he darts and veers between the tree boles. Something chill, slithering through the trees as if it stalked something.

#

Whatever is going to happen ripples in Phariane's perception, about to burst. The child figures' faces are now pinched wasp-like malevolence. The two groups - Phariane, the wolf and Wolf-ward - the brother and sister if brother and sister they are - have almost circled. The child figures now stand with their backs to the edge of the Shadowfast. The others have their backs to the forest.

The moment snaps like a sting.

The girl figure's eyes widen, and the wolf suddenly goes at her, flowing like hoar-grey quicksilver - and a hummingbird drills out of the forest into the starlight - and the wolf's jaw fastens on the girl figure's throat - and there is a sound, though it's impossible for Phariane to say if it's a snarl and which of them it comes from - and wolf and girl figure carry off the brink of the Shadowfast.

And still their stares stay locked.

#

The boy figure's own eyes, which were also widening, receded. Faded. He broke his own stare, turned and leaned over the edge of the cliff as if to watch. But he kept leaning. Until his body, without twisting or flailing after balance, simply tipped over and disappeared.

Harnak stood for a moment, a lithe, rangy man now, slick with sweat, ribs and chest rising and falling. He spoke calmly but quickly to Phariane. He looked back at the forest and spoke of the cairn, and of how something had come from it. As he spoke a matted mass of canopy stirred in the distance and something soughed along beneath it, moving closer.

Phariane went to the edge of the forest and tied the rope she had carried, to the outermost bole. She took the rope back to the brink of the Shadowfast and tossed the unravelling coil down. Its end came to a stop, jouncing barely above the Shadow. The dragonreme nestled against the Shadowfast, a small pale disturbance in the vast ocean of dark.

Phariane turned and strode over to the Wolf-ward. He hadn't moved since his wolf had plunged over. She reached a hand to his shoulder. He turned without looking at her and both of them began to descend the rope, feet scraping against the yellow-grey cliff, scuffling off more brittle sickly-smelling shards.

Harnak stood at the edge and watched them. He glanced over his shoulder one last time at the dankly bristling patch of convulsion coming tearing through the trees and raised his long sinewy arms.

Phariane and the Wolf-ward were almost half way down the Shadowfast when they felt the feathery rush of a white tern diving past them.

#

Pulling away from the Shadowfast, stroke by surging oarstroke, everyone on the dragonreme can see the figure on the clifftop. It has a straggling eruption of hair like the forest itself. It has the shape and manner of an old, old man. And it rages. It shambles

along the cliff edge, back and forth, back and forth, as the dragonreme slips further away. Its head jerks and twists broken-necked as it rends its monstrous hair.

And it screams, the cries ragged, their edges ripped.

Phariane and Harnak wonder if the old figure is the father of the child figures, or if indeed they are the begetters of the old one. Perhaps one or all three raised the Shadowfast long ago. Things are rarely as they seem in such places. The Shadowfasts are creations of powers close to, and sometimes more than close to madness...

#

All the way back to Dragonkeep the Wolf-ward said nothing. His eyes were open but hooded inwardly as was the way with his people. He hardly moved on the deck but, when he did, it seemed as if he did so with a suggestion of something by his side - or missing from his side.

Once he tilted his head back and gave one piercing howl, crystalline with grief, into the stars. It ceased rather than faded. There was no wind to carry it away.

#

Back within Dragonkeep, Phariane stands wearily in front of the broken arch. In the light of the Blade-ward lanterns she looks at each piece of stone. She tries to put back together, at least in her mind, the frieze that lies in chaos at her feet. There are no statues in Dragonkeep. This was decided in the days of its founding. The body of the dragon was still softly and slowly transforming into rock and gem, into dolomite or granite or rhyolite, into jade and jasper and azurite and lapis-lazuli. The founders with little more than hands began sculpting the roads and then the buildings. But it was agreed there would be no statues. No idols to worship. No tall symbols of old faiths or old wars in old lost lands to stir unease in Dragonkeep. Instead they raised and shaped arches, decorated them with scenes of the time of Uroboros to come. Forewarnings. Reminders of the purpose of the city's people. A symbol of hope that one day the Shadow would recede. Phariane stoops and takes hold of a stone. The arches are shaped of sarsen. Harder than granite. In time ancient before the Shadow, flint was whetted on sarsen. The Blade-ward, she is told, arrived too late to prevent the damage. But even if the desecrators had strong rare iron - tools stolen from the metal workings in the dragon's fiery mouth, "they should not have been able to do this to sarsen," she whispers.

But the Uroboros is close, she realizes. This is a time of change. What was not always stone may soften again. She remembers the faces of the child-figures on the top of the Shadowfast - watching them change - how it reminded her of Harnak. She remembers, more unwillingly, how she recognised that something about them, about the power within them. How it reminded her of herself.

The Blade-ward around her are now panoplied from the city armoury in more than hawk-helm and gambeson. The golden lantern light sheens on the steel of pauldrons and cuisses and vambraces. For the people of Dragonkeep, her people, are changing too. This is not the first act of desecration since the Phoenix Prey arrived. But - she looks around her at the flesh-and-bone rubble strewn among the stone - these are the first deaths.

"Did you kill them?" she asks, for the lantern light falls on swordblades also, in the hands of the Blade-ward. Understandable if they did, she thinks, but no, they tell her. The desecrators were dead before the Blade-ward arrived. And she nods, because the human

wreckage, the necks and limbs and torsos, have clearly been sundered by something even sharper than steel. And there's no blood.

Tears teeter in her eyes, for a crowd of reasons, but something colder than sadness stops them. She weighs the lump of sarsen in her hand. Dragonkeep itself is changing. Stirring.

#

Gel shoulders the doorframe of his chamber in the archive and gazes at his sleeping Dream-ward. A woman not old. Not young. The silver patterns in her hair dishevelled by the motions of her head on the pillow. She still angers him. Puzzles him. He's mocked her, hurt her, taken her with force – as is the way of princes in his realm. Yet she doesn't respond with fear in the way of slaves or even with hatred. She does not complain, or leave him. She stays. And if her duty is to guard his sleep why does she sleep herself?

Gel eases himself into the room and leans his body against the door to close it. Twin urges to laugh and sob shudder through his body. His robe is stained with blood, not drenched but rather finely sprayed as with mist. His skin is infused with a similar colour. The sweeping crescent heads of his ax, though dry and clean, almost glow crimson.

He leans on its pole and slides to the floor, not through weakness, onto all fours. Laying Bloodbane before him he strokes the crescent blades with the gentleness of a harpist caressing strings.

But the strains evoked only sound inside his mind. Screams. The cries of those whose lives the ax has taken that night. Ever since arriving at Dragonkeep he has kept the hunger in check - until tonight. He drives his hands against his gaunt but ruddy face, palms cushioning the pain, fingers clawing at the guilt. Suddenly a warm concerned arm is around his shoulders. And he knows that the Dream-ward was not asleep - was not asleep when he slipped out of their bed earlier - was not asleep on any of the other nights he slipped out of the bed.

But other voices, other screams rise to meet these newcomers. Bloodbane is old and has fed on epochs of blood. A thousand thousand ghosts swarm like flies about it, all screaming endlessly.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"What is the soul?" The next evening, though still tired and troubled, Phariane asked the question at the second convocation.

There was no argument this time. No words at all. Instead Zantalliz, the last to leave the first convocation was the first to stand now, almost before the question was finished. With a quiet smooth swiftness he turned his slight shoulders and left the table. Phariane watched him go. She leant forward in her chair as if caught between staying or following him.

Phariane looked at Gel, but there was no snigger. He was unusually still. The uppermost prick of one of Bloodbane's crescents was laid thoughtfully beneath his throat.

Gemmored sat, fully healed, his scabbarded blade laid across his thighs. Unlike Gel, his glacial stillness was nothing more than usual.

Harnak's face, now the face of a wizened old woman, showed the subtle shifts in skin and eye and hair and bone that constantly played over her appearance, whatever it was. She too said nothing.

#

Phariane knows that her question about the soul has a meaning and a pain for each of them. The importance of it is not in any answer they might give her, but in the answers that they must silently give themselves.

With that, also silently, she answers a question for herself. She pulls back her auburn hair, which has now grown halfway down her back. She stands and follows Zantalliz.

#

Phariane went along the cloister just below the mezzanine and entered one of the arches. One or two scholars perused among the shelves. She ignored them.

The shelves she passed were stocked with leathern scrolls. The scrolls further on were parchment. By the time she reached them she was beyond any light cast by the scholar's lanterns. Still she moved quickly and surely through the narrow passages crammed with words and symbols set on leather and parchment and papyrus and maguey and clay and velum.

She had no need of light, or to have seen the way Zantalliz went, to find him.

He was stood before a section of lazuli tablets, holding one carefully in his hands. He was studying its hieroglyphs with his strange eyes that needed light no more than Phariane's.

#

She looks into those eyes and wonders what they might need, hoping to see the same need she feels. She wonders how to tell.

Just a few days ago the arrival of Zantalliz and the others had the archive alive with eyes. Half of Dragonkeep it'd seemed. The coming of the Phoenix Prey had sent them scurrying here. Some came to consult texts they had first studied years ago - chronicles, aetiologies, cosmogonies, eschatologies. Others came for the first time in their lives. But all searching for what's to come, for the truth, for hope. And now almost all were gone again. How quickly hope fades, thinks Phariane, or twists.

#

"Have you found what you were looking for?" asked Phariane.

Zantalliz lifted his head and turned to her, responding without replying. "This is a fine library. Complex. Diverse. A good place for searching."

Phariane nodded. Then, "There is a section I think may be of particular interest to you." She moved past Zantalliz for a few steps. Turned. He followed.

"There are thousands of accounts of times, places, lives, wars," she continued as she walked.

"Especially wars," said Zantalliz.

Phariane turned at right angle down a narrower passage of shelving. Scrolls and buckram spines.

"History is often blood," said Phariane.

"And legend is often darkness."

She turned again. Her hand trailed lightly but not casually against metal tablets leaning one way on one shelf and the other on the next, chevrons of knowledge.

"There are thousands of languages collected here," said Zantalliz. "More than a single realm could contain."

"The archive is set out like Dragonkeep itself," Phariane responded without replying.

"Yes," said Zantalliz. "Avenues and streets..."

"Yes," said Phariane, but Dragonkeep also has wynds."

Somewhere the shelving had strayed from straight, had begun to weave. It had not happened or begun. The change was outside happening or beginning. But now they had reached a part of the archive where the walls of books, tablets, scrolls and solanders bowed out and recurved almost sinuously.

"Not many know how to find their way here," said Phariane. She stopped. Her back became still. She pulled out a beresty manuscript of bark. Eyes lowered, she pressed it against her chest and breathed. "These are my favourite," she murmured. "They remind me of forests." She glanced at Zantalliz. "The knowledge we both have comes from both book and forest." She held out the long strip of ancient bark with its cuneal inscription, stared at it. Her mouth gestured with the barest of movements.

The sharp angles of the stylus marks began to soften. To stretch. To change.

Phariane's lips closed and the symbols shrank back and stiffened into their old shapes.

There was something new in Zantalliz' eyes.

Phariane hastily pulled out something from another shelf. It was a large gilt-edged book of bound vellum pages, almost as fine as silk. She opened it and offered it to Zantalliz.

#

The symbols on the vellum are looping and swirling in style. They intertwine with the border designs so intricately that not even the closest of study can be sure where illumination ends and text begins. Especially since both are laid not only in vivid inks but gold and silver leaf. Zantalliz brushes a hand down one page. Even the textures are pleasing.

He remembers the archives of his own people in the realm of Voyage. Regret, sadness, pain - none of these are tainted emotions, all might be allowed. Yet he has allowed no other since the Phoenix plucked him from Voyage. Since his people died.

Perhaps now...

The book reminds him not of forests, but the caverns and grottos of his isle, coraled with niches filled with scrolls of rayskin and tablets of bone and books bound in driftwood and shell. Nowhere in the Dragonkeep shelves has he found books like those.

But perhaps...

His lips slowly part, breaking a seal of dryness. Then, just as slowly, they begin to move, hesitantly to shape questioning whispers. And although this book is leather and vellum rather than shell and silk, first the silver, then the gold leaf on the pages begin to twitch.

Oh.

These are indeed like his own people's scripts. The texts in the rest of the archive are fixed in the languages, the grammars of human knowledge. But these hold the strangely

shifting knowledge that is his, and now he realizes is also Phariane's. Mankind desires yet fears it, calls it madness among other names, but it's simply that there is no order, no grammar to this thing.

Now the inks on the pages are becoming iridescent, swaying, reaching out from symbol to symbol.

Oh.

#

"Archives are places to search out truths," says Phariane, "but sometimes they can be used to escape them, to hide from them."

She regrets the words as soon as they're spoken, but then sees that Zantalliz hasn't heard. He stares deep into the swirling shapes on the book he holds. Phariane is unsure whether to be pleased or not. There is so much more she'd wanted to say. But perhaps if she waits.

There are things to say to the other Phoenix Prey, also. She believes that it was Gel who killed the desecrators of the arch and should explain to him that in Dragonkeep there is no punishment for one of the Phoenix Prey, no matter what they do. She knows that Harnak is also troubled, though in subtler ways. Even Gemmored. She needs to speak to them all. But not now. Now is her and Zantalliz.

He's moved one hand beneath the spine of the book and uses the other to turn the pages. His agile fingers brush the edges so softly, almost beckoning them rather than turning them. She reaches out and takes this hand. Still he stares into the book. On this page thin ribbons of interlinears appear, fade, reappear, coalesce into the other symbols. She slowly guides his hand towards her. Its back is smooth to the touch as well as the eye, with only the slightest ridging of veins. Slowly, slowly she brings the tips of his forgotten fingers to her lips and holds them there.

And then she hears something.

#

Each step of Harnak's Dream-ward was carefully taken. Although he'd transferred the yellow light-giving flame from the tripod in Harnak's chamber to a lantern, still he descended the caracol uneasily. It was steep, and he had never before been in the vaults underneath the archive. He wiped the back of his free hand across his damp forehead then pushed his fingers through his tangle of hair.

He stepped off the stairway onto the floor of the third vault. Lifting the lantern he looked around quickly. Glazed amphorae filled this chamber as they had the two above. The young man turned back to the caracol as if to descend further, then paused. Instead he stepped deeper into the chamber, into the midst of the amphorae, which reached to his waist. He lifted the lantern and looked more carefully about.

After a moment he grew still. His eyes slowly dropped to his other hand which rested on the edge of an amphora. A small black shape glistened there, but not with the sheen of glaze. Pincers twitched. A slim segmented barbed tail arched out of the back.

At the sight of the scorpion the Dream-ward took in a breath. His mouth widened with delight.

In a moment, a naked version of the tow-headed Dream-ward stood next to the clothed. It leaned a hip against the nearest amphora and folded its arms.

"How did you know that I wasn't a true scorpion?" said Harnak.

Immediately Harnak had transformed, the Dream-ward had turned slightly away and stared uneasily at the floor. Yet he jerked a moment's grin at the question.

"There are no scorpions in Dragonkeep?" Harnak continued.

"Oh yes," nodded the Dream-ward, setting down his lantern, "and all in this chamber. But all of them sleep."

"One might've woken," said Harnak.

"No," said the Dream-ward. He was pulling his plain linen shift over his still-averted head. "It's not time yet. Though soon."

"And where do they sleep?" said Harnak.

The Dream-ward picked up his lantern and made a sweep of it toward the amphorae. Head still bowed, he offered his shift to Harnak and continued. "Have you seen trees in Dragonkeep?"

"Of course. Some like the trees of my realm, some very different."

"And flowers?"

"Again, some I know, some not."

"And cats?"

"And horses."

"And bees?"

"And tasted their honey."

"But there are many fruits and beasts of all kinds," said the Dream-ward, "that you've not seen."

"I know there are cattle because I've eaten meat. And I know there are silk-worms despite this," said Harnak, fingering the Dream-ward's linen shift but still not taking it.

#

He has no need of it. He's not really naked.

#

"But I thought most living things of this realm had been lost to the Shadow."

"Some," said the Dream-ward. "But many are stored here, in these chambers. In these containers."

They both looked down into the nearest amphora, but even held over it the lantern light somehow failed to penetrate. From within came the smell of the chamber at its most overpowering - it was moist, rich, but not the smell of decay. Harnak reached a hand toward the amphora's mouth. The Dream-ward looked almost alarmed, but made no protest. Nevertheless Harnak hesitated.

"Seeds? Eggs?"

"Seeds of a kind," said the Dream-ward. "Eggs of a kind. Life in abeyance. Biding."

"Awaiting the Uroboros?" said Harnak.

"Awaiting its outcome," nodded the Dream-ward, "to see if there's any use for life..."

The Dream-ward slowly looked up at Harnak, for the first time since Harnak had retaken human form – the Dream-ward's form. He still held his shift in his free hand. Still unaccepted, it left both of them naked. "Is that why you came here," he asked, "to find this out?"

Harnak shook his head. "I came for what was here before you came, with your lamp. You've taken darkness and brought something else."

"Light," said the Dream-ward.

"And shadow," said Harnak. "One causes the other."

"I can take the light away," said the Dream-ward, turning, but Harnak took hold of his arm.

He changed without letting go of the Dream-ward's arm. The transformation was not drastic. A slight melting of appearance. The frame became a little shorter and tauter, the shoulders broader, the hair sandy, the skin tawny. There were no subtle shifts as there were with other shapes he took. No minute flickering of eye colour. No ghosting flux of bone.

#

Harnak no longer smiles. Now he really is naked.

#

He folded his arms across his chest, taking hold of his shoulders, then turned. His back was a mass of barely healed welts and cicatrix of older wounds like horizontal spines.

"Even if you took the light you would still leave shadows," he murmured.

#

It's not so much a sound that Phariane hears. Nor something glimpsed. Or detected with any other sense of the common five. But she is connected to the archive in such a way that she knows that something is wrong and knows where it is happening.

She runs headlong through the passages of shelves without disturbing so much as a single tablet or scroll or beresty. Without so much as brushing a binding of a book. Her breath is half pant and half sob, still stinging from tearing herself away from Zantalliz, furious at having to. Her kris is already drawn.

She turns a final corner and the anger vanishes.

He's so young. Hardly a man. Like the rest of the male Blade-ward, he has remained unshaven since the coming of the Phoenix Prey, sworn to do so until the Uroboros. Yet his jaw is barely feathered with beard. So young.

He kneels with a papyrus scroll in one hand and a small canister wrapped in cloth in the other. The top of the canister is hinged back and flickering out is a sliver of flame. White flame. It would not have been hard for him to steal it from the dragon's mouth, even in such wary times. He is Blade-ward. Trusted.

But Phariane can see from his face, his so young face, that he is scared, confused. Even if he could succeed in what he is trying to do, she could still forgive him.

He holds the flame under the scroll, almost touching it. Yellow flame, like the tongue in the lamp by his side, is for light. White is for burning. "Burn," he mouths, "burn," as if raising the archive, destroying every word here would turn back the Uroboros. "Burn..."

But the flame only forks, flows around the rolled papyrus.

The Blade-ward still is unaware of Phariane. His face is wet with sweat from the pure effort of willing the scroll alight. She waits silently, her breath quiet again. A dragon's fire will not burn the dragon, and the archive and every book and tablet and scroll in it are part of the dragon in a way Phariane understands. She waits for him to understand too.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Once again Sstheness sat on the serrated throne in the cold chamber with the murk-bottomed pit. Again Rorn, the fifth Phoenix Prey, lay like a beaten animal beside her. Again a figure stood before her. But this time it was a woman rather than a man, and no skull-casqued warriors restrained her.

Rather the woman stood still and calm before the pit. She was bare in the cold tallow candlelight. In front of her were placed boots, breeks, a plastron, a cape, and a sword shaped like a sickle.

"The Uroboros comes," Sstheness said to her, "and in that battle loyalty will be valued above all." Sstheness tapped her face with her fingerstalls, the needle ends of the long sigils contemplatively pricking her chin. "Are you loyal, daughter of Leviathan?"

"I am," said the woman. Rorn gave a sound that might've been a cough or a snigger, but was unambiguously bitter rather than defiant.

"Loyal enough to join those I trust most?" said Sstheness, ignoring him.

The woman nodded, raising her head and letting it fall slightly.

One of Sstheness' sigil-thorns lifted from her cheek, leaving a pin wound of red. The finger stretched out, curled back. Beckoned.

#

Rorn watches the woman walk around the pit. He glimpses the murk stirring as she does so - darting twitches of movement.

She bends to pick up something on the dais in front of Sstheness - a gaping skull. Her dugs pend forward as she stoops. If not fat, certainly not spare, considers Rorn. And not tall. Every skull-casque Rorn has seen in Leviathan has been these things.

As she reaches for the skull its mouth snaps shut. Her hands stop and there is a moment sharper than silence. Rorn is impressed that she does not look up at Sstheness. Then she takes it by the sides and the mouth slowly hinges wide again, as though mocking.

Rorn watches her retrace her path around the pit. No, he thinks, most certainly not spare. She stands where she did before, this time with the skull held over her head. As she lowers it Rorn searches her face for fear but finds none.

Sstheness leans over to him as if she knows. "Doubt," she says, "is punishable by death in Leviathan."

#

Then she turned to the woman and called, "Who wear the clothes and sword at your feet?"

Before the jaw of the skull descended over her eyes she smiled. "Those of the Death'shead Cadre."

Then her head was encased by the skull to her neck. Her arms dropped to her sides. She stood still and calm. Then the jaw snapped shut. Her throat began to jerk, a wild solitary movement of her body. Then a sound began too. It was a creaking. A creaking of bone. And then her hands flew up to the skull again and she was twisting and curling and arching as if the convulsion in her throat had exploded through her body. And caught her foot in the cape lying at her feet and staggered to the very edge of the pit and again its lost

depths thrashed. And her dugs and thighs quivered as she struggled. And blood trickled and bubbled from the skull's eye-sockets and jaw. And another sound wove in and out of the creaking and it was a whine.

And then she fell to her knees. It was over.

"And who are the Death'shead Cadre?" murmured Sstheness.

The woman went down onto her hands, reached over for the sickle-sword and used it to lever herself back to her knees. She lifted her skull casqued head and the jaw dropped open again and moved. Her voice was different. Hollow. A resonance of echo.

"We are the skull beneath the skin, the steel beneath the skull..."

#

She climbs to her feet and Rorn sees that she is taller, sparer than before.

Then he feels the familiar prickling graze of Sstheness' sigil-thorns in his hair - finds his head wrenched up and Sstheness' tongue in his mouth.

"Hungry?" she says when she withdraws it. Without waiting for an answer she pulls Rorn to his feet and out of the ribcage surrounding the spinal seat. The ribs, curling inward, require even more pain in egress than in access. Wounds reopened, they leave the cold chamber with the serrated throne and the murk-bottomed pit while the new member of her Death'shead Cadre continues to dress.

The bloodless vessels and lifeless nerves, which make up Leviathan's narrow labyrinths, are even colder. Like the various darknesses Rorn has experienced since coming to this realm, there seem to be an equal spectrum of colds. The chill in the labyrinths is more active than that in the hollow varices, cysts and tumours that are the sea-wyrm's chambers. There's no draught as such, of anything as obvious - or wholesome - as air. But something makes it bitter. Something part of the mixture of decay, tumescence, slime, and razors that is Leviathan.

There is a spectrum of dread, too, that for Rorn is part of the wyrm-city. The one he feels now is not the greatest, but by no means petty. It is not the apprehension of an unknown but of a known. Sstheness has dragged him this way every day since he's been strong enough. Citizens of Leviathan who are licking the weepings from the labyrinths' stillbirth walls turn and leer at him as he stumbles past. They know where Sstheness is taking him. So does he.

Finally the twisting, gradually descending journey is done. They reach the longest vertical slash of any Rorn has seen in the walls. It is the tallest gateway. Sstheness tears it open fiercely and hurls him through into a chamber Rorn knows only too well.

Again there is a different cold. Bleak. Vast. Filled with moans. The chamber stretches into the distance, and throughout that length, hanging from the vaulty ceiling, are the same fleshy stalactites that strew the labyrinths. Except these are longer. And from them hang bare bodies. Men. Women. Children. Living. Moaning.

The tendril-things curl around their necks, holding them just above the floor. Others meander among them. Gazing up at them. Nudging them so that they turn slightly. Pinching them. Considering. Because these tendrils, unlike human umbilical cords, not only nourish but leach. They give life to the suspended ones but at the same time soften tissue, suck bone brittle - until the time is right. This is what they're considering, the meandering free ones - if the time is right. Sstheness too, beside him, pushing him along.

They finally come to one. A young man, around Rorn's age, though with fair rather than the umber-dark hair of the Waste-Ranger. He's pallid, but all the hanging ones are pallid. Sstheness takes his hand. She looks up at him and perhaps he looks down at her. It's impossible to tell as his lids are drooped almost shut. Sstheness lays her other hand on his wrist and still his eyes don't widen. Her thumbs, just the thumbs, stroke. So gently. The sigil-thorns don't even touch the flesh. She smiles, and begins to twist. The sound reaches into Rorn's stomach and twists that too - the gristly stretching and ripping of human fibre. The stretching sound gives way to the ripping. The young man begins to moan. Softly. It remains soft even when the sound is joined by the cracking of bone. No scream. Of all the places in Leviathan there are no screams here. Only moaning, and the occasional laughter that echoes across this long chamber differently than through the labyrinths.

As the arm comes away there is only a piddling spurt of blood, the young man's heart being as enervated as the rest of him.

Rorn watches Sstheness bring the meaty bloody shoulder of the arm up to her mouth. He suspects that with her unnatural power she could well have twisted it off even if the hanging one had been strong and whole. In the middle of disgust he enjoys the moment's frisson of helplessness.

"We are all cadaverous fruit," she says, still chewing, "with a worm at the heart."

She swings the stump around into Rorn's face. An offer. He shakes his head.

Somewhere in this vast hall, once the intestine of the giant sea-wyrm and now the feeding gallery of Leviathan, a snigger spits into full laughter and echoes...

Before they can fade a messenger rushes up to Sstheness. A young girl. Spindly and flushed. She sprawls on her front, narrow back heaving in breathlessness. Sstheness discards the arm and hunkers before her, grasps her hair, pulls the girl's mouth up to her ear and listens to the spittle-lipped whisper.

Then Sstheness is gone. Rorn watches her rush through the hanging garden of living corpses, hurling or striking casual feeders out of her way, disappearing through the gateslash into the labyrinths.

He hears grumous jabs of chewing and sees the messenger urchin attacking the discarded arm. He turns to her. She stares back at him with feral apprehension, drops her meal and runs.

The fair-haired suspended one still moans, though faintly. The ragged shoulder has already stopped leaking. Soon, in a few days, the arm will begin to regrow - as it has done time after time. Why did they do it, Rorn wonders. When men first invaded and carved their city out of the sea-wyrm did the suspended ones volunteer for this fate or were they chosen and forced? To feed the populace of Leviathan forever, never dying.

Rorn looks at the torn arm and knows that eventually, like all other discarded flesh from the suspended ones it will be collected and rendered for the tallow that makes the candles that flutter in the chills and the darkneses of the city. But he knows another thing. That thought curdles in his mind and his stomach. He is hungry. And he will eat.

He looks up at the suspended one and asks a hopeless question, expecting no answer.

"Is the cold dark or the dark cold?"

#

Sstheness strides fiercely through Leviathan. She runs the sigil-thorns of one hand along the walls as she goes. The fingerstalls are in a way part of her. They grow. The only way to keep them pared is to claw them against the stony surfaces of the sea-wyrm's heart chamber.

But apart from the spatter of viscously sharp scabs, the labyrinth walls are pulpy rather than hard. The talons simply sink through as they rake along. Even beneath is only a black crusty chitin that the sigils rasp against uselessly.

But Sstheness pays no heed to this. The message occupies her fully. Dragonkeep sighted again. So soon after the last. Evidence that the Uroboros grows ever nearer. But the sky-wyrm has not increased its speed or turned in its course. So it may be that though Leviathan has sighted Dragonkeep, Dragonkeep may not have sighted Leviathan.

So...

She might dispatch the Shadow Corsairs, but the Corsairs are wild and undisciplined, not given to stealth... The Death'shead Cadre are far more loyal... But there is another cadre at her command, beyond loyalty, beyond stealth.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

They stream out of Leviathan, out over the Shadow, rushing for Dragonkeep. They need no ships. They ride the storm. They are the storm. The storm is not lightning, or thunder, but moans and sobs and shrieks - and even these are silent.

As they pass, even the Shadow flickers for a moment.

They go swiftly, far more swiftly than Dragonkeep. The sky-wyrm moves differently than Leviathan. The sea-wyrm ploughs on changelessly, while the sky-wyrm - not home in sea or Shadow - pulses forward.

The storm is almost upon Dragonkeep now. They approach at the tail, but even if they rushed at its very snout, at the glittering chalcedony and fire snarl of the Beckoning Gate, or at the huge eye craters where watch is always kept, they would still not be seen.

They need no rams to breach the dragon. They will pass through jade scales unhindered, through streets and walls unchallenged, into the bluestone archive, infesting it, curling between strokes of ancient ink, sinking into the grooves of clay or wood or lazuli tablets, burrowing into the coils of scrolls, wrapping themselves around runes and symbols and sigils, and finally slip, unresisted, into dreams.

#

Through a gnarling blizzard, Gemmored glimpses one of the mighty ice-block fortresses of his folk, high on one of the jokuls of the northern reaches of his realm. Home. As a child he sits in its huge hall, warmed by kindled blubber and furs and hundreds of kin, aware of the winds bawling outside. Listening to words. Stories of elder time. Stories of sombre gods.

As a child he sees those words seethe forge-red,

blinks at the splintery flashes that fling from the
 thunderous blows of a hammer hard against an anvil.
 He hears the words quieten as they describe the smith –
 a dark giant figure with a brooding star of glimmer
 beneath his brow. As a child he hears the words erupt
 into cataracts of hiss as a candescent newborn sword
 is plunged into water. Stories.

Now Gemmored sees himself as a giant, grown,
 A bear-pelt horizoning mountainous shoulders,
 A broad blade in his hands, ambitions of sojourning south
 to fight in wars already forming in his young thoughts.
 He sees himself undertaking that trek, but finding himself
 lost in a lurking mist, known by his people of the ice-wastes
 as the Shifting Despair. Few who wander within ever return.
 He sees himself seeing the sword, settled on a cromlech
 part ice and part eidolon, recognising it by the pale scabbard
 and the rubious gleam of gem that pommels the antler hilt.

Only possible in a dream,
 he sees the look that formed on his face –
 desire and terror.

He remembers remembering the story. How an elder god
 in an elder war forged a blade for battle.
 How huge and fine it was. How the god plucked an eye
 from his head and set it on the end of the hilt.
 How the sword would take from any it slew their battle skill
 pass the wiles on to the wielder of the warsword.
 But also Gemmored remembers standing before the sword and considering
 how stories are like rivers and sometimes tales fork.
 How a different fork said that the elder god fixed
 his soul upon the sword, that this soul was tainted,
 and that it was this dark pupil-like defect within
 which made it wear the semblance of an eye.

He remembers remembering how the two forks of the tale converge
 to tell how the blade, through the eye or the soul,
 takes into itself not just the battle skill of those it slays.
 How it harvests their evil.

And how for this reason,
 above all others,
 the sword was named 'Doom'.

Gemmored dreams himself standing in the Shifting Despair,
 before the sword in the cist of part ice and part eidolon.
 He dreams himself balancing the desire and terror:
 pride in the mythic past of his people,
 descended from the warriors who fought beside the elder gods,
 weighed against a presentiment that feels like
 a shivering draught drawn across infinity.
 He sees his hand
 reaching for the sword.

#

Harnak has long believed that all his dreams have been tortured out
 but among the dull scrawls of sense now seeping into his sleep
 he dreams of his realm of Aftermath and the city of angled spires.

He dreams of the shackles biting his wrists, of the sweltering
 odours of heated coals and cresset pitch, of streaks of fire
 laid across his back, in the city of angled agate spires.

Harnak has long believed that all his dreams have been tortured out
 in this way. This is the way, in the realm of Aftermath
 that someone like Harnak is trained. Those who can shed their shape

in the city of angled agate spires, are shaped by the whip.
 Each generation such children are taken. All but one put to death.
 That one to become a servant, a weapon, ideal dreamless assassin.

Shape-shedders lack the secret inner part possessed by men
 so can never know guilt. Nor loyalty. This must be taught by the whip.
 In chambers such as the one that Harnak dreams of.

There are fifteen whips in the chamber beneath the palace of the city
 and each is a different fineness of leather, he recalls,
 each imparting a different nuance of fire, a different precept.

The finest teaches loyalty and is a favourite of the prince.
 This is the way of the city – the lessons of the lash must be taught
 by a prince of the city of angled agate spires.

Each whip has a different hiss as it slithers through the sweltering air
 so even before the first stroke lands in Harnak's dream
 Harnak knows the lesson his back is about to receive.

Harnak's screams are silent but they always echo the cries of

Harnak's parents, put to the sword by the city's guards while
their child is dragged away through the city of angled agate spires.

This is the one way that Harnak knows that this is a dream.
Because he stopped screaming, even silently, long ago.
And now the screams are not even Harnak's

but lacerating cries that sound as if they have prized open the air to be born,
keening shrieks swirling in the spireless ruin of a forbidden ringfort
pushing out of a pampa where not even grass would grow.

Harnak remembers then, standing inside that carious tooth of rubble,
wondering if the cries were of pain, or mirth, or something else...
and not caring.

Harnak remembers speaking, whispering, yelling
in the spireless ruin of the forbidden ringfort
hurling at the voices til they quieted – and listened.

Harnak can see himself this time, of course, in the dream.
But he still cannot see the owners of the voices since
when he invaded their fortress his eyes were rammed shut.

He knew the lore of the place, knew what sight of the ragers would bring.
Oh, they asked him to look, he remembers, wheedled and threatened and cajoled
after he talked, after he struck his bargain with them.

All the while as he led them across the dust-pampa
toward the city of angled agate spires.
They tempted, taunted, pleaded for him to look.

But he had planned his vengeance for so long.
So he does not, did not look behind.
But he remembers looking down.

Under the sunless, perpetually dusky glow of Aftermath's sky
shadows are no more than dim stubs of circles around the body.
Yet the shadows of the voices stretched out across the dust like cold, black scars.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Pharlane's chamber in the archive is no different to those of the Phoenix Prey. The
measure is no larger. The furnishings are the same, the bed, the settle, except for a table

and chair. Except that the lick of dragonflame hovers above her bed rather than in a tripod. The flame is still, a smooth spindle of yellow which glows calmly in contrast to Phariane beneath. She has always been a restless sleeper. Even before the Phoenix Prey and all they've brought. She shifts vaguely in the bed. Her hair, almost the length of her body, slides and fans and tangles uneasily across books and scrolls abandoned on the sheets.

Then her head stops in mid-turn. Her bare arm, drifting across her studies, goes still, and the dragonflame begins to quiver.

She sits up and listens.

#

Gel listens in his dream,
but does not hear what he expects.
Awake or asleep
he always hears them scream.

Ah, but he dreams of a time now dim
so perhaps that is why.
Before he found the labrys Bloodbane,
before the labrys Bloodbane found him.

He dreams of the Sun Skein,
a maze of electrum
above the cool onyx palace buried in the sands
where Gel is a warrior princeling thegn.

Gel dreams a rare sight –
the Sun Skein in darkness.
Such a thing happens once in a thousand sky weavings,
when all three of Gnomon's fierce suns have fallen into night.

The rays of even one of these,
reflecting and multiplying among the electrum,
is enough to turn the light too bright to bear,
the air too hot to breathe.

Only at a time of threefold setting
is it possible to enter the ancient maze.
Here the royal houses of the onyx palace beneath
place their dead, bedecked in jewellery.

And here,
on this long past night dreamed by Gel,
he sees himself placed –
not dead, but near.

In the onyx court intrigue is tradition. Poison,
 both verbal and liquid, part of etiquette.
 The stiletto an instrument of politics.
 Venom takes many forms in the realm called Gnomon.

Dreaming Gel looks down as his cousins of House Volquanon
 drag his body through the maze.
 In one of the three-suned realm's rare nights
 they have waited until almost the first sun's dawn.

There are no guards to evade or bribe or kill.
 In the near-perpetual day of Gnomon grave-riches are protected
 by blazing mirrored heat; but in the rare night are sentried
 by superstitions of ancient evil.

This is Gnomon - stories are despised here
 but the maze is known to be older than the onyx palace
 or the royal lineages within, or the arid land they rule,
 or even the gods they fear.

Thus, as soon as they have dragged Gel's body
 a little way into the maze,
 Gel's cousins fling it down,
 spit on it, and pad away quickly.

Gel looks down from his dream, feeling neither pity nor rage.
 He waits for what he remembers will come next - watches
 until his bloody body uncurls, twitching in weak agony,
 and begins to crawl - crawl blindly - further into the maze.

And now the dreaming Gel can hear them scream,
 whereas the dreamt Gel is only vaguely aware.
 And the dreaming Gel knows something
 he never knew before the dream.

He has always believed it was blind chance's fall
 that led him further into rather than out of the maze.
 Now the dreamer knows that the dreamt was summoned
 - that there came a call.

In a dream's moment, through the Skein,
 he has crawled on his belly for an age - along tall, twisting,
 roofless electrum corridors and is almost within reach
 of the ancient labrys Bloodbane.

And as the dreamt Gel reaches,
 with the last motes of life trembling at his bloody fingertips,
 the dreaming Gel realizes that he's no longer watching
 from above, but also reaching.

Then a single trembling fingertip touch
 on one of Bloodbane's blades and the summoning sound that has been so soft smashes
 into his brain. Like a thousand raking slivers of noise.
 No. A thousand thousand. Countless such.

Gel - the only Gel, now both Gels are one, the dreamt and the dreaming -
 twists. Something flows into him and at the same time out.
 He feels himself grow stronger,
 stronger than he has ever been, his wound closing and healing.

A convulsion close to hysterical laughter shudders through him.
 But at the same time,
 almost unnoticed,
 something tears and slips away from him.

A rill of something infinitesimal
 but unimaginably precious
 trickles
 or rather is sucked into each labrys sickle.

Gel stands now,
 Bloodbane's haft in one hand,
 the other stroking the blades.
 They are bound now.

Part of Gel's soul is locked within Bloodbane,
 together with the souls of others.
 Countless others.
 The souls of all those the ax has slain.

The labrys is older even than the maze –
 indescribably old – from a time in Gnomon
 before the third sun bloomed, when armoured warriors
 fought beneath kinder skies, cooler days.

The whimper of Gel's fragment of soul
 is lost among the others - they do not mourn,
 they feel too much despair for that - they scream.

Endlessly howl.

He will hear them scream from that moment, he knows it -
 from that moment, until the moment in another realm in a hollowed
 corpse of a dragon in a chamber in a crypt of useless scribblings,
 where he will sleep - and dream of knowing it.

But somehow Gel knows that this is more
 than a memory,
 more than a dream.
 That death here would be more

than something to be waked from.
 He is less than certain that this time he will escape
 before the first sun brinks and turns the mirrored maze
 feral with heat. He begins to run.

#

Pharlane runs along the archive cloister. She has no time to give thought to her
 nakedness, nor bother clothing it. She can hear them, the stealthy invaders from Leviathan,
 sliding through the shelves and walls of the archive. Hissing among the cloisters. Curled in
 the centres of scrolls. Murmuring against the falls of stairways. She reaches the doors of
 the Phoenix Prey's chambers. Gemmored, Harnak, Gel, all have a Dream-ward's
 protection, but Zantalliz...

She throws open the door and sees him lying in his bed, a gracile form tossing mutely
 beneath fine sheets. Even distressed his breaths are soft. The sight throws an ache through
 her that makes her pause. Then she slips between those sheets.

Zantalliz' body is damp. She can feel it through his shift. Also the restless line of
 his spine. She presses against it, reaches her arms around him, and finds his hands. A tiny
 moan of sound escapes his throat. She entwines her fingers with his, gently pulls them
 against his chest. Caresses him.

She touches her lips against his ear and begins to whisper.

#

Zantalliz watches his dream unfold. It
 is woven of uneasy sights,
 but many of his dreams in the past nights have been so.

So it begins with a dark temple, a
 manytowered claw of lichened mortar
 raking at a sky equally dark.

Dark as a forest, a
 deep pathless light-forsaken chaos
 of towering tangleboughed claws.

Claws the dream, flickers from the one sight to the other, like
a sail bellying about from one side to the other
in a squall that snaps that way and this.

This is Zantalliz' realm of Voyage before it became Voyage. When
what it was before, was ending.
When the Shadow began to fall.

Footfalls like whispers - a woman
glides through the streets of the temple precincts
or through the forest.

Forest or flagstone, her face and body are lithe and wild. She
has long sleek flaxen hair. She
twists and sprints and slips into alleyways - or thickets sometimes.

Sometimes she is a cat. Even when she is not she
has the eyes of a cat. She runs from pursuers
that Zantalliz can only see vaguely and he is glad of that.

That way in which she runs, so
tauntingly fearlessly, makes it almost seem that she is stalking them.
She is a god.

A god emerging from a sea tinted with evening, or
perhaps dawn, onto a corralled reef
that Zantalliz recognizes.

Zantalliz recognizes a young man, fine-boned, almost
as lithe as she, but not a god,
walking along the reef toward her.

Her body is bare, they both are bare. Unsure
if they were so a moment ago,
Zantalliz watches.

Zantalliz watches the
evening-dawn tinting their skin,
pearls of sea still clinging to them.

They pull each other gently down, and
Zantalliz knows what he watches.
This is the birth of his people.

People descended from the coupling of a god and a man on
a remote and nameless isle. Because of this,
knowledge comes to them in dreams.

Dreams set down in books bound in scallop-shell and
tablets of bone ledged among reef coral,
set down in squid-tapped inks.

Inks able to hold dreams, pliant
enough to bend and flow with the tides of their power.
Because of this birth, Zantalliz' people will believe,

believe they lack the taint in the soul, the
taint that damages everything human.
They will decide which emotions are linked to that taint,

taint them in turn, codify a culture of manners that forbid such
feelings. And they will hide on their nameless isle for
generations upon generations, until...

until Zantalliz watches the young man's back and flanks
above those of the she-god, swaying back and forth,
back and forth, on the reef, until,

until he no longer looks at the man's back, but
into the face of the she-god,
her sleek flaxen hair woven against the coral,

the wonderful bones of her cheeks, parted
lips sending out warm urgent breath,
the strange, strange eyes that look back into his, dreaming.

Dreaming Zantalliz pulls away from that look, slowly
turns his gaze away from the she-god's face,
over the reef, out over the sea,

sea no longer ocean but sail: the
war-ships have come.
They are generations early, but dreams have no use for time.

In the dream Zantalliz looks back to the she-god beneath him, his
loins still swaying back and forth.
But the face he sees is no longer hers.

Her hair against the coral is auburn, the
bones of the cheeks not quite as exquisitely sharp,
and the eyes are different. And Zantalliz...

Zantalliz can still feel warm breath on his face, but
that breath is Phariane's.
She seems to be saying something, but he can hear nothing.

Nothing but breath and he feels himself tighten within
the dream - an ominous sensation mingles unpleasantly,
confusingly with the growing sweet surge from his loins. Ah!

Ah! He wrenches his face away again, but
this time the view of the war-ships is pillared
between two boots,

boots that Zantalliz' gaze travel up, over
mail to a helmed head glaring down at him.
The grim jaw shifts and a grin appears formed of teeth,

teeth the colour of scar-tissue. A sleek spearhead, pristine
in comparison, is poised just beside the grin.
The warrior's shoulders tense and the grin widens at Zantalliz.

Zantalliz girds himself for the pierce of iron – the
anticipation is as painful as the blow,
which never comes.

He finds himself back in his bed in the archive. Plucked from the dream. The she-
god and the young man and the war-ships and the warrior are all gone. The only thing to
remain is the breath, no longer on his face but against his ear. The realization is more
terrifying than any spear thrust. He plunges from the bed with a cry, away from the warmth
pressed against his back.

On the floor he glances back at Phariane, catches the last moment of hurt on her face
before she smothers the expression. He feels a moment's guilt. She has, he senses, saved
him from something terrible. But then he dismisses it - sympathy is not one of the forbidden
emotions, but is to be reserved for his own people.

Phariane throws the bed sheet off and grasps his arm. "Come," she says, probably
hoping that the urgency of her voice and action will disguise what he can tell has become
anger.

#

Gel still runs through the electrum maze
though time in dreams is outside measure,
he senses that he should already be free

of the maze.

He runs faster,
twisting and plunging through angular ambages,
darting past ancient charred jewel-bedecked bones.
Faster.

On each side of him other Gels slide
in the mirrors of the Sun Skein's walls. Each Gel looks up
and sees that the night sky is not quite so dark.
And faster yet they glide.

Then something whispers sharply, clear.
Not one of the souls
of Bloodbane's slain.
Something incalculably distant yet almost behind his ear.

He spins. A reflection of movement slides across electrum
and disappears into the maze's next jag of direction.
Again Gel runs. With every turn the same reflection
slides out of sight ahead - just seen, glimpsed then gone.

Finally he utters a shout
sees the reflection slide out of the entrance of the Skein,
exactly as Gnomon's first sun
sends its first ray out.

His heel lifts as the ray touches the first electrum mirror,
deep in the Skein.
Before the rest of his foot is off the ground
the ray has split into a thousand spears of blinding sliver.

By the time Gel has covered half the distance to the gate
each of those thousand has split into a thousand more,
and those thousands split yet again and again, raking
and swarming throughout the maze, a blinding torrid spate.

And as Gel is one step from escape from the ancient gyre
a ray of furnace catches him.
And as he bursts from the maze
he can feel his back blister into fire.

And as he crashes into the waiting arms of care,
of his Dream-ward whose whisper he recognized

from the moment of its hearing,
and as he buries his face in the silvered dark of her hair

and they fall out of dreaming
and into Gel's bed,
waking
he can still feel his back burning.

#

Outside the dream, Gel was bathed in sweat and his body heaved to breathe. He looked down at his Dream-ward beneath him, watched the lines of her no-longer-young face relax. He lowered his face to hers, then stopped.

"Do you hear that?" he said.

"Out in the atrium," she replied. And then, "Do you want to go and find out what it means?"

Gel grinned and shook his head. "Not yet," he said, and lowered his mouth onto hers.

His back still burned, but this time with the sensual sear of fingernails.

#

Harnak's dream has returned to the lash.
He feels each stroke on his back,
feels blood flowing down his back,

dreams the bite of each stroke
shred and flow into the pulsing smart
of the strokes that have come before.

Dreams blood and pain.
Flowing.
Blood and pain.

Blood and the sight of his mother and father
butchered for refusing to give him up
butchered by the guards of the city of angled agate spires.

Dreams blood and being told that a shape-shedder
is no more than a soul-bereft thing.
Blood and being told it again and again.

Blood and the look in the eye of a beautiful young citizen
as Harnak walks the streets
of the city of angled agate spires.

Blood and the word spat at him by a citizen, young or old,
beautiful or otherwise, time and again year after year

in the city of angled agate spires.

Blood and pain, flowing, flowing.
 And Harnak hears something as he waits, in the dream,
 for the slither of the next lash:

hears distant cries that skirt pain and mirth without becoming either –
 lacerating cries that sound as if they have pried open the air to be born –
 approaching the city of angled agate spires.

The voices of the ragers from the forbidden ringfort.
 The voices are coming nearer, coming for him.
 That is wrong, of course, not what happened.

Harnak remembers – he was the one to free the ragers,
 to lead them to the city of angled agate spires.
 They came for the prince, not him.

Harnak knows that in a dream memory is malleable,
 that things which never happened can happen, that things which happened
 can be twisted to happen in different ways. But even so.

A thought enters his mind that this is not the kind of dream
 that torture exiled from him long ago. That if the ragers were to reach him
 his suffering would extend beyond the dream.

For a moment he considers if he would care.
 Blood and pain, flowing.
 He doesn't know. He hasn't known for so very long.

He simply waits.
 For the lash. For madness.
 For whatever will burn across his back.

Blood and pain, blood and screams,
 blood and hopes and hatreds and fears,
 flowing, flowing, flowing.

And then something is pressing against his back,
 but it doesn't burn.
 It is hard and smooth and warm – and not dreamt.

#

Lying in his chamber bed, though his eyes stay closed, Harnak feels arms holding him and knows that his Dream-ward has rescued his life. Even outside the dream, he's unsure whether or not he cares.

#

"So when you came to find me, in the vaults, beside the amphorae - you knew I was not a scorpion," yawned Harnak.

"Yes," murmured the Dream-ward into his ear.

"I might've stung you even so," said Harnak.

The Dream-ward smiled. "You are Phoenix Prey."

After a while, Harnak finally opened his eyes. "Do you hear that?" he said.

"Music."

"It seems very dream-like."

"But it's not a dream," answered the Dream-ward.

And Harnak peeled back the bedsheet and rose.

#

Gemmored's dream churns into memories of carnage,
relives the first time he slays an enemy with the sword
Doom, how the warskill of that warrior enters him,
merges with his own - the elation. Elation at how his arm
answers to subtly altered instincts.

Then the inevitable realization that the rest of the legend
is also true - that those instincts
are not only swifter, slyer, but more savage.
He feels a wingless flutter beating through his blood.
Feels it settle uneasily upon some secret inner part of him.
And he watches himself as the dream spirals faster,
in battle after battle, each slaying
piling martial skill upon skill but also evil upon evil.
Until he plunges the sword back into its sheath,
a pale scabbard cut and sown of the elder god's flesh and hair.
Each time he does this the scabbard screams
and Gemmored feels all the gleaned skill and darkness flow out of him.
But still the spiral swirls - battle after battle, blood and darkness,
blood and darkness until he becomes towering berserk death,
and must plunge sword into scabbard before the secret inner part of him
is damaged or diseased. And he finds the dream change
as he reaches down for the scabbard and finds it gone.

This is no memory. This has never happened in his life,
though he has feared it every time he has drawn Doom.
And still the spiral churns. Faster still.
Blood and darkness and fear,
blood and darkness and fear,

blood and darkness and fear...

Then he finds himself standing in the centre of the maelstrom,
 watching his own life. And she is there too. Before him.
 Long golden hair weaving about a slender young neck in a way
 no real storm would shape.
 She holds her hand out to him as he once did to her in the archive.
 His Dream-ward. The expression on her face,
 her smooth oval face is hesitant as ever, Gemmored sees,
 but then something changes.
 He senses his swordarm lift,
 or rather feels the sword rise and bring the arm with it.
 It points slowly up her body, slender as her neck is slender,
 fragilely armoured in a sheer shift
 as white in dream as it is in true life.
 He looks along Doom's massive length,
 its chevron watering sleek and shimmering –
 rippling toward her ribs.

Now that 'something' shifts in the Dream-ward's mien,
 as she lifts her other hand to join the first,
 setting one on each side of the blade.
 Gemmored sees something
 appear on her face behind her apprehension.
 He considers it could be courage.
 Or perhaps, Gemmored mulls, it might always have been there
 and he has failed to fathom it?
 Her lips work but Gemmored hears no words,
 since the dream spiral of blood and darkness and fear
 and blood and darkness and fear
 has begun to scream.

Chapter Thirty

As soon as he leaves his chamber Gel feels a coolness in the archive. No bodily sensation, more a phantasmal instinct of vulnerability. It's nothing to do with the music he hears. Somehow his dream is still here, in the darkness, the cloisters, the walls. He nestles his gaunt cheek against the flat of one of his ax's blades. Bloodbane feels it too. He lifts his free hand to his lips. The fingertips still carry the touch of his Dream-ward's dark skin. He breathes in her scent and walks on.

#

Others were already sat around the table of convocation over the atrium. The brazier of dragonflame in the centre lit Harnak, Zantalliz, and Phariane, and one other.

He was a young man, hair uncommonly fair for Dragonkeep, silkily falling to his shoulders. His long smooth face was pale. The blue of his eyes was hardly even that. Nor was there any trace of line around or vein within them. Their lids were lazy. His mouth was kinked into a one-dimpled smile. One hand lolled on the top of the harp he cradled but ignored.

"Who is he?" Gel asked as he slipped into his chair.

#

But his eyes stay on Phariane. She knows why, knows that she hasn't bothered to fasten the gown that Harnak, unasked, has fetched for her, knows that it falls open. But she is far more concerned to hide any sign of worry than her body. It's always been so. One reason she's not taken a lover in so long, even one of the taciturn Wolf-wards, is an unwillingness to let anyone see how restlessly she sleeps.

This night especially, she keeps the mask tight. Zantalliz' disgust at finding her in his bed still stings. But there are more important matters.

"Who is he?" asks Gel.

She hears the harper introduce himself. But she knows that because of what he is everyone around the table hears a different name.

Then a fresh strain of music flows. And Phariane is grateful, because Zantalliz and Harnak's heads are drooping and even Gel's eyes are becoming heavy. Now they all look to the harp. The frame is sleekly curved. The swirling patternings on it are so smooth that they fall between engraving and grain. There are no strings. Nor does the harper move his hand. But something undulates in the gracefully cradled emptiness within the frame which is closer to wood than metal, nearer to bone than wood.

#

The movement was a ripple. Akin to the hackles of some animal stirring. The music had something of the same quality. One or two solitary notes quickly cascaded into a longer timbre. Beautiful, but with a thrum of warning underneath, a subtle purr in the back of a throat, a memory of thunder.

The harper shushed it like a skittish animal.

"And what are you?" asked Gel.

The harper smiled. The hand on the harpframe lifted a revolving finger. "I am a Wheelwalker," he hummed.

"And what might a wheel walker be?" asked Harnak.

The harper looked at Phariane. "How many of the convocations have your Phoenix Prey completed?"

"Two," she said.

He nodded. "What are the gods and what is the soul." He looked around the table, words still more song than speech. "When you reach the fourth, you will know what a Wheelwalker is."

The harp stirred again, sending out another uneasy melody. The harper shushed it again, for longer this time.

"It senses the Coronach Storm," said Phariane.

"What kind of storm is that?" yawned Gel, now gazing down into the table's onyx patterns like Harnak. Zantalliz had rested his elbows on it and was holding his temples up with his fingers.

"Leviathan has sent the Nightmare Cadre against you," said Phariane. Their weapon is the Coronach Storm. It cannot be seen gathering, or approaching, or heard breaking but it is here, in the archive, all around us, sucking us back into sleep. It's in sleep that the Nightmare Cadre strikes," said Phariane, her head also sinking.

"What do they strike?" murmured Harnak.

"You know," said Zantalliz, the words struggling through a bleak drowsiness. "We all know."

"They enter the wounds in dreams," Phariane said. "They pry open the scars they find there."

"Scars?" said Gel.

"No mater how well hidden," said Phariane.

"Is there any protection?" asked Harnak.

"Stay awake," chuckled the harper, the only one around the table whose eyes remained clear.

"If we leave the archive..." said Gel.

Phariane moved her head from side to side. "The cadre would only follow." Then, after a moment, "Talk. Talking will stave off sleep."

No head lifted. Gel rested Bloodbane's haft against the table. The harper leaned over and whispered to Phariane.

"They don't seem very talkative."

Phariane looked at him with disgust and something deeper, and he jerked his eyebrows in a soft shrug.

"The third convocation," said Phariane. "Earlier than I had wished, but..."

The harper smiled at her. He stretched the fingers of the hand on top of the harp, a gesture of offering. "I could play something if you let me," patting the frame with the other hand, "if she lets me."

Zantalliz lifted his head, drew himself up. "Give us the third question."

Phariane looked at each of them in turn, then said, "What is evil?"

"I know," came a voice beyond the table. Gel and Harnak also lifted their heads now. They all looked.

Gemmored stood, towering, swaying at the edge of the mezzanine. Blood soaked down his shift and dappled his bare feet. Across his forearms, a mass of fair hair falling away from her face, throat arching upward, lay the still, bloody form of his Dream-ward.

Chapter Thirty-One

Phariane watched as the galley was lowered on its chains into its groyned bay. The dockers strained powerful arms to ease the descent. The ship hardly swayed. Then halted. In mid-air.

A gangway was slid across from dock edge to galley. Several dockers crossed it onto the ship. Phariane stepped onto the gangway. She looked down at the rock bed of the bay, up to the cavern roof,

#

looked anywhere but behind her. She remembers sensing the Coronach Storm fade away, taking the Nightmare Cadre with it, leaving barely any time for sleep before the uneasy dragonflame procession and aubade and the beginning of her next day's duties. The drowsiness banished last night by the arrival of Gemmored at the table of convocation has not yet returned.

So it's not want of sleep that makes her rub her palms into her eyes.

This first duty of the day is a bitter one.

#

The bulwark hooks groaned softly with the weight of the galley.

Phariane turned in the middle of the gangway and finally looked at the twenty or so citizens of Dragonkeep who waited to embark. She placed her hands on her hips, then raised them and ran them over her hair,

#

anything but speak.

Phariane remembers dressing this morning and catching sight of her hair in the mirror, seeing the striae of grey marring the auburn. It's not the translucent mist of Gel's mane, nor the silver flecks of his Dream-ward's hair - perhaps the reason why he chose her? It's more like a claw has raked ash through Phariane's hair from forehead to nape - a wound dealt by the Nightmare Cadre. She's shorn it close to her head again but has made no attempt to hide the cicatrix grey. The fear grey.

She studies the faces before her on the dock, looking for surprise, even sympathy, but finds none among the men, women and children - even children. The Uroboros is coming and everything is changing. Since the killings at the arch that night there have been more deaths, as if a key has been turned. Twisted. Streetfights. Rituals have been enacted, dredged from faiths lurking in wait since before the Shadow fell. So no pity. Good.

"It is your right," she says, "to go. But Dragonkeep was created for what comes. To keep alive the hope of life, to turn back the tide of Shadow from the realm..."

She pauses. The sound of laughter stabs her. It comes hawking from two Corsairs captured during the battle to save the five Phoenix Prey as they comented from the sky. Two Blade-ward stand behind them but make no attempt to restrain them. The Corsairs too wait to board. Phariane stares at the people. Her people. Still no pity. The same concentrated look of fear and determination that fixed the faces of the group who wanted to leave Dragonkeep for the Shadowfast. But this ship is bound for no Shadowfast. This ship is bound for Leviathan.

"No one who has ever wished to renounce their citizenship has been prevented or punished in any way." She looks at the Corsairs again. One spits on the dock. For a moment she allows herself to want to kill him - kill both of them - wishes the law of the city was not that prisoners are returned rather than executed - wishes that the council that enforces such matters had fallen apart like so many others. She wishes all this and more. She wants

to kill all the fine brave citizens before her who want to abandon their heritage, whose betrayal spits on Dragonkeep.

#

But all she did was nod to the dockers. The lock gates of the bay opened. Below the gangway, around the pale hull of the dragonreme, nigrescence formed. The chains were loosed from the bulwarks and the ship swayed, afloat on Shadow.

And all she said as she walked off the gangway was, "Just be sure you wish to place your faith in darkness."

#

Some of them move forward almost before Phariane steps back onto the dock. She silently counts. Twenty-two, twenty-three. Not as many as there might have been. More than she hoped. One would have been more than she hoped. One or two even brush against her as they pass, either from eagerness or resentment. She wonders which would be worse.

#

Then she saw a face familiar. The young Blade-ward who tried to burn down the archive. The coppery feathering of beard was still there, but the confusion had hardened into bitterness. He stopped in front of her and thrust out a stare.

#

Phariane makes herself wait for it to end. Then he passes.

Almost all have boarded when she sees another she recognizes. This time the vertiginous pang is even greater, almost overpowering. A woman, young, cheeks still retaining the fullness of a child's, sallow-skinned, sloe-eyed. Zantalliz' rejected Dream-ward. She meets Phariane's stare. No bitterness on this face, but a sadness just as hard to endure.

Someone else Phariane has failed.

#

Their hands reached out, touched. The Dream-ward looked down as if in surprise, and without looking up again slid her hands free and boarded the ship.

Phariane kept her back to it. The only one standing before her now was Gemmored.

#

She has brought him in the slight hope that the sight of one of the Phoenix Prey might turn the mind of at least one of those wanting passage. But also to try and draw him out of the torpid state of trapped agony he has frozen into since last night. He wears a fresh chiton, but his vein-raked forearms are still streaked with blood. He looks down on Phariane with eyes the grey of frosted steel that are now not just bleak but tormented. Eyes that have watched without interest.

#

"Why do they go?" he murmured.

"Why?" Phariane told Gemmored about the Blade-ward, bitter because of his inability to find enough belief in either his city or himself to stay and fight.

"And the girl?"

"Do you remember the day you arrived in Dragonkeep? That was the Dream-ward chosen and then rejected by Zantalliz on the first night.

"I'd forgotten," said Gemmored.

"Yes," said Phariane, "so had I."

"And that's why she goes."

"After a lifetime's preparation, to have the chance to serve one of the Phoenix Prey... To be rejected..."

Gemmored nodded. "Won't they be killed?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not."

"What does the law on Leviathan decree?"

"There is no law on Leviathan."

#

Phariane keeps her attention on Gemmored, even though there's pain in doing so - the wild deadness in his eyes, the deep graven despair in his voice. Is her pain concern, or something more selfish? Since their coming she has failed each of the Phoenix Prey in some way or other.

She listens to the dragonreme casting off. She knows that behind her it silently glides over the Shadow and if she speaks long enough the ship will pass through the puckered gate in the dragon's jade flank and she will not need to watch it go.

Or, she admits, be tempted to wish that she was aboard.

#

"And the rest of them?" Gemmored intoned. "Why do they go?"

Phariane's shoulders twitched between shrug and shiver. "Sometimes it becomes simpler to run onto the blade than try to avoid it. Sometimes it's easier to walk towards the night than wait for it."

Then she heard the cry and whirled.

#

The dragonreme is distant now, but Phariane is sure she can make out an arm thrashing above the sea, a head bobbing above the dark surface. Perhaps an argument and someone fallen or thrown overboard? No. There was no anger in the cry - only anguish. The cry of someone tormented but the cry of someone - even one! - turning from the night.

Then something huge rushes past her and plunges off the end of the dock.

Gemmored. There's no splash or ripple - this is Shadow, not water. For a moment he's gone. Then his great back surges up, arrowing for the drowning figure.

Phariane remembers touching Gemmored's dream last night, hearing the sorrowing wails spiral around him. What is it that seems to have finally pulled him out of that nightmare?

Then she sees. The head struggling to survive is sallow-skinned. The hair is darker than Gemmored's slain Dream-ward but the neck equally slender. There will be some form of atonement if he can save this girl, this other Dream-ward.

If.

This is Shadow, not water. Even Gemmored's strength might not be enough to reach her and return to the dock.

But he must. Phariane knows he must. For now she believes more than ever something not all the books or scrolls or tablets in all the archive have convinced her of. That the key to the Uroboros is the Phoenix Prey.

Since their coming she has failed each of the Phoenix Prey in some way or other. But one she has failed utterly. The one captured by Leviathan. She's abandoned him or her, even to having a name to call them by. Phariane promises, as she waits on the quay, to ask that name. To hear the fifth Phoenix Prey speak it.

#

Gemmored grasped the edge of the dock and hauled himself and the Dream-ward onto land. The Shadow gave them up without sound or resistance, though it left rills of itself on their garments and flesh and hair. Both of them were breathing in quick, struggling gouts.

Phariane waited patiently for this to ease. "Go to the dragon's mouth," she finally said to them.

Gemmored looked puzzled, but the Dream-ward looked up at him and nodded. "To burn away the Shadow stains," she explained. And she took his hand.

As she led him away, Phariane called after him. "Then prepare for a journey."

"To where?" asked Gemmored.

"To Leviathan."

END OF BOOK TWO

Chapter Thirty-Two

As the dragonreme bore Phariane and the Phoenix Prey toward Leviathan, the talk was of evil.

"Evil is what casts shadow and what it casts shadow upon," said Gel, as ever leaning on his labrys. "Without the two there is no shadow..."

"Evil is therefore both outside and within us," mused Gemmored.

"So," Harnak said slowly, "good is necessary for evil?"

"And evil for good," Gel spat upon the dragonreme deck, "each defining the other."

"So simple," murmured Gemmored, hand on the quillons of his sword.

"Not to say," interrupted the harper, "that both are eternal." The heads of the Phoenix Prey turned to him whenever he spoke, or plucked a few notes on his harp, as if they had forgotten he was there.

"Some writings say that there's no evil – only fire and shadow." It was the first thing Phariane had said since the ship had left Dragonkeep and taken to the Shadow.

The harper smiled at her. "Good, evil, fire, shadow... The Uroboros will decide everything and nothing, as it has before."

"You talk like one who knows something of destiny," said Gel.

"Destiny," said the harper, "is more fragile than the augurs would have us believe."

Phariane looked sharply at him. He brushed the backs of his fingers over the space within the frame of his harp where the strings should've been. No sound came.

#

Zantalliz catches his eye. He gives Zantalliz a smile. A knowing smile. Zantalliz suspects that he knows some of the truth behind the harper's riddles. But out of dislike for him and - respect? - for Phariane he chooses to reserve judgment until the final convocation.

He looks to Phariane. Respect? Yes, one of the Moon-Ghost is allowed to feel such for a human. No more. He looks away before she can notice his gaze.

Gemmored, the giant with the sword, is now once more accoutred in his cuirass and vambraces and jambes and other armour, all cleansed of Shadow by Dragonkeep's fire. He's taken for his Dream-ward the girl that Zantalliz rejected. Zantalliz would be pleased for them both if compassion for their kind was not another of the emotions which the lore of his people decree unacceptable.

Zantalliz looks out over the sea. At night, he remembers that his people would emerge from their caverns and grottos and set out from their isle to fish from coracles. Always at night, hidden from sight of ships - hence the naming of his people the Moon-Ghost.

But that sea was nothing like this. There are no rhythmic foamy rustlings against the dragonreme's pale hull. Albeit this sea is not as flawlessly flat and still as when he first fell from the Phoenix's flames into it. Albeit momentary whippings of glimmer now bolt across the surface giving it some hint of the restlessness of the seas of Zantalliz' own realm.

No. This is no ocean of brine. This is Shadow. And Zantalliz, the last of the Moon-Ghost, is like wounded, sorrowing sea wrack cast upon the shore of a realm with no moon.

#

The voyage continues.

In the ship's bowsprit the navigator murmurs to the helm.

The harper meanders across the dragonreme deck. Sometimes he hums. Sometimes he strokes at the stringless harp and plucks silence. But sometimes it sings to life by itself. A ripple within the frame. A breath of sound. As if the harp had its own voice. As if the harp were its own voice.

Gemmored listens to it and hears the winds of the ice-wastes, the implacable snarl of his world.

For Gel it evokes the festering memory of the throatless scream made by Gemmored's scabbard when he sheathed his sword Doom.

Harnak is reminded of the drums of Leviathan's quinquereme galleys.

No wind blows across the Shadow, but when the harp sings something stirs across the dragonreme, whispering at hair and skin. A rumour of thunder.

#

Then Leviathan was sighted.

The navigator went silent.

As the dragonreme came toward it, so Leviathan came toward them. Its face was as immense as Dragonkeep's, if not more so. Its wrinkled mouth, the only feature set into a smooth eyeless snout did not hold fire. The pucker opened wide, caverning in on itself, falling into blackness, teeth dripping strings of mucus and Shadow.

"Do we dock in that?" asked Gel, eyes narrowed to grimness.

"No," said Phariane, and instructed the oars to ease and the helm to angle the ship's course.

Leviathan moved on through the wakeless sea and the dragonreme slipped down its flank. Across its leagues of back a spine of bony spikes stabbed out. On each spike was impaled a torn, livid body, an oriflamme of skin and sinew. The spike bore through the small of the back and up through the belly, bowing the body, arms and legs lolling down. The heads did not loll. There were no heads.

"That," said Phariane, "is the Shrike Wall - Leviathan's sentry."

Harnak's lips twitched. "How do they keep watch?"

"And how," Gel sniggered, "do they give alarm?"

The dragonreme turned. The oars picked up their tempo and the ship drew close to the sea-wyrm's side. Unlike Dragonkeep's sides, Leviathan's sides were not scales of jade but scales of charred weeping flesh. And while Dragonkeep 'pulsed' across the Shadow, as if rowing, Leviathan surged in a ponderous unchanging motion.

Phariane strode to the dragonreme prow and tested the knot of the rope fixed there. She slid her hand along the cable's length as she came back along the deck and picked up the harpoon fastened to the other end. She pulled back and flung the barb at Leviathan, sending its precious brass head deep into the scales. There was no reaction from the sea-wyrm.

So close to the monster, the Shrike Wall across its back could not be seen. Nevertheless everyone on the dragonreme looked up and listened for a moment. There was nothing.

The oars on one side of the dragonreme had been withdrawn. That side of the hull was now flush against Leviathan's side.

Phariane moved over to Gel and spoke to him. He lifted his labrys onto his shoulder and moved over to the ship's rail. Not heaving but merely brushing one of the great bladeheads against the wyrm, its black scales parted with Bloodbane's sweep. Another effortless sweep and the putrid meat beneath gaped. Gel looked over his shoulder and smiled. Several more passes and weavings of the twin blades and he skipped onto the threshold to a short seeping tunnel of a wound. There was a slash of glimmer at the end. There was something sick about it. As if even the light inside Leviathan were a kind of decay. Before he disappeared inside, Gel stood his labrys on the pulp at his feet and bowed to the dragonreme.

#

Phariane watches Gemmored follow into the tunnel. Gel is almost as tall as Gemmored, so the tunnel is of a size to admit even him. His pale scabbard is at his side. He rests an instinctive hand on the hilt of the sword sheathed within. Since the attack of the Nightmare Cadre Phariane knows better than to ask him to draw it.

When she slipped into Zantalliz' dream she touched all the dreams of the Phoenix Prey, heard the snickering ambivalence of the voices in Harnak's nightmare, the despairing shrieks in Gel's, the malevolent wails in Gemmored's...

She knows them all better now. Knows that Gemmored's Doom draws evil from whatever it penetrates, whereas Gel's Bloodbane draws souls. This is why she asked Gel to open Leviathan. The wyrm has no soul to rape, but there is still evil to tap. No, she will not ask Gemmored to draw Doom, at least not yet.

She runs her hand over her changed hair. Ashen. Still shorn close. Since the night of nightmares it no longer grows in the old way. No longer has the power to heal. Perhaps because she was touched by another dream that night - her own?

But she puts such thoughts aside.

Harnak is stepping into the tunnel next. He wears a Dragonkeep chiton. The rags that clothed him on his arrival were beyond even the dragon's flames to cleanse - yet another splinter of worry nagging at Phariane.

She follows him into the tunnel, then turns and waits for Zantalliz. He stands on the deck in his restored raywing cape - a fittingly exquisite garment - and returns her look with his strange eyes, then shakes his head. The sight scalds Phariane. His eyes are not strange enough to disguise fear.

#

Phariane turns her back and Zantalliz realizes she has mistaken disdain for fear. He almost calls her back to explain. To endure talk of evil is one thing, but to be confronted with it so blatantly, so obscenely - the idea of actually entering this physical embodiment...

Phariane wears a cataphract of the same otherworldly mail as the ship's Sword-Mariners'. But this is not scaled as theirs, nor fashioned into jerkin and breeks, but clings sheer to her form as a skin. So delicate, he thinks. Making her seem more vulnerable than protected. For a moment he almost follows her into the tunnel.

But then he shudders and the possibility occurs to him that it might be he who's mistaken fear for disdain.

And then she turns again.

And the wound closes.

And Gel and Gemmored and Harnak and Phariane are gone.

#

Inside Leviathan was a livid gloom of a kind no candle should shed. Even candles such as those set into the wyrm's walls, fashioned, as Phariane had told the Phoenix Prey, of the rendered fat of the dead.

The four made their way through the bloodless vessels that formed the wyrm's labyrinths. The first forking to the left was carpeted by skulls. Harnak looked to Phariane, who nodded, and he turned toward this path. He appeared to collapse but by the time his chiton drifted to the floor it seemed for a moment empty. Then something moved within it. Something long. Squirring. Then a sleek brown cobra smoothly darted out of the folds of cloth, flowed across the first of the skulls, and slithered away.

Gemmored was the next to go.

Chapter Thirty-Three

As Gemmored moves along the distorted, twisted passages, past the sealed varices, cysts, and tumours that are Leviathan's chambers, he listens. As expected, there are screams. And other, less identifiable echoes. But there is something unexpected, more disturbing than the rest. Laughter.

It's of a harsh, sometimes malicious kind, but laughter nevertheless. And Gemmored realizes that he has heard more of it in a few moments within Leviathan than in all his time within Dragonkeep. He can understand the laughter of the Shadowsea Corsairs – Leviathan's warriors know that if captured they will be treated well, not tortured as their Dragonkeep counterparts. But there's more to it than that. He remembers Phariane saying that doubt is accepted on Dragonkeep but on Leviathan is punishable by death.

Then he finds them standing in front of him. Turning, finds more of them behind. Shaped like men, they stare at Gemmored with bottomless eye-pits. Something colder and sharper than ice stabs at his nape.

He draws Doom.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Harnak slithered wildly as a Death'sheadcadreman brought his sickle-blade down.

The sharp edge snicked the air beside the snake's skin, lifted over the grinning cadreman's skull helm, came down again, as close again, boneshards flecking off one of the skulls carpeting the passage, lifted again and the cadreman's footing slipped and he stumbled back a step and was no longer grinning and brought the blade down more fiercely than ever and the skull over which the snake slithered clove in two and the snake drove into the eye socket of another skull but before it had fully entered the blade came down again and the snake's tail jerked, and an eyelet of skin oozed blood, but the wound and the rest of the body had vanished into the depths of the skull carpet before the blade came down again.

Then everything was curses and wheeling and flailing steel and shattering skulls, but Harnak had gone...

Chapter Thirty-Five

Gel twists and turns as he makes his way through Leviathan's passages, looking this way, that, walking, trotting, his steps skipping sideways, backwards even. His shoulders jostle the walls. Sometimes an elbow jars an alcoved stub of candle. How different from Dragonkeep! Even the echoes - not clean and crystalline but smeared and glutinous. Not resounding against rhyolite and granite and dolomite and porphyry, but quivering through stinking fleshy tunnels.

Then a needle of pain rips his shoulder.

Looking down, he lifts the tear in his jehad swaddlings and touches the blood. His lips slowly curl and part like another wound opening. He realizes that the scabs that streak the glistening stillbirth walls are sharp as daggers.

As his eyes travel down the passageway they leave the walls and fasten on a mother and child. The mother is yanking her son along. Her hair is in slovenly ringlets, his head is shaved. Her face is pinched, his plump. Yet Gel presumes that mother and child is what they are to each other. There is a common look to the noses, to the eyes. And they share an expression that is brittle with resentment.

They stop. Turn to the wall. The child is snivelling. The mother pushes his face against the wall. He resists, squirms away. The mother clasps the back of his shaven head and rams his face to the wall again. This time, gasping and snivelling still, he licks. This is what they do here. Gel has seen others do the same. Phariane explained once that unlike Dragonkeep, Leviathan has no water. The citizens of the sea-wyrm slake their thirst with the weepings that slick her insides. This is what gives the taint to their skin.

Gel moves closer.

The mother is the first to turn and see him. Then the son, his head suddenly free, his mouth caught in mid-mewl like a bruised glyph.

Gel waits for their expressions to widen. For fear to flare. He's not like them. Taller. Pallid. The yawning hollows of his cheeks. The cruel jut of the bones. The hair.

Closer still, he touches the cut on his shoulder with the pad of his thumb, smoothes the blood across one face of his labrys. The smear fades at once and for a moment his skin is less pallid.

Still neither woman nor boy call out. Rather their stares dull. They merely turn back to the wall. The child's tongue reluctantly returns to its task.

Gel has met the same response when happening upon others in these tunnels, has not yet needed to kill to prevent an alarm being raised. He suspects he knows why. He suspects that despite all the shadows and talk of shadows in this realm, only here, within the sea-wyrm, is there no shadow of hope.

Decay and razors, razors and decay.

He skips down the passage, hardly able to contain his delight at this Leviathan and its people.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Gemmored pulled together the lips of the wound in the sea-wyrm's wall which had given him entry to the chamber. When he felt the blackened edges seal again he wiped the back of his hand over the wound raking his forehead. They had been sluggish creatures, but their nails were sharp as any dagger.

He lifted Doom and turned it in the air. A scatter of powder slipped from its flats. Its steel had bitten not into flesh and bone but dust. Its sweeps and thrusts had yielded not splashes of red but curls of grey.

Gemmored studied the gem that formed the sword's pommel. The flaw of black in its heart barely stirred... Shaped like men they may have been, but they had been nothing more than fragile envelopes of corruption and their evil had been just as ethereal.

#

Gemmored feels it entering him like the shiver of wings, spattering his soul like smuts, but feels no urgent need to expel it by sheathing Doom in the pale scabbard at his side.

#

Instead he turned to examine the chamber he had backed into. It was almost bare. Only an ancient siege stood on the floor at the far end. It showed signs of a once ornate and

impressive design, but the wood, of whatever kind, had rotted badly and rotted also any majesty. Its back was eaten to perhaps half its original height. Its edges were ragged. The legs tapered like black stalactites. They could have supported nothing more than the rumple of soiled cloth piled on the seat.

Then the cloth twitched.

#

It might be a rat, a cat. For a moment Gemmored wonders if it might be Harnak in yet another form.

#

The cloth began to lift, to rise up as if it were an animal stretching after sleep. As the crumpled folds spread out the cloth revealed itself as a hooded robe. Then it began to fill out.

#

No. Not a rat. Or a cat. Or Harnak. This is not something squirming within the cloth. This is something taking the shape of the cloth - using it - something becoming.

From the darkness of the cowl a face appears, not emerging out of the darkness but an extension of it.

#

The face was old - ancient. And it rippled, as if it was not a face but a nest of frantic maggots feeding on something which, unlike the siege, refused to rot. And it spoke.

#

This is not the language of Dragonkeep, nor any language Gemmored recognizes. The sounds are not even words as much as malicious clatters of spittle. However Gemmored knows the meaning of them - the threat of them. He knows that if this arcane thing gnarled up in its filthy robe continues to utter them then he will never leave this chamber.

He lifts Doom.

But he understands all too well what will happen if he spits the creature. Its evil will rush through Doom's blade, into the hilt, and flood through his fingers, his wrist, his arm, and seek out his soul.

Perhaps from revulsion at this understanding.

Perhaps from despair at the memories of all the times evil has invaded him, tainting all the slayings he's made with Doom.

Perhaps from an instinct that if the arcane thing continues to spit sound then Gemmored will never complete the few steps needed to reach the siege and thrust the blade home.

Gemmored chooses to lift Doom higher and hurl it across the chamber.

It spears through the filthy robe and whatever matter inhabits it and thuds shivering into the rotting stub of the back of the siege. The flaw of black in Doom's pommel stirs. The voice stills. Then, slowly, the arms of the robe lift. From the emptiness of each sleeve a hand appears - like the creature's face, not emerging out of the darkness but extensions of it. They take Doom's chevroned blade. The watering wavers, begins to fracture. The flaw in the pommel dances wildly. Slowly, the hands pull. Doom comes free of the creature as smoothly as it entered.

Then there is a motion. The arms of the robe. Something rushes at Gemmored and carries him off his feet.

Sprawled on his back, looking down, he sees Doom, buried in his own chest. Then the pain comes.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Pharlane waits on the floor before the black knot that she knows is the heart of Leviathan. With her knees drawn up and her arms clasped around them she sits like a little girl amid the screams and laughter and other distant calls.

She knows that the harper is approaching along the scabrous corridor behind her, but she doesn't smile until he lifts the harp to his shoulder and adds its music to the echoes. Just for a moment. To Pharlane it weaves between a lost lullaby hummed by her mother and a lover's bittersweet lament. Then, too soon, it stops. Pharlane knows that for a moment more, after the harper's fingers have left the nothingness where his instrument's strings should be, the harp continues, itself unwilling to let go of the melody. Still behind her, the harper's fingers place themselves with equal gentleness on Pharlane's shoulder. She lays her cheek on them.

#

"Your music betrays you," she said, "you were never meant for a world so dark and bloody."

"Sadly, I'm meant for every world. To walk the Wheel from realm to realm."

"But not to stay? Not even with the end so near?"

The harper's tongue nuzzled into her neck. "The Uroboros has come to other realms before."

"But perhaps this will be the last time - the ending that ends all the realms forever."

"Perhaps."

"And even if not the end of life," murmured Pharlane, "then almost surely the end of mine." She eased her face against the harper's hand. "Do you still care about that as you once did?"

"Once?"

"How long has it been since you last walked in Dragonkeep?"

The harper chuckled. "How do you measure time here?"

"Don't you remember? On Dragonkeep we measure time by the bringing out of the flame from the dragon's mouth to give us day and the returning of it to give us night. By the passing of generations. By the sightings of Leviathan as it pursues us. Some of us measure time by how long it is we've waited for our love to return."

"This," said the harper, "is an unlikely place to wait for me. Or is he in there, that missing Phoenix Prey of yours?"

They both stared at the black stony knot in front of them, watched the subtle rhythm of shuddering that was Leviathan's sullen ghost of a heartbeat.

"No," replied Pharlane. "He's not here. One of the others will find him - Gemmored or Gel or Harnak. The Phoenix chose them all - the link will draw them to him."

"The citizens of Leviathan have merged in appearance," the harper went on. "There's a taint to their skin through drinking the weepings from Leviathan's decaying flesh. Your Phoenix Prey will hardly pass unnoticed."

"Loyalty is disdained by Leviathane," said Phariane. "Only one of the Death'shead Cadre would raise an alarm, assuming they lived long enough. And how long would one more cry take to be recognized?"

They both listen. Screams and laughter and other echoes...

"So who do you wait for here?" the harper asked again.

"The one an alarm would be meant for," said Phariane. "But she's not here. I had hoped..." Phariane paused and, looking over her shoulder, the harper saw the kris in her hands, the slim wavy blade balancing across fingertips. "...to meet her again.

"I've waited so long for that," she murmured. "Longer than I've waited for you."

"Waited for?"

"The ruler of the sea-wyrm. The bitch of Shadow. Sstheness. My sister."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Pain sprays from the wound like poisonous spindrift. It soaks Gemmored's massive chest and spreads through him like capillaries of burn.

His back pressing against his cuirass as he lies supine on the floor is a distant pressure. He looks up at the steel spire emerging from the front of his cuirass. It ends in a crosshilt pommeled with a gem that sits on top like a rubious eye. He looks at the eye and the eye looks down at him. He remembers, then, that this spire is his sword, Doom, driven deep into his chest. He thinks perhaps that he can feel its point touching his spine...

Yes.

So the pommel is indeed an eye. An eye of an elder god of an elder time of Darkling Realm.

Gemmored looks into the eye and sees in its unfaceted depths the chamber he lies dying in. He sees the arcane ranting thing on the rotted siege. He sees himself, standing, facing it, with his sword in his hand.

Gemmored understands. What has happened in this chamber has happened and yet not happened. The scene in the gem is happening yet not happening. Nothing is settled until death. And Gemmored understands death most of all. He fixes his will on the Gemmored in the gem and the Gemmored in the gem takes a slow, dragging step forward.

Yes.

The Gemmored in the gem lifts the sword in his hand.

Yes.

But he does not hurl it. Not this time. He realizes the act will not do.

So another eternally slow awkward step towards the thing on the siege.

But the Gemmored who watches, who lies with his chest pierced and the wound still flowing, knows that if the short journey across the chamber is not completed soon...

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Kneeling behind Phariane, the harper laid his harp down, took his hand and slid it around Phariane, stroking her hand that clasped the kris. Her hand remained motionless, but the blade stopped undulating.

"And if you meet your sister," he said, "do you believe that would stave off the Uroboros? No," he murmured when Phariane gave no answer. "No, you know better than that m'love. You won't have told your Phoenix Prey yet how the Wheel works, but you know..."

A single sharp note yelped from the harp and the harper turned his head. Behind him a broad, bearded figure in a blood-red lamellar jerkin was stealing up. Seeing him turn, the Shadowsea Corsair abandoned silence and began to run, boots slapping down hard, turning powerful shoulders and pulling back his sabre. Almost casually the harper took his hand from Phariane's, reached back and plucked - rather nipped - the air cupped in the harpframe. No note sounded, but the Corsair jolted, stumbled and sprawled as if an invisible arrow had leapt from a phantom string. He lay still. The spittle on his lips still. No hint of sight in the eyes. The harper turned back to Phariane.

His hand went back around her and took her hand again, stroking it with his thumb. He pressed himself to her, moulding his chest and stomach to her back. His chin nuzzled her neck, his cheek finding hers. His other hand moved off her shoulder and made its way across the sheer otherworldly mail that allowed the heat and scent of her body to escape, sheathing every swelling and curve and sinew, betraying every rise and fall of breath.

"You know the true nature of destiny," he continued. "If I die today, if you die today, if your sister Sstheness dies here and now, you know it would make no difference. The Uroboros will still come - and no act, nothing that happens before it comes will affect what will happen then..."

Phariane shuddered.

The harp began to play again - low, resentful jangles of notes prowling into being like musical hackles. The harper ignored it.

#

The cries and moans of Leviathan recede in Phariane's ears as she remembers the harper, no different than now, smooth, unblemished, pale eyelashes and paler insouciant eyes, in the forest of Dragonkeep. She remembers the girl with him. "Phariane," he says to her. The girl has Phariane's face, in some ways no different, but this skin has the subtle swell of child barely turned woman.

Behind them, the city glimmers, the yellow light is dimming as the evening procession returns the dragon's flame to its mouth. The young Phariane is already the city's archivist, mindful that she should return to her studies. Yet, hand in hand, she and the harper walk further into the forest, unable to tell which hand is pulling the other.

And when night follows they lie on soft mossy ground and above the looming trees the roof of Dragonkeep is nothingness punctured here and there by a spark of emerald or garnet or amethyst. And a wolf bays out. And the girl eagerly pushes herself up against the harper's weight.

"Promise me," she whispers.

"Phariane," he says.

And not even his heavy-lidded voice has changed.

Phariane's voice though, has become harsher, weighted with time and hurts and fears. But here, in Leviathan, still sitting and staring at the black stony knot at its heart, the harper's hands running over her, her words are the same. "Promise me."

Quivering out. More gasp than speech.

"Promise me," she says. "Promise not to leave me this time." So easy. So easy just to stretch out on the cold sea-wyrm floor and push her body into his. Even so she forces herself to ask again. "Promise."

But instead the harper's hands grow still. There's the warmth of a sigh brushing her ear. Then the hands move again - softly - caressing even as they leave her. Phariane knows better than to listen for his fading footfalls.

She sits alone, listening to all the sounds dimly trickling through Leviathan's passages. Calls. Threats. Sobs. Snickering. Moans. Shrieks. And something else. Something she realizes has been there all along. The sound of breathing, long, deep but quick nevertheless, and quickening. And inlaid within the breathing, riding it, is another kind of moan. A woman's rhythmic moan, violent, hungry, and growing louder.

Phariane recognizes the throaty mockery of lovemaking. Recognizes her sister's voice. She measures its intensity, the nearness of climax. There may still be time. Sstheness might yet sate herself and return here to Leviathan's stone tumour of a heart before one of the four Phoenix Prey finds their missing fifth. Or she might return before the alarm is raised at last and Phariane and the others have to flee the city with or without the last of the Phoenix's chosen.

She looks away from the heart, her eyes paining after being fixed so long. She blinks down at the kris. It too recognizes the moaning, undulates in her hand. There might still be time for it all.

To kill Sstheness,

To find the fifth Phoenix Prey.

To escape to Dragonkeep.

But Phariane no longer cares. She climbs onto stiff legs and hobbles down a passage she barely chooses, leaving the Corsair's corpse and the kris behind. And even some way along the winding length of razors and decay, when the suppleness returns to her legs, she moves no faster.

Chapter Forty

Each step is a battlefield strewn with howling, cursing dying. Yet finally Gemmored stands before the arcane thing on the siege. Both the Gemmored with the blade buried in his chest and the Gemmored he watches in the pommel gem do this - somehow they are one and the same now. The wound the first Gemmored sustained on his forehead drips the sting of sweat-salted blood into the eyes of the second.

Gemmored lifts his arms, hands clasped around his sword's antler-bone hilt - another endless battlefield - and wipes a wrist across his brow.

The arcane thing's harangue, louder with each step taken, now changes again, turns higher. The maggots rippling under its face become even more frantic. The rotting siege ripples too, infested with the same maggots. And Gemmored's arm is frozen.

Destiny balances on the moment.

Then Gemmored drops the sword and dies.

Then Gemmored plunges the sword into the thing.

Then Gemmored drops the sword.

Then Gemmored plunges the sword.

Then Gemmored.

Then Gemmored.

Then.

It is not like forcing the sword through brain and bone, nor does the thing's head offer only the desiccated resistance of the dust men outside the chamber. The chevroned steel bites into hate - the thing is fleshed and skeletoned with hate.

Its voice grows higher again. Piercing. The sounds are no longer words now - if words they ever were - but one sound. One endless cry in a scabrous language of one single sound.

Strands of dark blood, or dark that is blood, spatters and hisses along the blade. Gemmored realizes as it jumps toward him there is no difference - blood and darkness, darkness and blood, each a part of the other. He stands at the other end of the sword and waits for what he knows will come.

Not just pain but something else barbs through him. Vessels spawn through his huge body, twisting and twisted sewers - and then the familiar fluttering sensation sluicing through those vessels. He tastes the darkness that is blood, the blood that is darkness. He's felt it all before. But never this much. Never has he understood evil this much.

The sword's chevroned watering, the bridge between slayer and slain, quivers again, begins to crack again.

A strand of darkness spits off it into one of Gemmored's eyes. Yet another kind of pain. Blinding. Blood and darkness. Darkness and blood. Still he stands with both hands on the hilt, makes no attempt to withdraw the sword.

Nicks and scores appear on the edges and flats of the blade, making it as ancient, more ancient than the thing on the siege.

Then suddenly it ends. The thing shreds away like shrieks of saliva. The robe shrivels to a rag once more, sliding off Doom back onto the siege.

Gemmored staggers across the chamber. He pushes a hand into the crack of the entrance and tears it open again. Shouldering through, sword first, he finds other blades waiting. These are sickle-swords, in the hands of rangy cuirassed figures helmed in skulls. Some dozen members of the city's Death'shead Cadre crescent him, poised.

Gemmored notes the swords have edged pommels. He realizes then, that they cannot be fulcrumed on the wrist, which gives him an idea how they will probably be wielded. The knowledge is entirely his own. The thing on the siege passed no martial skill to him as it died - only darkness. Darkness he can still taste. Darkness that still blinds his left eye. Gemmored's mouth curls between smile and snarl and he lifts Doom. One eye will be enough.

Chapter Forty-One

The Death'shead Cadre guard shrieked as venom sprayed through the orbits of her skull helm and turned her eyes to fire.

The snake lowered from its rearing and Harnak uncoiled into a man, scooped up the staggering guard's sickle-sword and cut short her cry.

All assassin-swift. A few flecks of candlelight squirmed.

#

Harnak knows that this is the chamber. Knows that the staring figure he turns to, huddled against an empty serrated ribcage throne, wrapped in a blanket like a broken animal, is the fifth Phoenix Prey.

#

Equally swiftly Harnak moved to the guard's body, lying at the edge of a murk-bottomed pit in the centre of the chamber. His hands darted at cuirass straps, wrenched free boots and breeks. Soon the woman was naked and Harnak was clothing his own nakedness. As he dressed, his body subtly narrowed, lengthened, adjusted to fit the garments more exactly. Finally, she reached down for the corpse's skull helm.

The fifth Phoenix Prey, still huddled against the throne, pulled in a breath. His stare was less dead for a moment.

Harnak tugged. The corpse jerked but the skull casque remained firm. Harnak let go, straightened, and her head, having just made the slight transition from male to female, began to change again. Her hair drifted in thick locks to the floor. Then the skin began to fade. It was a gentle, ghostly flaying. Flesh melted into bone and eyes receded deeper into sockets and Harnak's head was now a Death'shead Cadre helm.

Picking up the sickle-sword again, she moved over to the blanketed ruin. "What are you called?" she asked.

#

Standing over him, in the silence slurred by the echoes roaming Leviathan's passages and chambers, Harnak considers whether to kill him. Not for mercy, though it would be such. Harnak has moved through Leviathan with the stealth of a murderer, the role she is trained for in body, mind, heart. The call of blood still murmurs in her.

#

Then, raking through the city, a new ululation entered the chamber. It was shrill, vibrant, ripping through yearning and despair and terror and fury and most of all ecstasy.

And the staring face of the fifth Phoenix Prey wrapped itself even more tightly in the blanket.

Harnak bent and pulled him to his feet, neither gently nor roughly, meeting neither resistance nor help. As she guided him to the chamber entrance they nudged the Death'sheadcadrewoman's body. Her arm lifelessly pendulumed over the edge of the pit. The murk below twitched.

Chapter Forty-Two

Slick with crimson, Gemmored stands among the juddering sprawl of dead and dying cadre.

A head struggles to lift and arms fight to prize themselves out of the debris of skull-casques and cuirasses and sickle-swords. Gemmored pulls back Doom with the slowness of an archer stretching a bow-string, relishing the gathering of power before its release.

Then, just before the stroke, something else is released. A sound rather than steel, but just as powerful. From some distant place in the city it knifes through the passageways, exultantly raping its way higher and higher through yearning and despair and fury and ecstasy and most of all terror.

As he listens, death remains taut across his shoulders and arms - then he allows it to slacken.

Gemmored lowers Doom.

Even before the ululation begins to fade he strides away.

Chapter Forty-Three

Gemmored was not the first to emerge through the crusted cut in Leviathan's side. Murmurs went through the Dragonreme's oarcrew as he appeared, wounded and bloody and changed in other ways. Other murmurs had travelled through the banks when Phariane had appeared, not wounded but also changed. The whispers that greeted Harnak's return were not because of his shape, though it was still that of the Death'sheadcadrewoman. They were for the hunched shape that accompanied him.

The fifth Phoenix Prey was barely able to keep his feet. Harnak had sat him down on the galley deck and crossed his legs for him. Then, like Phariane, she stood, silent, apart. Head still bowed, Zantalliz had not moved since refusing to enter the sea-wyrm.

Gemmored was not the last to emerge.

He strode over to Phariane, Doom still in his hand. The few Sword-Mariners aboard tightened their grips uncertainly on their own blades. Phariane watched him come, her arms wrapped vaguely around her sheer-mailed body, face fixed. "Where's Gel?" he said.

"Still within," she answered.

"Leave him," said Gemmored.

Another murmur went through the dragonreme. Phariane was silent. Although she looked at Gemmored she gazed at his cuirass, as if she lacked the will to tilt her head to see his face. Through the skin-sheer mail the hollow at the base of her throat deepened and shallowed as she spoke. "A little longer."

"Are you so sure of his return?" said Gemmored.

Another murmur.

#

The fifth Phoenix Prey sits in his blanket and stares at the sky. There are stilettos of light. In his own realm of Nightwake the sky is a dark, starless waste. He remembers the Phoenix, all fire and infinity, rising out of the Prophecy Vats, plucking him from his world

and plunging him into another. The stars are terrifying - they only make the darkness darker. For a moment he remembers his name, then forgets it again.

#

Then Phariane did lift her head. Slowly. As if pain made her ancient. She looked at Gemmored, at the wounded eye. It bulged. The lid strained over something inky, bolused within the socket that was no longer an eye. A discharge of Shadow trickled out of it.

"I cannot heal that," she murmured.

"I know," said Gemmored. "Nor heal as much as a splinter in a child's finger. Not since the Nightmare Cadre paid us their visit and gave you this." His hand reached forward and sank into Phariane's hair, tousling the ashen streaks. His voice crept louder.

"Dragonkeep will have to make do with henbane and opium and propolis, now. They all know it."

The dragonreme was taut. The Sword-Mariners stared, straining in their stillness.

Gemmored clutched Phariane's hair and brought his head down toward hers. Almost as if to kiss her. His voice lowered again. "The Nightmare Cadre touched us all that night. Perhaps some more than others. Perhaps Gel most of all. Perhaps he prefers Leviathan." His mouth formed the words savagely, spittle jumping like sparks. "Leave him."

A droplet of Shadow from his ruined eye slid into his mouth and leapt with the last word onto Phariane's face and she winced.

A hand closed on Gemmored's wrist, small, slender fingered.

Gemmored turned his head to stare at Zantalliz.

The blister within the eye socket shifted.

A shout.

Bloodbane's twin blades slipped smoothly down the slit in Leviathan's side which the ax had itself first opened. Gel followed, smiling. "I believe the alarm is raised," he said.

Without taking his hand from Phariane's hair or his stare from Zantalliz, Gemmored lifted and pointed Doom at the brass barb that fixed the dragonreme to Leviathan's flank. "Cast off," he roared.

The Sword-Mariner entrusted with the care of the barb began to tug at it. He worked it back and forth, twisting it in the sea-wyrm's scales, but it stubbornly held. Doom still pointed unwaveringly. As blood-splashed as Gemmored, strands of thickening crimson stretched down from the blade. The Sword-Mariner's efforts became more frenzied as Gemmored's head began to turn in his direction.

Gel took a stride of his long legs, swinging his labrys up.

The sweeping blades climbed high and fell in a blurred crescent. They stopped impossibly a fraction above the deck, having lazily severed the barb's shaft.

Immediately Leviathan and the dragonreme began to pull apart. The ship's withdrawn banks of oars shot back out and into the Shadow. All three tiers of oars on each side pulled. One stroke. Nearly two hundred pale-bladed shafts hauling through oceanic darkness... lifting... swift back... plunging down for a second stroke... a third... each faster than the last... each a sinewy response to the urgent notes of the pacemaker's flute.

The dragonreme quickly pulled away and ahead of Leviathan, but the oars continued to strain. Gel, Harnak, Zantalliz, Phariane and Gemmored stood at the stern, watching Leviathan's massive puckered maw ploughing after them through the wakeless Shadow.

#

The fifth Phoenix Prey sits on the deck still, beginning to rock. A question which is perhaps a memory has wrapped itself around him. Is the cold dark or the dark cold?

#

"What will be sent after us?" said Harnak, whose face was still a skull.

Gel glanced at her. "Perhaps the Death'shead Cadre, eh?"

"More likely the Corsairs," said Gemmored. "Or the Pitspoor."

Harnak nodded. "The Corsair ships are slower than a dragonreme. The Pitspoor are winged and swift enough to catch us." She turned to Phariane. "Or might it be something else?"

She made no reply but something was emerging from the dark cavern of Leviathan's mouth.

It spat out. Spewed in shreds. Once out onto the Shadow, rather than sinking, the shreds flurried in front of the sea-wyrm. They swarmed. Then they turned toward the dragonreme.

The pacemaker's flute sprang almost to frenzy and the oars obeyed. Pale blades lifted. Shimmers of dark clung on them for a moment then slid away. The oars darted and dipped again. The ship sped forwards and Leviathan seemed to fall further behind with every stroke - but the spewings still gained. They seemed to neither swim through the Shadow nor fly over it. They looked, like the dragonreme, to be travelling upon its surface. But not, like the dragonreme, to be skimming. They were running. Each shred was now clearly a horse and rider. A threatening paean drifted before them.

"What have they sent after us?" asked Harnak.

"The Wyrmshod Cadre," murmured Phariane.

The oarcrew continued to row with disciplined savagery, but their heads and eyes strained to look behind. Soon, terrifyingly soon, they had no need. The Wyrmshod Cadre were all around the ship.

They outstripped the dragonreme almost at will, it seemed, taunting its speed. The horses were clearly too wild to bear saddle or bridle. They were held by the riders' knees, guided by a hand clawed into the mane. They wheeled and even reared on the Shadow, allowing their quarry to spear ahead again, then galloped back along its sides.

Riders and mounts were equally manic. The paean had become a battle yell. There was something of the mocking call of Leviathan's Corsairs in the sound, but this was closer to panic than laughter. Like panic in laughter.

One of them surged ahead again, wheeled again, brought a hoof down on a splintering oar

#

and now Gel sees how they ride on Shadow. The dragonreme is hulled with parings from the dragon's talon. The Corsair quinqueremes, he's heard, are coated in the grave-wax that seeps throughout Leviathan. But these horses...

But as this horse rears, Gel glimpses its shoes, recalls the daggersharp scabs veining the sea-wyrm's stillbirth halls. Of course. These horses are marvellously shod with the selfsame razors!

And what horses. Sinewy slicks of tremulous ferocity, unnaturally loosely jointed, eyes bulging and darting through bone chamfrons. As he admires them

#

a cry broke from the other side of the ship. A Sword-Mariner staggered away from the rail then jerked back toward it, hands clawing at his neck, blood spitting from his throat. Harnak was the nearest of the Phoenix Prey and for an instant

#

is the only one aboard the dragonreme who knows what is happening. From the moment they emerged from the distance into warriors she has wondered what weapons the cadre bear. Swords such as Gemmored's or the sickle-sword she carries in her present Death'sheadcadrewoman shape would be useless to them. Throwing blades or axes would be almost as futile, spent in a single cast. Bows would be the natural choice, but Harnak remembers that, unlike Dragonkeep, there is no wood on Leviathan. No tree would survive in such a place, and timber from before the Shadow fell would be as rotten and frail as kindness.

But just before the Sword-Mariner's cry goes up she knows what their weapon is. Cold vertigo leaps and twists in Harnak's heart. She sees the riders begin to unwind the coils of rawhide cord they wrap around hand and bazuband and elbow. She sees one snap forward an arm. Sees the cord wrap around the Sword-Mariner's neck and wrench taut. And the blood? Harnak sees the specks of white, woven into the cord. Teeth, she thinks, filed to needle points. Of course. Not only whips, but barbed whips.

#

Harnak lifted his sword but it was too late. The Sword-Mariner struggled against the ship's rail for a moment, then pitched over the side. The Shadow swallowed him without sound, without ripple or splash. The Wyrmshodcadreman yanked his mount to a halt. Razored shoes skidded on blackness. As the Dragonreme sped on, he snapped his arm in jerky, elbowing twists, and the end of his whip, plunged into the Shadow with the Sword-Mariner, emerged free. Streaks of blood and Shadow clung to the rawhide.

The Wyrmshodcadreman snapped his arm again and the cord curled back to him. Releasing the horse's mane he caught it expertly with the freed hand. He dug his knees into his mount's sides. It spurted after the Dragonreme again. The rider's bazubands covered forearms and elbows, but the hands were unprotected. The cadreman ignored the barbs which tore and bloodied his fingers and palms as he wound the whip back into its coil.

Around the Dragonreme others were wielding their whips now too. Barbed lashes cracked out, wounding and blinding oarcrew. Once again one of the cadre held her mount in mid-rear, waiting for one of the Dragonreme's oars to sweep past, then brought the hooves down upon it.

Another did the same.

Another.

Even if the wounded oarcrew rowed on, little by little the Wyrmshod Cadre were crippling the ship.

One, even more frenzied than the rest, urged his mount at an oar bank. This one did not rear and drop onto a single oar but leapt onto the bank, riding a plunging splintering path across them, then lunging onto the dragonreme's deck.

And now the mount did rear. And wheel. And lash out with its front hooves. And the rider also lashed out, twisting left and right with his whip. He screamed his warcry, lathy torso and limbs bristling with ferocity and swirl-patterned tattoos. An unmorioned Sword-Mariner charged him and he bent and swept his arm. The Mariner staggered back, face ripped open. Iron was as precious to Leviathan as to Dragonkeep, but the riders' bazubands were woven with shards of it - the riders, as their mounts, were shod with razors.

The cadreman pulled on his horse's mane. It reared again, over an oblivious blanketed figure hunched cross-legged on the deck.

#

The fifth Phoenix Prey is looking up, but not at the hooves. At something above. Something flickering, he thinks. No. Not the stars.

#

As the horse began to stamp down toward his head, a bolt of bloody steel swept from the side. Gemmored. Doom. The horse nickered in outrage, staggering sidelong. The rider splashed onto the deck, almost severed through the middle. His warcry turned liquid in his throat before stuttering to nothing. The tattoos on his body began to unwind. They ran down his skin onto the deck and scuttled crazily away, ratstails of Shadow.

Gemmored, tall as the horse, stepped forward and reached for its mane. It shied away and almost stumbled again as another blur of steel hurled at it, this time from behind - and Gel was astride its back, lofting his ax and laughing. The mount yanked its neck to and fro, muzzle peeled back and teeth snapping. Gel stabbed a hand into its mane, rammed his legs against its ribs, and sent it racing for the galley's side.

It slid a splintering path down the oars and back onto the Shadow. Both mount and rider twisted and jerked for balance. Both achieved it in a moment. And then Gel began to whirl Bloodbane.

#

Zantalliz has watched Gel go. He's pulled Phariane away from the ship's stern and huddles kneeling with her on the deck, an arm around her shoulders as the barbed whips cast and snap overhead. He watches Gel disappear over the side, melded and matched in ferocity with the Wyrmshodcadremount, Zantalliz finds himself wondering if Gel goes not to slaughter but to join his new brethren?

#

Gel was a joyous snarl of motion. Hair a savage translucent pennon. Some of the Wyrmshod Cadre broke off their attentions to the ship and closed on him. Whips lunged at him but the labrys, whirled by the thong at its end, shifted its path to meet and slice the cords. One of the cadre edged his mount too close. Bloodbane's humming arc swooped and the horse's foreleg vanished. Its shoulder plunged wildly and its rider fell and was swallowed instantly by the Shadow. His whip licked the darkness for a moment and was gone too. The horse bucked and screamed away in agony.

#

Bloodbane whirls.

It knows its way, the familiar swooping and soaring way through limbs and skulls and spines - a fragile way, for all things part like ghosts at the touch of Bloodbane's thirsty crescents. This is the swathing. Steel and stone are flimsy as flesh and bone, flesh and bone frail as straw. And with each passing the numberless souls locked within Bloodbane scream again. Even, faintly, the sundered fragment of Gel's essence whimpers. And after the labrys passes, a wake of blood and soul follows its weaving flight.

This is the swathing.

This is Gel's delight.

And even this is barely enough for the labrys. It yearns for something to challenge its bite, defy its swathe – this is its true hunger. The bansheeing of the souls in its keeping provides no more than consolation.

This is the swathing.

This is Gel's delight.

Blood and soul and scream.

Somewhere, in the distance, still torn at by Wyrmsnod Cadre whips, the dragonreme drags itself on.

Chapter Forty-Four

Sstheness rips open the blood sutures of the entry and stumbles into the chamber with the serrated throne and the murk-bottomed pit. She steps, wearily, upon the dais and scrapes herself through the ribcage and slumps onto the throne. She has come, breathlessly livid, from the things she calls her husbands, still covered in the slime of her pleasures. In the candled dimness her flesh glistens.

Far away, in some coiled lonely winding of Leviathan, her scream still echoes, but only she can hear it now.

#

"Do we have them?" she asked.

Beyond the pit stood a Shadow Corsair and a Death'shead Cadre warrior.

"They row the Shadow," said the Death'shead.

"Still within sight," said the Corsair.

"But too fast for quinqueremes to catch," said the Death'shead.

The Corsair spat a look at the Death'shead warrior. "Not so swift now."

"The Wyrmsnod Cadre are on them," said the Death'shead. "The dragonreme is almost crippled."

Sstheness had covered her face with a sigil-taloned hand. The tips of the sigils were buried in her hair. "The Wyrmsnod won't take them," she coughed. She bent forward, slithered through the ribs of the throne onto the dais on all fours, threw out a spatter of blood-streaked vomit.

Several beads drivelled over the edge of the pit and into the murk.

Sstheness' matted hair curtained onto the mess until she lifted her head.

"The Wyrmsnod will fail but we'll still have them," she said.

Chapter Forty-Five

On the dragonreme the ratstails of tattoo Shadow still scurry about the deck, over planks and feet, but always around, never touching the fifth Phoenix Prey. He still watches the sky as if it might swoop.

#

No one else looked up. He was the reason the others on the galley had risked their lives on an unthinkable voyage but now no one gave him a moment's attention.

The oarbanks on each side of the ship still rowed, but a good half of the oars were damaged, the wood broken or the pale end-blades gone.

Wyrmsnod Cadre whips cracked and lunged all around. More of the Wyrmsnod Cadre riders had taken the same suicidal route onto the ship as the rider slain by Gemmored. They laid about with whips and hooves among the banks. Some of the oarcrew were hampered by weals and cuts. Some were broken like their oars. Some were dead. Several had lost eyes to the barbed lashes. Not one left their station on the benches, but even the unwounded were exhausted, their strokes shuddering with effort.

Gemmored wrenched Doom from the dying chest of a wyrmsnod horse. The rage of its eyes dimmed. As it added its blood to the crimson wash on the carcassed deck, the swordsman turned in the mess and roared at Phariane.

"They have us!"

Zantalliz still knelt beside her, his cloaked arm protectively pressing her against him. Her head stayed bowed but her lips moved.

"What does she say?" yelled Gemmored.

Her lips motioned again. Zantalliz brought his head even closer to hers, their foreheads gently touching, his fine-boned face squinting with concentration. Then he looked up.

"She wishes us to unfurl the sail," he called back.

The ship went still.

The pacesetter's flute went quiet at his mouth. Sword-Mariners halted. The helm paused at the rudder. The oarcrew's leaden pulling stopped for a moment. Gemmored and Zantalliz exchanged a stare.

#

When the Phoenix flung them into this realm, the furled sails on Dragonkeep's triremes had puzzled them both. A mystery too petty to give thought to. Until now. Why a sail? No wind blows over the Shadow.

#

Then life returned to the galley. The oarbanks rowed on. Sword-Mariners raced to the lines fixed to the deck and running up to the yard crossing the single polemast. Wyrmsnod Cadre whips flew at them. Most narrowly missed or harmlessly slapped against helmets or the tunics of otherworldly mail. One or two found and ripped open necks or faces, but even these Mariners stayed hunched over their task.

One side of the sail came down a little. It floated deckward rather than dropped. The canvas behaved as if thinner and lighter than canvas - almost ethereal - and it glittered.

On the opposite side one final line was proving troublesome. Finally the Sword-Mariner freed it but as he did a Wyrmshod Cadre whip snaked up and wrapped around yard and sail before it could unfurl.

Without hesitation another Sword-Mariner sprang to the mast. Taking a dagger from his belt, he took it between his teeth and began to climb.

Almost at once the Wyrmshod Cadre riders circling the ship bent their whips on him. Twisting and wincing, he managed only a short way up before a vicious lash-wound on an arm loosened his grip and he fell to the deck. A second managed more than half-way to the trapped sail before barbed rawhide curled around his thigh and he was dragged off the mast.

Without the pacesetter's bidding, as if their hearts had decided as one, the oarcrew pulled with new desperation. The Wyrmshod Cadre rider whose lash was trapping the sail was caught by the spurt and was jerked from his mount. He floundered a moment in the Shadow, keeping grip on his whip, pulled along by the dragonreme, then vanished. But still the rawhide cord, trailing in the dark ocean, trapped the sail to the yard.

Harnak, still in the shape of a Death'sheadcadreman, turned her skull-casqued face to the mast.

The casque began to change. The grey colour of bone became the colour of skin. But not human skin. She dropped her sickle-sword, bloody with Wyrmshod Cadre blood. Her hands tore at and released the straps of her cuirass. They were already shrinking and growing fur.

By the time Harnak had bounded up to the mast the change was complete. The monkey scooped up the dagger of one of the fallen Sword-Mariners and, as the Mariner had done, placed it in her mouth and scurried up the pole.

Whips snickered at her as she climbed, but this was a smaller and more agile target than the Mariners. Reaching the horizontal yard she scrambled along it to the rawhide wound around the sail and grasped the dagger.

Now she was still, Harnak was a better target for the Wyrmshod Cadre riders' lashes, but her tiny hands were as agile as her long-limbed body. In a moment the sail unfurled.

Chapter Forty-Six

In the candled dimness of the chamber with the serrated throne and the murk-bottomed pit, Sstheness knelt low and forward, thighs folded onto calves and ankles, her forearms flat on the stone floor - like a cat - like something about to pounce. She watched the spatter of blood-streaked vomit between her forearms begin to congeal.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The unfurling is accompanied by breaths of relief and awe and dismay.

Pharlane does not need to look to know the sail is freed. She can hear the shame in the voices. She shares it. If they manage to return to Dragonkeep she will, no doubt,

shoulder the blame as she has for everything else since the Phoenix Prey's arrival. She no longer cares but some, she knows, will consider this unfurling blasphemy.

Dragonkeep has always been riddled with guilt. Guilt over surviving as the rest of the world perished. Guilt over maiming the dragon, most glorious and sacred creature of the skies, vast as aurorae, all fury and sunrise and corona and starlight. Shame over mauling and twisting its dying, transmogrifying vitals and humours for man's own selfish use. The triremes are the embodiment of that guilt. The pale plates of their hulls, the plates that enable the ships to breast the Shadow instead of sink beneath it, the blades of the oars too, are parings from the heaven-raking talons. The sheer scaled mail of the Sword-Mariners' jerkins and breeks, harder than metal and more supple than leather, are woven from crescents of haw, the filmy inner eyelids of the dragon.

But the sail is the most terrible shame of all.

The populace of Leviathan feel no guilt. No guilt in the price they pay for survival. No disgust in walking the wyrm, in sustaining themselves on the diseased weepings of its eternally rotting walls. No unease in spawning to the rhythm of its still-shuddering heart. Their Corsairs give no thought that their quinqueremes can only ply the Shadow because their hulls and oars are slathered in the sea-wyrm's gravewax. On Leviathan guilt, like doubt, is forbidden.

Often, latterly, Phariane has wished as much of Dragonkeep. Now she no longer cares. But still she does not look at the sail.

#

But Zantalliz does look. The last of his people, the last of the Moon-Ghost, the Phoenix Prey who refused to enter Leviathan, he churns with shames of his own. But this is not one of them. His view untainted with remorse, he stares.

The sail is square-cut. Not canvas, no more canvas than the Sword-Mariner's mail is iron. More sheer than that mail, the sail flows down from the yard without a crease, a delicate, iridescent membrane.

A dragon's wing.

So beautiful that for a moment Zantalliz fails to notice that no sooner has it unfurled than it has begun to billow.

No wind blows over the Shadow. As far as Zantalliz knows no wind ever blows over the Shadow. And the sail does not move as if caught by some stir of air. No sooner has it gracefully arched away from the polemast that it begins to flatten again, no sooner flat than arching out again, rhythmically, smoothly flexing, in, out, in, out, colours shifting and shimmering as the membrane swells and sinks and swells.

Not like a sail.

Like a wing.

Like a beating rainbow.

#

Almost from the first beat of the sail the dragonreme nosed forward with renewed speed. The Wyrmshod Cadre riders shouted in surprise. They urged their mounts harder. Their whips spat out with even more frenzy.

Swelling, flattening, swelling, flattening...

And not just renewed speed.

Billowing, sinking, billowing, sinking, billowing...

After several beats the galley began to rise. After several more it was above the Shadow, cleanly parted from it, without a speck of darkness clinging or trickling from the ship's pale hull.

The remaining oars ceased motion. As they were withdrawing one Wyrmshodcadreman made a last wild charge onto the sloping sweep of oar shafts but immediately his mount skidded, lost balance, and fell.

The sail gave another, almost triumphant, swell. The galley was picking up both speed and height with each beat.

Impossibly, on one side of the ship, came the sound of steel slicing into the dragon-paring plates of the hull. Gemmored sped to the rail. Crimsoned sword poised, he looked over to see Bloodbane buried deep into the plates. Below it, hanging onto the labrys' haft, Gel fleered up at him. In moments he had climbed effortlessly onto the deck and prized Bloodbane free with equal ease.

The dragonreme was soaring now, far ahead of and above the Wyrmshod Cadre. Far below they whirled their whips in the air, impotently hissing strips of maelstrom.

#

But the crew of the dragonreme stays silent, notes Zantalliz. Though their bodies, exhausted, some injured, slump with relief, they still owe their escape to the butchered square of wing. Their silence is their token of thanks, of repentance. Zantalliz is surprised to find himself impressed. They carry their guilt well.

#

Even so, only the Phoenix Prey looked to the sail. And of these only Zantalliz gave it more than a glance. But still it beat and the dragonreme sped on, not pulsing forward as Dragonkeep across the Shadow, but with a pure, soaring flow. Like a dragon.

The Wyrmshod Cadre were almost lost to sight. Eyes began to look towards and beyond the ship's prow, watching for the jade scales of Dragonkeep to appear on the horizon formed of dark sky and darker Shadow. Other eyes glanced to the stars. Others were occupied with the wounded and dying.

Not Phoenix Prey, nor Sword-Mariners, nor oarcrew saw that the fifth Phoenix Prey, still heaped in his blanket in the middle of the blood-drenched deck, was no longer looking up as if the sky might swoop. Was no longer looking up, but ahead.

And the ship smashed into nothingness.

Chapter Forty-Eight

In the candled dimness of the chamber with the serrated throne and the murk-bottomed pit, the patch of grume-streaked matter between Sstheness' forearms had shrunk, thinned and dried to a wafer. She nestled her chin on the cold dais and pursed her lips. She blew. Softly.

The edge of the wafer lifted, flapped. She blew harder and the wafer flipped over. Even as the last glisten of moisture faded from the underside, a pictogram began to resolve.

Lines appeared, funnelling in and splaying out from a centre. Others emerged and demiluned between them.

Sstheness' chin stayed on the dais. A speckle of vomit had dried on her lips. It fell as she smiled.

Chapter Forty-Nine

It was as if the ship's hull had run aground some reef of void in the sky. The dragonreme did not stop instantly. Those standing were nearly all thrown onto the deck. Those lying wounded were flung painfully about. Those dying were jolted a little nearer death. But whatever the ship had crashed into, yielded slightly. Even once the ship steadied, it sawed fractionally back and forth in the air.

Almost at once the sail began to beat again, adding to the swaying, but whatever held the dragonreme held it fast.

Then, slowly, perhaps brought to life by the ship's struggles, it began to reveal itself. Like horror opening. Like a beast uncurling. Like annihilation stretching out.

Capillaries of silver spread out of a point of nowhere, bled smoothly away from each other like languorous, fluid lightning, out into the sky. Other capillaries forked out of these, not smoothly but erupting like brittle splashes of lightning. These leapt and curled and weaved between the straight threads, creating ever widening luminous tracteries. The straight threads had all spoked out on the same plane. Immense as it was, Annihilation was flat. It was not perfectly vertical. It tilted back a little. The dragonreme had run into it just above the centre, ramming into one of the tracteries.

#

Harnak remembers glimpsing flickering patches in the air on the journey to Dragonkeep after the Phoenix dropped him into the Shadow. And on this voyage too, to Leviathan.

#

Gel recalls the same flickerings, but also remembers dismissing them as some trifling mirage of the realm.

#

Gemmored has speculated on their nature. Some kind of bird? Perhaps roosting on the rare Shadowfasts which rear up into the sky? Perhaps Pitspoor of the kind which attacked on the Phoenix Prey's arrival?

#

But only Zantalliz realizes what this is.

#

Harnak's monkey-shape was still crouched on the dragonreme's yard above the sail, the dagger used to cut it free still in her hand. She replaced it between her jaws and darted head-first down the mast. Reaching the deck she scurried on her four long limbs for the prow. The intention was obvious to the crew. She had cut the ship free once...

Though the trireme's ram was buried in the luminous threads there was a space between them and the higher front rail. Harnak jumped the gap without pausing. She

landed surely. The threads flexed slightly under her weight. It took a moment for her to judge the give, then she began scampering over the silvery disc. Her movements were sure, but erratic, darting across one patch of tracery, then swinging to another, then double-backing. Then she halted, as if some instinct had decided that this was the place to start. She was almost exactly above the dragonreme's ram, nearly level with the prow deck rail. She grasped one of the threads in one front paw while the other reached for the dagger.

#

Zantalliz gently detaches himself from Phariane and stands. She makes no protest, but even so he feels something tear in him as he moves. But he knows he must. He moves to the prow. He's the only one to look for it, the first to see it, the first voice to shout. But even he is too late.

#

It looked like a dark break in one of the glowing tracery threads below Harnak. Yet even after it appeared, the line did not fall apart. So not a break, it seemed, but a glaucous bruise of some kind. Then it moved. It sped along the tracery line, onto another more twisting, another more curved, then darting along one of the straight radial lines, then jaggling back onto the haphazard tracteries, but always moving up, always rushing nearer Harnak.

She was sawing at her first chosen thread when Zantalliz' shout went out to her. The gleaming lines were not irresistibly strong, yet their give made them difficult for the dagger to sever. Harnak held it with her other front paw, pulled it taut for the blade. In a moment more the line broke. She reached for another but other shouts were going up now.

Even as her head lifted, the glaucous bruise reached her.

As if struck by a catapulted missile, or even lightning, Harnak was hurled off the disk and back over the prow onto the dragonreme's deck. Several Sword-Mariners clustered around her. They knelt or stood in keen bow, exchanging confused, concerned glances. One or two extended a solicitous hand, but these wavered short of touch.

Harnak fidgeted dully like a troubled or fevered sleeper - as if the bruise had stung as much as struck her - as if the darting glaucous patch was not a gap or a bruise but some kind of cunning stalking venom.

#

And it is exactly that. Zantalliz knows. His people, the Moon-Ghost, wrote of such things in their grotto-archived books. He remembers these books, remembers the deep fear which always came in the unlocking and reading of them, the fear that beckons to the heart and can always be recognized but never known. He feels that same fear now. Recognizes it.

This fear is his heritage. His race springs from a young, fine-boned man on a corralled reef fringing a nameless isle and a lithe and wild she-god with the eyes of a cat.

But after a time the human half comes to be considered tainted. The fear is part of the taint. It is then that the race takes the name of The Moon-Ghost, creates a lore which forbids the knowing of that fear, demands the shunning of it.

Before this, the race has another name.

#

Zantalliz turned from the prow and went back to Harnak. The body of the shape-shedder was fitfully swelling and shrinking, from the size of a monkey to the size of a human and back again. Patches of singed fur dissolved, regrew and dissolved again. The monkey muzzle melted back into a woman's nose and mouth and jaw. Then the flesh itself melted into the bone of a death'shead helm. Then grew back again, this time into a man's features. Then began to bulge again into muzzle.

Zantalliz' eyes squinted concern for a moment, then he knelt and gently eased the dagger from Harnak's twitching hand. He lifted it to his mouth and began to speak. No sound came and the motions of his lips seemed to stop short of fully forming language. He passed one flat of the blade before his breath from tang to tip, then turned it over and did the same to the other flat. He extended his other palm beneath. The dagger began to change. Its shape became molten. The blade shifted both like Phariane's kris and yet unlike. The bronze forked and bristled rather than undulated – almost more like the traceried threadwork of the disk. Almost more like a bronze barracuda skeleton. No longer just a dagger.

Zantalliz passed the dagger over his other hand and a line of blood appeared across the unwounded palm. The line curled for a moment into something like a symbol, then sank back into undamaged skin. Zantalliz drew his slender fingers into a fist and turned back to the prow.

With a sleek movement he vaulted onto the ship's ram.

#

He stands without wavering, lifting both the hand closed into a fist and the hand holding the dagger. The glow of the disk flickers in his face, and the fear gathers around him. When he stood before Leviathan he refused the knowing of it. This time he accepts the knowledge, allows the fear entrance. Feels it enter his heart.

The slender fingers locked into a fist uncurl and reach out. Zantalliz steps forward and springs.

The threads sway beneath him as he lands lightly on the disk but he holds firm. Begins to climb. So that both hands can grasp the threads, the barracuda dagger is held between thumb and palm. Zantalliz guards it carefully. This is the only chance of freedom for the ship. Below, now far below him, the dragonreme sail beats more slowly than ever, sluggishly, like the fading memory of something once vast as aurorae and furious as storm. The silver threads hardly distort as the ship pushes against them. Annihilation cannot be torn. It can only be severed. Zantalliz finds a certain thread. The dagger no more than strokes it and it breaks. As it falls apart Zantalliz is already climbing for another. He moves almost as nimbly as Harnak's monkey and just as surely, almost as quickly as a spider and far more fluidly - like a cat.

He cuts another thread. Turns. Climbs. Knows unerringly the next place on the disk to aim for. Zantalliz feels laughter bubbling up like so many times when he has spoken the contents of the books of his people. But this time the feeling is different - not maniacal but cool, cool within him. This is how his people must have felt before they shunned the fear and so much more and became the Moon-Ghost. The laughter stays silent, yet it courses through him like a kind of terrifying joy, even when shouts fly out again from the ship.

The venom sac has appeared again. Zantalliz knows it without the shouts, without seeing it. He knows he must work faster, and not just because of this. The luminous face of spokes and weaving tracery threads is no longer a disk. It curves. The threads above him are vertical now, harder to traverse. Zantalliz has expected this. He knows the nature of the thing he climbs. Knows it is part sky, part lightning, part star, entirely predator. It is a plexured tumour, turning conic, slowly enfolding the dragonreme.

The stalking sac approaches Zantalliz. He cuts another thread. Not the thread along which the poison travels. From the ship it seems an apparently random cut, yet the sac shrinks and fades.

Zantalliz understands the threads. That they're not silver but a kind of silk spun of Shadow, their glow the sheen of darkness. But darkness is as much a part of Zantalliz now as the fear, as it was part of his people before they called themselves the Moon-Ghost - when they called themselves the Shadow-Dancer.

As the disk becomes a cone the threads above him are overhanging him now. His foot slips and he hangs by his free hand. The barracuda dagger almost slips from his other. The spokes funnel down to a core of nothingness, the centre of Annihilation. If the threads enfold the dragonreme much more...

Another venom sac makes toward Zantalliz. Still, despite it all, the fear is still cool within him. The Shadow-Dancer finds new footholds, cuts another thread, clammers through the gap to the other side, slices another thread and the sac hesitates and starts to fade.

Now the cross-webbing begins to change. Brighter shapes appear in their weave - pentacles and runes and almadels form and melt like brilliant hoar. Zantalliz knows that the shapes are no brighter than the threads were moments ago. It's the threads that are dulling. They're weakening. The shapes are not forming on top of the threads. The shapes have always been beneath. Like bones. Like entrails.

More venom stalkers swell into being. They move in frenzy this way and that, darting, hesitating, even moving back on themselves. Zantalliz knows, even the dragonreme crew can guess, this is panic. The mandalas twist. The pentacles disfigure. All the glowing diseased arabesques maim themselves. As the Shadow-Dancer goes about his task, the venom stalkers finally all go still, then rush at him as one. But even as they do, Zantalliz knows they're too late. He reaches for the last thread he must cut - not a spoke thread plunging down into the core of nothingness and out into infinity, rather a tarnishing trickle of a tracery thread, splitting into two before it reaches its opposite spoke. But Zantalliz is sure. Fear and darkness meet in him now, and he feels the same in the thread. The first of the venom sacs reaches him as his dagger touches the thread.

#

Annihilation went instantly dark, all its fading rigging collapsing into aether.

The dragonreme plunged toward the Shadow for a moment, drowning in its sudden freedom. Then the sail stirred with renewed force. Within two vigorous beats the ship began to climb again.

Soon it was holding its steady course for Dragonkeep between sky and Shadow.

Like Harnak, like the other wounded, Zantalliz lay on the ship's deck where he had fallen. Sword-Mariners knelt and ministered to him. Phariane still knelt where he had left her, head still bowed.

END OF BOOK THREE.

Chapter Fifty

Even when the glittering line of the Beckoning Gate, the jagged light escaping the dragon's mouth, was sighted, there was little elation aboard the dragonreme. A stir of relief. No more.

As the ship descended, the crew managed a crippled murmur of the hymn of greeting.

"Dragons were before land..."

"Before land..."

"When the world was only sea and sky..."

#

When the pale hull touches the Shadow the oarcrew slumps back to their task. They've tasted what a dragon used to be, a glimpse of starlight and storm and corona. Their oars are awkward embarrassments, distasteful to ply.

The ship forlornly manoeuvres along the jade flank of the dragon and into the immense puckered entrance to the harbour.

Even the vaulted rainbowed roof-sky... purple porphyry inlaid with emerald, garnet, spinel, ruby, sapphire, opal, carnelian, topaz, amethyst, jasper... does not lift the heartsickness.

#

A crowd awaited on the quay. Not the throng that met the Phoenix Prey on their first arrival. Men, women, a few children. None as feverishly expectant as on that first time. Still respectful in stance and gaze. But calm. Eerily so.

Dockers executed their tasks, with derrick and boom and chain, equally calmly. The rhyolite lock was closed. The Shadow beneath the ship faded. The gangplank extended. The dead and wounded were disembarked. Then the rest of the crew. Then the Phoenix Prey. There was no turmoil in the crowd. No chant. No jeers. A child, held in a father's arms, grizzled. A chariot horse restlessly sidestepped. There were six chariots.

#

Gel spies his Dream-ward in the crowd. He strides over to her, pulls her against him, draws in her scent, dares her eyes to meet the want in his.

#

Gemmored also sees his Dream-ward.

#

Harnak, weak but recovered, now a tall narrow-shouldered man clutched in a blanket, searches for the face of a young tow-headed man.

#

Gemmored, still blood-grimed, strode to his chariot. The young Dream-ward, his second, looked up at him, puzzlement dawning across her expectant sloe-eyed features. Gemmored ignored her. He hauled himself aboard the car, pushing the driver off almost by

his thrust alone. The horse started in a half-rear. Gemmored snatched the rein and turned to Phariane, the last to disembark.

"Well?" he shouted at her. "Are we gods now?"

He yanked on the horse's rein, even as his Dream-ward, still unacknowledged, climbed beside him. He sent the chariot in the direction of the cleansing flames of the dragonmouth.

#

Only Gel matches his vigour, lifting his Dream-ward into his own chariot before boarding himself. Gel has little interest in purification - his most urgent need is for another satisfaction. The other Phoenix Prey and Phariane climb wearily onto their chariots. Their most desperate need is for rest. Cleansing will wait until tomorrow. Their drivers turn their chariots toward the archive.

#

The fifth Phoenix Prey, the very cause of the journey to Leviathan, is neglected for a moment. He stands as if he should be swaying, rapt in void. A thought flickers and he remembers and then again forgets his name.

Chapter Fifty-One

Harnak's chariot was the first to arrive. Strength returning rapidly, his frame was stout now, his legs more powerful. He jogged up the wide shallow steps into the archive. In the atrium he turned on the turquoise and amber tiles, staring up at the tiers of cloister above, all lit fitfully by yellow brazier flame. He shouted the name of his tow-headed Dream-ward. He shouted again and launched up the basalt stairway into the echo.

But his recovered strength was fragile. By the time he reached the fourth cloister, the one containing the Phoenix Prey's chambers, he could barely stagger into his own to find it empty.

He emerged and leant his back against the doorframe. His breath despairingly came and went. Gel and his dark-skinned Dream-ward appeared at the end of the arcade.

She turned to Gel, laid a hand on his chest, and spoke quietly. As she moved away from him, Gel reached out a rangy, lazily protesting arm and grabbed her shoulder, but she eased free and walked over to Harnak. She went close, her face going gentle and sad as she spoke. Harnak's began to change also. The skin shrank on the skull. The skull itself sharpened, the eye sockets plunging deep and blackening. He lifted his arms and the blanket slid from his body as the shoulders narrowed again. His hands slowly clawed from his temples to the back of his head. Then he clawed at the Dream-ward. His fingers sank into her neck.

Even as her back arched and her hands splayed Gel was between them, prising Harnak free and flinging his gibbering frame over the cloister edge into the atrium well. The Dream-ward gave a cry and staggered to the edge. Even as she did a fluttering sound rose. As she looked down a bat was frenziedly swirling around the brazier-lit well. It wove madly into and out of the cloisters and in and out of shape, rippling out of bat and into bird into

hornet then back to bat, slamming against the walls in one shape and thrashing away as another. Finally Harnak slumped onto the mezzanine just below.

Zantalliz and Phariane arrived in time to see a shivering sprawl-winged raven fall onto the table of convocation.

Each leant on the other, Zantalliz still weak from his injuries, Phariane still wrapped in her drifting sham of awareness. Nevertheless she moved as if wanting to go to the table. Zantalliz supported her. Sinking into one of its chairs she was within easy reach of the raven, still brokenly twitching in a spatter of its blood, but she made no effort. Instead she slid her forearms onto the table and together. Just before her head nestled onto them she nudged a hand in a torpid gesture of dismissal at Zantalliz.

He stood for a moment, breathing, then turned away.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Zantalliz steps into his room. A hand reaches up to a sharktooth brooch and his raywing cape slides off his shoulders to the floor. Would that he could shed the weariness pressing onto his body and heart.

The tripod is bereft of the yellow fire that once lit the room. An unthinkable neglect, but he feels no surprise. Dragonkeep has changed. Perhaps as much as he. And as with Zantalliz, there is a calmness and strength about the change.

His eyes adjust to the dimness and he sees something placed on his bed. His book. Another neglect, the bed is only roughly made. The scallop shell rests among rumples of blanket as if lying on a slovenly seabed.

Zantalliz feels a thought touch him fleetingly. Before he can grasp it he finds himself kneeling before the bed and pulling the book to him. He rests it on his thighs and releases the nacre clasp. He gently eases the scallop covers apart and the pages, even finer than his cape, swell at the spine and part and stretch open.

Still blank.

Then, as he watches, neither expecting it or surprised by it, like a tentative shooting star, a rill of colour slips down one page. Even for Zantalliz' strange eyes, it's too difficult to tell in the dimness if the rill is the colour of blood.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Heat and flesh and bone and breath...

Gel and his Dream-ward gasp and snarl, sinking into each other, straining, his misty mass of hair spreading over the bed, her wiry mass of dark and silver hair roiled in his darting fingers.

Heat and flesh and bone and breath...

Gel needs her nails in his back, needs razors...

On Leviathan, among echoes of laughters and sobbings and groans and threats he felt comforted. Even Sstheness' scream, both climax and alarm, whetted sharp on the barbed

passages of the sea-wyrm, cloaked those in his head. The thousands of raking slivers of despair.

He still hears Sstheness' scream, still wants to hear it, beneath the scream of his Dream-ward who clings and claws. Even his Dream-ward's petty cry of pain and joy comforts him.

All the time one long arm caresses and wrenches and crushes her body, the other trails off the edge of the bed and tenderly fingertips the haft of his ax.

Chapter Fifty-Four

The chamber which Rorn was carried to was only slightly different to the chambers of the other Phoenix Prey. A small tongue of yellow dragonflame had been left in this chamber's brazier, offering a tender and soothing glow. The drapes over the walls and window were thicker. The bed on which he was laid was deeper, kinder. The covers which were placed over his body were softer.

The two chariot drivers who had carefully lifted him into the archive and up the stairways left. Only Rorn and a woman remained.

In place of a comfortable settle was a bare, harshly carved chair. The woman sat. Tawny-eyed and skinned. Her hair was scraped back and all expression with it. Her brows and her mouth were set watchfully. Rorn had not been able to choose his own Dream-ward. She had chosen herself.

She sat with the blanket on her knees that had swathed Rorn on the journey to Dragonkeep. The blanket from Leviathan. She looked down at it, smoothed it on her lap with her thumbs. It reeked. There was piss. There was something else, that smelt of chill. Smelt of taint.

Despite the drapes, the cries of Gel and his Dream-ward, distant and muted, seeped into the chamber.

#

There are echoes inside him, the one who has forgotten his name. The covers over him are warm, the bed forgiving. But there are echoes inside him which are neither.

He sees a face, a mordant smile kinking the handsome features, reflected in the wafer-quartz of a window. As he stares he drifts closer to the face, drifts into it, and suddenly the face is gone. He drifts on, across a wreckage of utter unending night unsullied by moons or stars, prowled by things suited to blindness and ruin. In this somewhere man clings to survival. Only a few can and do step outside impregnable noctilucous mansions to carry messages of possibility and comfort.

Presently he sees, or possibly hears, perhaps even tastes, one of the prowling things. He drifts on, becoming aware that he is following it, stalking it. He glimpses or hears or tastes it twist in the wreckage of night, arch like something without a spine and uncoil away further into blackness. He follows. It claws and squirms and swims through the blindness of the landscape. And as the one who has forgotten his name drifts after it he realizes that the face, the face that had been reflected in the quartz window a mask of skin and cynical eyes and mordant mouth is not gone. It's instead adhered to his own - over his own... or...

rather... he realizes his mistake... this face is his own. Except for one lineament. A faint white scar, the merest delicate indent, on its... on his... cheek.

He remembers a woman. A long talon of a fingerstall. He remembers a needle of icy burn drawing down his cheek. He can feel it now, and feel something below it, something which slithers beneath his face much like the prowling thing he still follows slithers across the ruined face of this realm.

And just before it vanishes, the one who has forgotten his name almost wonders if the thing was the name he has forgotten.

And he groans.

#

The Dream-ward beside Rorn's bed lifted her head at the sound. She let the tainted blanket drop to the floor as she stood. In the gentle brazier light she watched him shift in a forlorn shred of restiveness. She studied the pale etch that ran just below his eye to the side of his slack mouth.

She reached forward and lifted the bedcovers and eased herself beside him. He groaned again. She reached her arms around him, still tracing the path of the scar.

Chapter Fifty-Five

After Phariane lifts her head from her arms and stands and leaves the table of convocation, Harnak painfully sheds the bloodied feathers of the raven and stretches into a man. This is his true shape. Young but not youthful. Strong shoulders. Lean but not thin. The skin bears the scars of his training in the torture vault of the prince of the city of angled agate spires.

He remembers revealing the scars to his Dream-ward. Offering him true nakedness. Bearing the seals of the blood and pain that disfigured his heart into an assassin's. On the table of convocation he leans forward and loops his arms around his knees, feeling the cicatrices stretch on the rack of the skin of his back. He bows his head. To reveal them now is not to make an offering. He is not sure why he reveals them.

Perhaps because of what Gel's Dream-ward has told him. That Harnak's Dream-ward was not waiting for his return because unable to bear the presence of one who's trodden Leviathan. Harnak searches his memory for some hint, in gesture or word or voice or eye, that would explain the change, the betrayal. Perhaps this is why he allows the scars display. Because other fresher scars make them less important? Less precious?

Harnak thinks of Gel's Dream-ward, Gemmored's Dream-ward, the tawny Dream-ward who has offered herself to the ruined Phoenix Prey brought back from Leviathan. An appetite stirs within him, familiar, if not as comfortable as once. The taste of killing.

He remembers Phariane walking away from the table, wearily stumbling her way to the back of the mezzanine and down the stairway. He remembers that shortly afterward came the sound of the bronze and ornate door on the floor of the atrium, the door to the vaults below.

He feels the need to follow. He slides off the table. Whether he wishes to talk to Phariane or kill her he will consider on the way.

But before he goes...

#

Instead of taking the stairway down Harnak climbed again to the next level. He saw the blanket that had slipped from his shoulders in the exchange with Gel's Dream-ward. Lifting it he uncovered what had fallen, unseen, with it. It lay in rawhide coils. He picked it up. Pale needles of teeth were woven along its length.

Recovering his senses from his fall, Harnak had found the whip by the corpses of a Wyrmshodcadreman and his mount on the deck of the dragonreme. He had slipped it beneath his blanket, fingering it secretly on the voyage back to Dragonkeep, fingering it secretly.

#

He fingers it now, still not knowing why.

#

He turned and made for the staircase, allowing the whip to uncurl behind him. The teeth barbs clicked on the basalt steps all the way down to the atrium floor.

It eeled after him along the tiles and through the bronze door where garnet, emerald and amber gave way to metal treads and darkness.

#

Harnak does not have the sight of a cat. He makes his way slowly down the vaults. The smells in the damp air are the same as before - grains, seeds, soil. These give way, as before, to the other smells he can put no names to. He stops now. Moves off the stairway into the vault - the third, forth down? He has neglected to count. Around him are the dim sheened outlines of the amphorae. He sinks down against one, bare back against cold glaze, running the whip over a palm.

Waiting for the silence to turn against him, his flesh wafts from male to female. Young but not youthful, high breasts, lean but not thin. No minute flickering of eye colour, no ghosting flux of bone - this is also her true shape. Scars still swathe across her back.

She realizes that she's listening for footsteps descending the stairway, watching for a yellow lantern glow. Something twists even more inside her.

Looking down she sees her hand crushed into a fist around one of the whip's barbs, blood wetting the squeezed channels between the fingers. This, too, is a realization.

She takes a length of the whip between her hands and lays it across her back, from one shoulder to the opposite hip. Then she begins to saw it, slowly, back and forth. The barbs cut across the sometimes ancient paths of the scars, and the not so ancient, ripping their calloused seals and releasing the pain again.

Yes.

Now she knows why she took the whip.

This pain, this old pain, this pain feels like faith.

Not in darkness, nor in light. The cavern at the bottom of the bronze caracol is the same as before. Silvered. Walls incised with deep mysterious glyphs. A fountain set in the centre.

But this time Phariane does not sit on its edge. She has struggled out of the sheer otherworldly mail of dragon's membrane and left it slumped wearily on the ground and stepped into the pool.

She dips her hands into the path of the arc of silver rising out of the pool and lifts it onto her bare shoulders. It runs glimmering down her back, her breasts, her belly. It burns.

As she once told Harnak, this silver is sky-wyrm's blood. But she did not tell Harnak that a sky-wyrm's blood is fire. Unlike Leviathan, whose inhabitants still walk the vessels that once contained its blood, those who found the dragon found no veins, no arteries. A dragon's life is fire. Dragonkeep still lives in the furnace of its mouth, but also here. In this pool. This silver is also fire. Cooled and distilled but still fire.

And it still burns.

Good.

She wants it to burn.

She wants to care that it burns.

She wants to care that it is her fault, all her fault that all they have brought back from Leviathan is a half-dead shell of a man and hopelessness. She wants to feel anger for the toll the voyage has taken, the damage done to Gemmored and Harnak. To feel disquiet at the changes in Zantalliz and the lack of changes in Gel.

She delves for the old nagging fear born on the night of the Nightmare Cadre's attack - the suspicion that the Cadre has left some taint on one of the Phoenix Prey, a diseased seedling of betrayal waiting to burst at the Uroboros. That fear has gone. A dripping hand strays to her ash-clawed hair. Even the dread that such a seedling might have been planted in her - even this is gone.

Most of all she wants to feel pity for herself.

But no.

She cups more scalding silver fire onto her shoulders.

As the pain trickles forlornly down her body, she hears something behind her.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Harnak stops raking the barbed whip back and forth across her back.

She hears footsteps.

For the span of a pang she holds her life frozen as she listens. Harnak struggles to turn the sound, change its quality as it reaches her ears. But the footsteps are too soft, too sure, too feline. Not the footsteps of her Dream-ward. She listens to them descend the metal treads, reach the vault where Harnak sits, continue down without pause.

Before they fade she begins to ease the barbs back and forth once again.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Pharlane knows the sound for the tremor of a phantom harpstring.

She does not turn around.

The tremor clings to the air in the cavern, not desperately, but with a crafted firmness, a sweetness. It holds just long enough to open the way for another note, and another, cascading now into melody.

It breaks over the silvered walls, washing the glyphs, draws back, surges again.

Winds murmur in the timbres, or maybe sough between them, in shrills, flourishes and broodings of sound. Sometimes there is a wanting of a voice in the harp music, and sometimes what comes needs no voice, and sometimes it seems that the music cadences into a lost language that dances between the two. Then the music gathers and glissades back from the walls for a soft stroking moment, single samite pangs of sound, only to sweep out again, lazily carrying with it skies and seas and oceans of skies and plains and cities and gardens and mountains and forests.

Most of all, Pharlane hears forests, but she does not turn around.

And realm glissandos over realm, languorously and sweetly.

And there are storms in the promise of some melodies, and in the foreboding of others, and in the melodies where promise and threat meld into one, and the echo of storms, and the memory of storms.

And Pharlane draws in her breath, deeper and deeper. The harp sowings tremor along her spine. They taunt and coax through her, plucking at her misery. But still she does not turn around though her will tears at the effort.

Then something touches her spine, her back. Warmer than sound, it moulds to her from shoulder to flank, harder and more urgent than song. Skin. Another body pressing against hers.

"Come with me."

The voice comes, as she knew it would. The harping purrs lower, but the voice also holds storms and the echo and memory of storms.

"Come with me."

And hands slide along her body, a touch so light and smooth that they seem not to have been laid on her skin but simply to be. They slip from her thighs, across her belly, over her ribs as if they were harpstrings, and on.

"If I die today, if you die today, if your sister Sstheness dies, you know it would make no difference. The Uroboros will still come - and no act, nothing that happens before it comes will affect what will happen then..."

Pharlane's voice is a stranger. She waits to hear what it will say.

"If the Uroboros is lost there will be nowhere to go."

"Only if it is lost. And you know that even if the Uroboros is won then Dragonkeep as well as Leviathan will die, and most of the dwellers of the wyrms, even your Phoenix Prey, m'love, even you. And you don't care any more, m'love, I can tell. Come with me..."

Breath winds into the whorls of Pharlane's ear. It's true. She's changed. She remembers that not so long ago she considered the damaging of one of Dragonkeep's arches

more tragic than the deaths of those who committed the damage - perhaps that's when it began, when she began to edge away from her duty. She would not have considered an arch as important as a life when she was younger, even though fresh with belief in her calling as archivist of the city, as its protector. She would not have thought life less important than stone when she first met the harper. When he first walked into this realm as he walked so easily from another. When the Uroboros was not so near, or so certain.

"Come with me."

If he had asked her then, would she have gone? No, that at least is sure. Nor if he had sauntered back into her realm when the arch was broken. Even then with her duty, twisted away from care for the flesh and bone of Dragonkeep to care for its petrified corpse, even then she would not have gone with him.

But now...

"There's no care left in you." The harper's hands still play over her nakedness, his own pressing against her. The harping has slid again into a timbre needing a voice to complete it. But the harper's voice in her ear, Phariane realizes, is that voice. As her own hands stray back to the harper's thighs, she realizes that it always has been. Voice of harper and of harp are one and the same. Purring. Prowling with storms.

The storms gather around her more tightly, soft and sweet, and unending, and none bring with them blood, or darkness, or fear.

Or anything.

She arches and strains to hear anything beyond the sweetness. She finds nothing. The harper, the Wheelwalker, has walked, sauntered, meandered countless realms without care. And there is no care in his voice, in his lazy touch. Not even for her.

"Not even for me."

As she says it the harpsong dies away but the voice continues. It says, "If you won't come with me, perhaps the other one will. The ruler of Leviathan. The bitch of shadow. Sstheness. Your sister." The voice laughs. Lazily. Mockingly. A shrug of a snigger echoes into nothing and she knows the harper has gone. Her back is naked again. Alone. Already beginning to cool.

Even now she doesn't turn. She stands in the fountain, in the light shed by the delicate thread of silver arcing in front of her. After a moment's eternity her shoulders straighten.

In the emptiness there comes to her a footfall - graceful, silent, and unmade. She turns and looks at Zantalliz.

#

Phariane climbed from the pool and strode over to him. He had changed into a fresh shift. Phariane took hold of it, gripped it in her fists and tore. Then she took his fine-boned hands and twined her fingers with his and brought them to her breasts. She drove them hard against her. His strange eyes watched her. Then she freed her own hands and took his face in them and drew his mouth to hers. Then they drew each other to the cavern floor and she rammed herself down onto him. And again.

#

She wants it to burn.

She wants to care that it burns.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Gel awoke in the morning. His Dream-ward was warm and still. Pouting, he studied the path of her spine, stretched out a finger and traced it without touching. Thought touched his eyes. He wended the finger back.

#

He can still feel spits of Shadow on his body from the voyage back to Dragonkeep. They squirm about the dried Wyrmshod Cadre blood stiffened on his skin. They slide over the scratches on his back still fresh with sting from the night. In the bed the Dream-ward stirs, awkwardly, as if something nags her sleep. He glimpses specks of the same dark amorphous lice on her back.

He knows what he needs to do, where he needs to go.

#

He suddenly glided out of bed, disturbing neither sheet nor Dream-ward, and straightened. His labrys was already in hand. His hand had never left it through the night. He wound on his jehad swaddlings. Moving to the window, he pulled back its drape.

#

Morning in Dragonkeep, but unlike any Gel has known before. The pensive quiet which settled over the city last night remains. The avenue stretching to the dragon's mouth flickers with yellow flame, but it seems that almost half the wayside braziers are empty. This dawn is more a pallid twilight.

On the table of convocation food has been laid. Cold food. There is a bowl of fruit, some that Gel recognizes from his own realm Gnomon, some not. There will be no more fruit from Dragonkeep's trees. Gel remembers seeing the hacked stubs of orchards from his chariot on last night's ride to the archive. The wood has gone to fashion staffs, tonfa, arrow shafts, hafts for hammers. There are a few plates of cold meat. The animals in Dragonkeep have been slaughtered. The bread is stale. No cults or gangs set fire to the fields for malice or some ancient desperate ceremony anymore. Not that anyone tends crops now. There's no more time for husbandry. The Uroboros is coming. The city has accepted it.

As he walks along the avenue he sees that the city is by no means deserted. People are about. They move quietly, but they move purposefully. There is a look to them. Every one of them.

On his way Gel passes one of Dragonkeep's armouries. Throughout the troubles since the arrival of the Phoenix Prey, the city's hawk-helmed Blade-ward have needed to guard them day and night. They still station themselves around this armoury, but the gates are open and they're passing out the panoply within. Iron and steel. Worth more than life here. Ancient swords and daggers, tridents and halberds, and axes and javelins of varied lengths and shapes, shields and helms and armours of many designs. The citizens who wait stand calmly and orderly but nothing disguises the awe on their faces.

For some reason Gel turns down a side street off the avenue before he can be seen. Perhaps the awe on the faces disturbs him. Perhaps he wishes to avoid such expressions

turned onto him. Perhaps he feels it best not to risk the lack of such expressions when the citizens' eyes fall on him. Perhaps he simply wishes to avoid delay.

The lesser streets and wynds of Dragonkeep are emptier. Gel moves quickly. Then he happens upon a plaza flagged in sardonix. He slows. He finds it familiar.

The plaza is quiet now, but he remembers it swirling with masked dancers in white and black and crimson gauze. It was soon after the Phoenix Prey arrived in the city.

And there was a song, an antiphony.

'The twisted and twisting worm...'

'The twisting and twisted worm...'

Yes, and there was a chant. He smiles.

'Blood and red slaughter.'

He remembers laughing.

In the middle of the plaza is a single figure. A woman. Young. Dancing. If she notices him she gives no sign. He comes close to her, Bloodbane across his shoulders, his wrists resting over its pole.

She's dressed in black gauze, the colour of the most frenzied of the dancers. But this dance is different from the dance of the masque. Her eyes transfix the flags. She sways and turns differently, her steps abort, gestures pull short of flow, movements turn in on themselves. He's close enough now to see the blood flushing her cheeks, hear the breathless murmur on her lips. Still she doesn't look at him.

Gel grins. He has always been able to recognize madness, always been drawn to madness, always been beguiled by madness.

He skips around her, bowing, bending his face near hers. Her blood flushed face.

'Blood and red slaughter.'

Still she doesn't look up.

Blood and red slaughter.

And the murmur on her lips.

"The twisting and twisted worm," she breathes, "the twisted and twisting worm."

And he can taste the echo of blood on her murmur.

But he knows what he needs to do, where he needs to go, and he backs away, sliding his feet across the sardonix, and turns away for the dragonmouth.

Chapter Sixty

Gemmored is unaware that morning has come to Dragonkeep. He again shifts his stance on the gneiss causey stretching deep into the fiery cavern of the dragon's mouth. He steps forward, back, side to side, diagonally, pivots on one leg, then the other, time after time. His right hand is close to the hilt of his sword, the left underneath. Twists of sheen spasm along the blade. Each cut is strong, whether born in shoulders or elbows or wrists. Plunging cut, shifting cut, crooked cut, the cut of wrath. Each guard and ward and thrust too, is powerful, swift, though he's performed these movements throughout the night. The old dance - renewing and refining the bond between arm and steel. The familiar pride is still there. Somewhere.

Even the evil coursing through his body like the hiss of wings is something he's known before. But not so much. Not for so long.

Before, when he's slain enemy after enemy without cease and felt the evil build in his soul to a pitch, he has sheathed Doom. Even in mid-battle he has sheathed his sword in its pale scabbard and heard it shriek and felt the evil drain out of him. But now the scabbard is gone. Now he can sense the evil rooting vessels through his whole massive body. He can feel the darkness on his tongue but has no word for the taste.

Beneath and all around the causey is breath as dragons know it - fire. An immense roaring inferno of life, writhing forest of flame, pirouetting branches and leaping buds, furious and licking and undulating tongues of yellow and white and red. The yellow gives light. The white bestows the heat used to forge or to kiln or to cremate the dead. And the red is the cleanser - the unShadower. When he came here last night, before beginning the old dance, he'd stepped onto one of the cantilever strips of jet leading off the main causeway into the hearts of some of the red flames. He did not complete the walk. Smears and flecks of Shadow still matt the fibres of his bear pelt, stain his cuirass and vambraces and jambes, lurk in the clefts and pits of his body. If Gemmored steps into the flame he knows these stains will all burn away.

But afterward, would his ruined eye still be abscessed with darkness? Would it still see things in its slurred vision that only dying minds have a right to see?

Would bathing in the flame unShadow Doom? purge it as the lost scabbard did?

He stops the dance and looks at the blade.

Or is he always destined to be Doom's suckling? Destiny? Is it more than chance that he happened upon the arcane thing on the rotting siege in Leviathan and slew it but lost the sword's pale scabbard? What was it the harper had said about fate? Has he been chosen to set the Uroboros in motion? Or to turn the coming battle in favour of Shadow?

Anger surges and breaks within Gemmored. All the talk of shadows, different darkneses, the words themselves shadows within shadows...

He walks to the end, the edge of the causey, and stares down. He holds Doom out and turns it, kindling glims of indigo - like brooding blood - and silver. Should he -

"Throw the blade!"

Gemmored turns. He's not surprised to see Gel, smirking, wrapped around his labrys like a whore.

Gemmored strides away from the end of the causey without discovering if he would, or could, or even wanted to loose Doom.

Standing before Gel, he presses the sword's tip onto the gneiss and leans lightly on the crosspieces.

Beneath Gel's mist of mane, squirms of dark maggot across his scalp. More shadows. His smirk is jagged. He shakes his head.

"You serve your blade," he says, "bound to its hunger. As," he caresses Bloodbane, "am I to mine."

"So why," says Gemmored, "do you come here?"

"Perhaps," says Gel, no longer smirking, "I came to do what you can't. To throw my blade into the fire, to be rid of it. Perhaps I've tired of it."

"So you don't come to be cleansed."

Gel walks past Gemmored. Gemmored does not move, doesn't watch him stand where Gemmored had stood, at the end of the causey.

The thundering forest of fire columns up before Gel. He talks into void and flames. "Why bother to wash away a piddle of darkness?"

Gemmored begins to stride away down the causey, toward the city. He knows where he needs to go, what he needs to do, even before Gel calls out to him.

"We are all shadow. Shadow to the bone."

Chapter Sixty-One

Sstheness lounged on the throne in the cold tallow-candled chamber with the rectangular-hewn murk-bottomed pit.

Her eyes brooded. One foot rested on the seat. A thigh jutted out from the coarse mantle that slovened over her. Her teeth vaguely gnawed on her lip.

Equally vaguely she ran a long pale sheath back and forth through the sigilstalls taloning her fingers.

#

A keepsake – something left by one of the Phoenix Prey. She knows what it is.

#

The chamber was crowded. Eyes darted. Shoulders bunched. Elbows twitched. A Shadow Corsair yelped and dropped into the pit.

There was movement deep below. Slithering, juddering. There were gristly sounds, suckings, rippings. Stiff, bone-white shapes darted.

The chamber was full of Corsairs and Death'sheadcadre and others who were neither. Sstheness gaze sharpened a moment and picked out one of these - a woman - the pinched-faced woman with the child that Gel had passed in Leviathan's passages. She was levered forward to the edge of the pit, whimpering. She looked up at Sstheness in the last moment before she was pushed, but Sstheness' sight had already drifted back into sulky abstracted wanderings.

Presently, her gaze sharpened again.

This time another Corsair, this one struggled forward by one of the Death'sheadcadremen.

#

The Shadow Corsairs are freer than the Death'shead Cadre, whom Sstheness treats like puppets - each hates the other for this. This delights her.

#

The Death'sheadcadreman wrested the Corsair over the pit brink, but the Corsair kept his own grip. Both toppled into the murk.

Slithering, juddering, suckings, rippings, dartings.

#

This doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that neither had any part or blame in the escape of the Phoenix Prey from Leviathan. It doesn't matter that the pinched-faced woman had.

There is no justice on Leviathan.

Sstheness is punishing because she must punish. Reason would only blemish what she does here.

She sighs and tosses Gemmore's lost scabbard into the pit.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Pharlane and Zantalliz lay, spent, on the stone floor of the cavern in the depths of the archive. The glimmering rill of silver, arching from the pool, veined through the silence. They gazed at the roof of the cavern.

#

Zantalliz thinks of the reef of the isle in the nameless sea. Of trails of moonbolt over the water.

#

Pharlane remembers the forest, soft mossy ground and the roof of Dragonkeep pricked here and there by a spark of emerald or garnet or amethyst.

#

"What do you know," she said, "of the way of Dragonkeep and Leviathan?"

"Dragonkeep flees, Leviathan pursues."

"Dragonkeep flees, Leviathan pursues."

"Across the Shadow."

"Across the Shadow," said Pharlane. "Bound."

The silver light burrowed deeply into the glyphs on the cavern walls.

"Do you know how the bond is formed and sustained?" asked Pharlane.

Zantalliz stretched out a reply. "Your sister?"

"Dragonkeep has its archivist, its healer. Leviathan its..." Pharlane's voice trailed. "When the time comes to choose them, it must be twins. The binding must be blood.

Sometimes they're found on the sky-wyrm, sometimes on the sea-wyrm. Never grown. Always just old enough to remember the parting. Sstheness and I were born on Dragonkeep. I remember her crying. Her mouth wide. Wider than madness. As though her pleas were splitting her face. My fingers sliding over her fingertips and then over nothing. I remember the fury in her screams as a dragonreme pulled away from the harbour, taking her to Leviathan."

Chapter Sixty-Three

Sstheness still lounged on the throne in the cold tallow-candled chamber with the rectangular-hewn murk-bottomed pit.

The chamber was not so crowded now.

A child, a girl, thrashed and squealed above the skull helm of a Death'sheadcadreman before being flung into the pit.

Sstheness yawned.

Now she ran something else back and forth through the sigilstalls taloning her fingers. It had been found in the same room as the scabbard. A soiled, rumped shred of cloth.

#

She knows what it is.

#

She pressed her sigilstalls closer together, stretching the shrivel of robe taut. The Death'sheadcadrewoman who brought it to her was the next to drop into the pit. Juddering, suckings, rippings.

Sstheness craned her neck, peered into the murk.

A Shadow Corsair snapped into frenzy. Wrenched his narrow blade free. Flailed.

Sstheness' eyes thoughtfully shifted from the pit to the shred of cloth. She crumpled it between her hands, cupped it to her face, buried her nose in it, breathed.

#

Her eyes pass through terror and pain and fury and desire and as she stands they still waver.

#

She strode off the dais. Even though the men and women and children in the chamber roiled, splashing cries and blood as the berserker Corsair laid about, they made a way for her. Someone toppled into the murk-bottomed pit.

#

She pays no attention to this. To the berserker Corsair being dragged, sniggering and weeping to the pit. To the scuds of thrash in the murk. She rends open the entrance to the chamber and slips out.

Chapter Sixty-Four

"We are all shadow. Shadow to the bone."

Gel waits long after he's shouted the taunt over his shoulder to Gemmored. Long after Gemmored has gone. He stands on the edge of the causey. Looking over the blinding molten havoc. Listening to the roar like volcanoes breathing.

Then he holds his labrys out over the flames as Gemmored did his sword. He balances it by a finger under the long haft, flawlessly unswaying. Perhaps he should have wielded it on Gemmored, as he'd intended, added his delightfully tormented soul to the screaming horde within the twin blades. He still feels the hunger, part his and part Bloodbane's and unable to distinguish between. It's true, what Gel said. Both of them are bound to their blades.

And yet.

Gel's head tilts. He listens to the screams carefully. Picks among them like carrion for the sundered fragment of his own soul among the howls. Searches without finding. Has the misbegotten whimper of essence died? Or, unnoticed, returned to Gel? Or, less fanciful, he sneers, has his entire soul, unnoticed, migrated to the labrys?

And. If any of these imaginings are true...

Gel's gaunt face hardens still and deep with an alien look.

Could he be free? His finger lifts Bloodbane higher. The flames light the blades but don't dance over them as they did over Gemmored's sword. Could it be? Could there be a time where he can be sure where pleasure ends and despair begins?

He brings Bloodbane back on his finger, slowly, like beckoning. He takes a step backward. Stoops. Bows? Abases? Eyes still fixed on Bloodbane. He lays the labrys, the violent god he no longer loves, slowly, slowly, on the edge of the causey.

And slides his finger away.

He takes another step back.

Another.

Gel kneels.

He can still hear the screams, but not so intimately, so painfully, and fading. Could it be? A fog descends on him, on his sight, his hearing, on all his senses, like a cataract over existence, like a concentration of mystery. And the screams are distant, are gone.

And then something emerges from the fog.

Chapter Sixty-Five

"We are all shadow. Shadow to the bone."

Gemmored walked down the causey away from Gel's taunts. He passed the deserted ironworking tools - swage blocks, mandrels, crucibles - beyond the dragonmouth and through the dragonthroat. Finally he entered onto the long shallow stairway leading into the city.

At the foot of this his Dream-ward still waited. She raised her head from the rim of the chariot where she had slept. She smiled. Her sloe eyes searched Gemmored - saw the smuts of Shadow still spattering him - became uncertain.

She steadied the horse with the reins. Edged to the side of the chariot.

But Gemmored walked past, starting down the wide straight avenue arrowing to the heart of Dragonkeep - to the archive.

He passed through vaulted arches petroglyphed with sinuous and angular stories, unknown but familiar.

#

Blind to them.

#

He strode past brazier after brazier.

#

Not noticing that many of them are empty of flame, that the day is dimmer now in the city.

#

A shout went out from somewhere along the streets and wynds off the avenue.

#

Once it would have reminded him of other shouts in other cities, on battlegrounds of his own realm Darkling. But not now. The pensive quiet that the shout slices through he ignores also. There is a feel to the city. The Uroboros is coming.

But there is something he must do first.

#

Gemmored walked on, Doom in his hand. His Dream-ward, no longer smiling, nudged the chariot along behind.

#

Inside the archive Gemmored sweeps the bowls and plates and cups from the onyx table of convocation. He sits and lays Doom down. Even on the journey from the dragonmouth he's felt the dark strengthening within him, the feathery, leathery, liquid, barbed wings of it surging. He feels the old pride, the honour, souring like bile.

He runs his eyes along the sword. The once fluid watering of its sleek grey flats is now ruined, the chevrons cracked and distorted as if the metal has wizened. This has always been the way of it. The more Doom has slain, the more disfigured the watering has become. Until Gemmored has sheathed it in its pale scabbard and the throatless scream has crescendoed. And when Doom has been unsheathed it has always emerged pristine and pure again. Pure.

Gemmored's gaze reaches the sword's pommel.

To his surprise the dark core of the gemstone is not flurrying wildly. It no more than stirs. A pupil-like flaw.

He remembers lying in the chamber with the rotted siege in Leviathan. Remembers staring into the gemstone and seeing himself – seeing himself and yet not seeing himself. Gemmored stares at the gemstone with each eye - his whole eye, still the grey of steel, and the wounded eye. The wounded vision sees differently. Gemmored has begun to understand. There may be no difference between blood and darkness, darkness and blood. Dark may be blood, but dark is not shadow. Shadow is something cast. A promise of darkness. Shadow is a mixture of light and pain and something else.

Gemmored takes the sword, lifts it by the crosspieces, and brings down the hilt on the table. He lifts it again. The gem remains on the onyx. It glimmers.

He lays Doom down again and takes up the gemstone.

He draws a breath into the jokul scarp of his chest. A shivering blade of breath drawn across eternity.

His other hand lifts to his face, to his wounded eye. Pushes at the bulging lid. Shadow trickles out. Presses harder, pushing the lid up, fingers digging. Feathery, leathery, liquid wings flicker blindingly around the pain.

One final wrench tears out the last of the dark pus from the socket.

His other hand, trembling, holding the gemstone, begins to lift.

As it nears the empty socket, Gemmored almost glimpses something.

Light and pain and something else.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Above all the bone echoes and meat echoes of Leviathan's labyrinths, Sstheness walks the sea-wyrm's back.

She weaves thoughtfully between the spikes of the shrike wall. One hand trails across the oriflammes of skin and sinew hanging from the torn headless bodies impaled on the spikes.

Finally, she stops.

She looks down at the soiled, rumpled shred of cloth she's carried from the cold tallow-candled chamber with the serrated throne and the murk-bottomed pit.

She looks up over the Shadow that Leviathan ploughs through. Vast. Pendent. But no longer flawlessly level. There is a suggestion of movement, of sway, of swell, of sink. Restlessly serpentine with whippings of glimmer. Neither sea nor sky. It is Shadow.

She lifts the rag. Caught between anguish and anger, with her other hand she drags the carelessly shouldered mantle away and tosses it onto the charred scales carpeting Leviathan's back.

No wind chills her naked body. No wind ever blows over the Shadow, but the oriflammes on the Shrike Wall suddenly stir.

There is a sound behind her.

Sstheness knows it for the tremor of a phantom harpstring.

She does not turn around.

The tremor hovers in the air. A crafted sweetness. It remains just long enough to open the way for another note, before it drifts out over the Shadow.

And as the notes cascade into melody there is wind. It murmurs in the timbres, or maybe soughs between them, in trills, flourishes and broodings of sound. Sometimes there is a wanting of a voice in the harp music, and sometimes what comes needs no voice, and sometimes it seems that the music cadences into a lost language that dances between the two.

It sweeps out, over the shrike wall, lazily carrying with it skies and seas and oceans of skies and plains and cities and gardens and mountains and forests.

Most of all, Sstheness hears gardens, but she does not turn around. She knows there's no need. She knows what will happen next, waits for it.

Something touches her spine, her back. Warmer than sound, it moulds to her from shoulder to flank, harder and more urgent than song. Skin. Another body pressing against hers.

"Come with me."

The heavy-lidded voice comes, as she knew it would. The harping purrs lower. Like the harpsong the voice carries the memory of storms, the threat of storms. She loves storms.

"Come with me."

She says his name, the name she heard from his mouth so long ago. It's a lie. Every ear that hears his name hears a different name. Every one a lie.

The Shrike Wall twinges again.

And hands slide along her body. They slip over her scars as if they were harpstrings. And the music glissandos to a sweetness like wounds.

It's been so long since the Wheelwalker last came to her. Promising her. Teasing her. Lying. Laying her down and taking her in the dank messes of the knot at the heart of Leviathan. Swearing to stay. Leaving.

"If I die today," he says, "if you die today, if your sister Phariane dies, you know it would make no difference. The Uroboros will still come - and no act, nothing that happens before it comes will affect what will happen then..."

She arches her back, laying her cheek against his, and whispers.

"Good."

#

Sstheness brought the sigil-thorns of one hand to her neck. Her thighs, her belly, her breasts, arms, shoulders, face, every part of her was etched with scars. Except her neck. Flawless and swan-smooth, it throbbed. Then she whipped the hand across, snapping her head the other way to the cut as if in disdain.

#

Sstheness doesn't draw a single sigil-thorn across her throat, slit a thin, delicate, swelling gorget. Instead she rips it crimson wide. In the glistening wreckage tiny verminous things squirm.

She drops to her knees.

The harpsong stops.

Sstheness smiles with bloody teeth. She wonders if her sister, Phariane, with all her scrolls and tablets and books, has ever suspected that the harper might always appear in each realm as each reaches its Uroboros? And if he does if it means anything. Means anything beyond a gibe.

There comes an unmusical sound like a snort from behind her and she knows the harper has gone.

#

She took the rag she still held and smothered it in her throat.

Peeling it away she tore the soaked cloth once, twice. They were long, careful tears, more gently ripped than her flesh. She impaled each piece onto the sigil-thorns of one hand, and began to crawl.

#

She crawls away from the Shrike Wall, across the breadth of Leviathan, towards its edge.

But Leviathan is as wide as a city. Sstheness knows she must hurry. She can see, beyond the sea-wyrm's horizon, that the Shadow has already begun to change. No longer flat. No longer still.

And Leviathan has no real edge. Its back slopes away. After a time Sstheness' hands and knees start to slip on the charred yet weeping scales. She slides. Halts. Slides again. The steeper the back becomes, the further she flounders. Massive scales break loose under her like squarrose brash. She sobs. Though the verminous things have gone from the tear, the sound is mangled by the journey through her throat.

By the time she reaches the place she needs to be and kneels, the tsunami has already risen. It rushes for Leviathan's flank, faster and higher than the sea-wyrm - a great, flowing, inescapable precipice of blackness.

Sstheness picks each piece of what was once robe from her sigil-thorns, crumples each tightly and throws it. Each toss is a weary convulsion. With each her knees judder

liquidly further down the slimy fell of sea-wyrm. None of the rags reach far. But each lands on the sloping scales and rolls on and down and finally into the Shadow.

#

As the third rag disappeared the tsunami halted, poised over Leviathan, blotting out the stars. Then, as Sstheness watched, from the arching crest of the wave fell three drips of Shadow. They fell beside the Shrike Wall.

Sstheness dug the sigil-thorns of her hands into the sea-wyrm and began to climb. By the time she looked up again there were three robed and cowled figures, hunched like ancient fears, beside the Shrike Wall.

She continued to climb, clawing and slathering and gasping her way up.

#

Her savaged throat has almost closed now, but blood still dribs.

#

She looked up again, peering at the Shrike Wall as if each spike was a pierced prophecy. There was no wind over the Shadow, but the impaled cadavers undulated.

#

The scars on her body burn. She loves how they burn.

#

One of the cowled figures raised an arm. The tsunami began to fall.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Gel writhes and thrashes on the dragonmouth causey. Spittle erupts from his mouth and slithers across the gneiss. His spine whips and convulses, cracks on the stone.

The fog still swathes him, his sight, his hearing, a cataract over existence, a concentration of mystery. His being is fastened onto a single sense - an awareness of where he ends and Bloodbane begins. The sense of separation is entrained with dismay and pain. Is this what he wished for? What he hungered for? He wonders when he began not to love the indescribably ancient labrys, its long slender helve and sweeping crescents of blade lying so near on the edge of the causey.

It has taken with it the screams. Silence bathes him like darkness, or blood, or fear. For a moment he imagines he hears the bone echoes and meat echoes of Leviathan flitting through his torment. He listens again, in shreds of memory, to the ululation of alarm that raked through the sea-wyrm when the Phoenix Prey invaded its passages. He strains to keep the shrill and yearning and furious sound inside him. Anything but the silence.

And then the fog vanishes. Sight crashes back. And touch. His clawing, floundering fingers have brushed a razor, a sweeping crest of keenness. Bloodbane.

And his long lithe body snaps away, a rolling, squirming, jerking, kicking, howling, gasping, frenzy. Bone glancing on stone. Vision maelstroming. The causey. The dragonmouth roof. Colossal veins of flame streaking up into the air. He glimpses fragments of all these as he writhes and tumbles, and one thing more. A woman. No longer young. Dark bristling hair jabbed with silver. Gel's Dream-ward. Staring.

Gel keeps rolling. The next glimpse of the Dream-ward allows him a suspicion, the next confirmation - that she is not staring at him but at something else. When he stops tumbling he comes to rest on the far side of the causeway. There, on the very other edge of the gneiss, he sees what transfixes the Dream-ward. He gazes into the dragonflames, the burning whites, the brilliant yellows, the languorous reds. Among all the flurrying colours there is one more. Something new. A single still blue flame like a gigantic lambent fang.

The Dream-ward breaks her stare. For a moment her eyes meet Gel's and anguish settles in them. Then she wrenches them away. She runs down the stone dragon-tongue, stumbling towards the dragonthroat and the city beyond.

Sprawled on the causeway edge Gel watches, confused, disbelieving. He raises a numbed and bruised arm and reaches out to her until she disappears into the distance. Only then does his arm fall back, not onto stone this time but emptiness.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

In his chamber in the archive, Rorn still dreamed.

#

In his dream he again walks in the perpetually dark wastes of Nightwake, his realm. He feels the ash bunching beneath the heels of his boots. He's reached the point which a Waste-Ranger will always reach, when setting out from an impregnable noctilucous mansion. It is the instant when the last of the restless uranic gargoyles squatting on its roof abandons its last luminous glimmer to the distance. It is when, utterly blind under the moonless and star-forsaken sky, Waste-Rangers know they are home.

Rorn knows he is home.

He has even remembered his name.

The dwellers in the noctilucous mansions have no conception of real night since the Dark March into sanctuary. At best all they know is the pathetic enervated twilight when the generators damp for sleep. Nor can they imagine silence, the windborne boundless silence of the wastes. Instead they chatter.

Rorn has attended their banquets and yawned through their chatter. The pretty compliments strewn amongst themselves, glittering phrases wound round perfumed necks, brightly coloured words bedazzling the ear.

But now, watching as the last scintilla of light fails in the distance, he waits for the feeling that always comes. The perception of something lost, something passed, something gone. But that passes in a moment. He turns, pulls his heart tight, and plunges on into the wastes. Only the Waste-Rangers can do this, this scourging of feelings. Only the Waste-Rangers must do this. In the blackness between mansions, emotion and imagination kill. The blackness breeds them into fear. Once the fear takes root the whispers come. On the wind. Out of nothing. Then even a Waste-Ranger is lost.

And so Rorn plunges on, unwaveringly, unerringly, across a land where even the gods have become unrecognizable and unknowable gibbous things.

And on.

The only concession he allows his introspection as he travels is a relished smatter of a sense of transgression. It warms him under the cloaked sky.

And on.

Until he skids to a stop. Teetering. Confused. On the brink of a chasm. He looks down. The shifting depths at his feet have no place on Nightwake. They do not move with the elegant entwining of umber and magenta and cyan and ochre and celadon of the mansions' prophecy vats. This darkness twitches. Slithers. Judders. Is not darkness at all.

In his dream, Rorn recalls the pit in the cold candled chamber with the serrated throne in Leviathan. The murk of that pit was not darkness either.

Nightwake's blackness is vast but utter. Clean with utterness. But the blackness of the chasm before him, the blackness of the pit in the chamber in Leviathan, the blackness that oceans the realm that the Phoenix carried him to... that is no darkness but a compound of many darkneses. There are currents within it, nuances and glimpses and eddies and echoes.

And at last Rorn realizes, understands, the difference between darkness and shadow.

The darkness is all around him, full of prowling things, but the Shadow is not just enchased at his feet but is within him, prowling within him.

He feels it, searingly chill, twisting and arching and uncoiling. He reaches for it.

#

In his bed in his chamber in the archive, Rorn stirred again. He tossed suddenly. A deep moan escaped. His watchful self-chosen Dream-ward, still holding him, tightened her arms. His legs jerked, threatening to dislodge the bedcovers.

Still lost in sleep, his hands began to tremble and reach for his face, for the scar on his face.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

In the archive Harnak, the shape shedder of Aftermath; Zantalliz, the Moon-Ghost turned Shadow-Dancer of Voyage; Gemmored, the swordsman of Darkling; sat around the onyx table of convocation with the archivist Phariane.

It was morning. Outside, Dragonkeep was still. Stilled while the Phoenix Prey had been away.

There were no more fires stolen from braziers or from the dragonmouth itself. No more fires were lit for malice. Once, not so many days ago, a stolen dragonfire had been spilled in the amphitheatre. The act had been thought of as nothing less than blasphemy. Now the Blade-ward no longer even guarded the braziers. The youth bands who had drunk and insulted the Phoenix Prey and ran riot, had drifted apart. Those who had blamed Phariane for the coming of the Phoenix Prey and all it heralded had forgiven or at least fallen silent. And those who refused to believe that the Phoenix Prey signalled the beginning of the end had long since succumbed and admitted the truth.

"The Uroboros is coming," said Phariane.

#

Harnak sits calmly. She finds it amusing that no one notices that the tiny shifts of skin tone or bone contour or eye colour have stopped. She's clothed herself in a new robe.

Beneath it, her old scars and the new ones from the barbed whip still swathe across the skin of her back. Both old and new are still open, damp if not flowing. The silk sticks to and stings her back, but no blood seeps through.

The desire to kill Phariane has receded but still pulses. Harnak balances it against other desires inside herself as she listens.

#

"Leviathan will soon reach Dragonkeep," Phariane went on. "The hejira is nearly done."

#

Zantalliz nods. Fear and darkness are still met in him, as they were in the battle with Annihilation in the sky above the Shadow. He allows himself to want the Uroboros. He also acquiesces to concern for Phariane. Both feelings are meldings of fear and darkness, and also something more. But not the same something.

#

Phariane glanced up at the next level of the archive. "The fifth Phoenix Prey is still bedbound and broken. Gel is nowhere to be found."

#

Gemmored knows where Gel is to be found, but says nothing. The others around the table have eaten. They have bathed and put on clean robes, even though remnants of Shadow still streaks their bodies. But Gemmored has sat at the table since early that morning, without food, without sleep. Dark and red stains grime his face and vein-raked arms, the chest of his cuirass. His bare unpommelied sword lies across his thighs. Doom's gem gleams in the socket of his eye. He can still almost glimpse something through it - blood, and darkness, and something more.

#

Phariane pauses as a bowl of seeds is placed in the middle of the table. She takes a few, caraway, luffa, poppy, pomegranate, and swallows them. They are a symbol of the time. "Time," she says, "for the last convocation." But as she begins, a shout comes from the stairway and the words stay lodged heavily in her throat as they have since the Phoenix Prey came.

#

All those sitting around the table turned. Gel's Dream-ward, breathless, torture-mouthed, staggered across the mezzanine. Too exhausted for deference, she slammed her hands down on the onyx. Her arms propped her, head hanging.

After a while, speech began to come. "The dragonmouth." And soon after that, "The blue flame has returned."

The Phoenix Prey looked to Phariane for explanation. But all she did was stand. All she said was, "Come."

She led Harnak and Gemmored and Zantalliz down to the floor of the archive's atrium and towards the entrance. Then she turned to Harnak. "You must stay," she said, and looked toward the ornate bronze door leading down into the vaults and finally the glimmering cavern. She placed a hand on Harnak's shoulder.

#

Harnak looks into her eyes and sees them still cold, but the action is that of another Phariane. Not the cool and even haughty Phariane from when the Phoenix Prey first arrived. Not the woman distanced by her archivist's duties, weighed down by them. Not the woman haunted by the harper, his coming and his vanishing. Perhaps the woman from the cavern below the archive, singing to the silver blood from the fountain?

#

"If we don't return, the battle will come without us," Phariane tells Harnak. "Guard the ovary chambers."

#

This is the first time Harnak has heard the term for the vaults below the archive. It may well be that the dank amphoraed vaults are shaped from the spawning parts of the dragon. But she knows the name means more. She remembers the bowl of seeds placed on the table of convocation. She remembers her Dream-ward's words about the contents of the amphorae - life in abeyance, awaiting the outcome of the Uroboros.

Phariane's trust is vertiginous.

Harnak manages to nod.

#

As Phariane watched Harnak slip through the bronze door, Zantalliz spoke. "What of the last convocation?"

"There may be no convocation," said Phariane.

"Does that mean there may be no Uroboros?" asked Zantalliz.

#

Phariane wonders. The blue flame has furnished her with a chance for the words of the last convocation, still waiting in her throat, to die there. A chance for her to discover what she and all the previous archivists have sought: a way to put back the Uroboros, perhaps forever. She feels no hope, but a kindling of something like a scrape of ice.

Perhaps.

But as she leads Zantalliz and Gemmored out of the bluestone archive, through the portico and down onto the vast esplanade, she hears something coming from the distant forest. The wolves have begun to howl.

Chapter Seventy

Phariane led the two Phoenix Prey through the dragonthroat. This time, it was silent. The gneiss bridge stretching into the mouth above the flames was the same. The flames still raged, as terrific and soaring as ever, but soundlessly. Even though Phariane had no need to shout now, she said nothing.

As they came near the end of the causeway, they could see Gel. His head and shoulders were hanging below the edge of the gneiss. His ribcage, ridged high beneath his jehad swaddlings as his body bent back, was still unmoving.

#

Phariane steps slowly toward him. Gel's Dream-ward has told her how she came to the dragonmouth to find him. How, before seeing the blue flame, she had found him.

Because of what she had seen she has not returned here with the archivist and Zantalliz and Gemmored. She had, she sobbed, seen Gel dying.

#

But as Phariane moved forward, Gel rose. His shoulders and head and finally arms leisurely lifted up. His ghost-fine mane was singed. In his hands was the long haft of Bloodbane. He grinned.

Then he spoke. "Is this silence a herald of the Uroboros?"

Then, finally, Phariane spoke. "No," she said. She gestured to the blue flame, beautiful and lambent and still, in the midst of the restless forest of other plumes. "The dragon always falls dumb when the blue flame appears."

She and Zantalliz and Gemmored and Gel moved to the edge of the causey closest to the new plume. Ethereal sapphire. It hovered just a few feet away, but there was no cantilever strip of jet leading into it as they led into the red flames. "Yellow is the flame of light," she recited, "white of heat, red is the cleanser, the unShadower..."

"And blue?" said Zantalliz.

"Blue is the flame of rapture," said Phariane.

"What is the purpose," said Gemmored.

"It takes," said Phariane. "It transports. It is the carrier."

"A means of escape?" asked Gel, with a start of amused interest, "from the Uroboros?"

Phariane shook her head. "The blue plume always calls back those who travel through its gate."

"But where does the gate open?" asked Zantalliz.

"Into Leviathan?" asked Gel.

Phariane shook her head again, and turned to the three Phoenix Prey. "Much further," she said, "though not as far."

"Other realms?" asked Gel, no longer amused.

"Any realm where dragons abide," said Phariane.

"Living or dead?" asked Gel.

"Even when a dragon's body turns to stone and gem that dragon still lives," murmured Zantalliz, "as long as its fire still burns."

"A dragon is fire," said Phariane.

"My people kept their own archive," said Zantalliz.

#

He remembers books bound in scollop shell and tablets of bone ledged among reef coral, browsed by rays and sharks, wandered by sea stars and crabs.

#

"Much was written of dragons," he went on, "among which was that each dragon has many heads."

Gel laughed. A shriek. It speared the cavernous quiet of the dragonmouth. "And I have only noticed one," he said.

"The fire is the true head," said Phariane. "And that fire is spread over many worlds, housed in the maw of a different sky-wyrm in each different realm."

"So the jaws of Dragonkeep," rumbled Gemmored, "the Beckoning Gate, is a gate that does open after all, in a way."

"When the key can be found to unlock it," nodded Phariane, turning once more to the blue plume. "It appears from time to time, and every time a party is led by the archivist into another other realm."

"If not to escape then why?" asked Gel.

"Here in Dragonkeep we grow and rear our own food. But there's one thing we can't husband."

#

Gel remembers the denizens of Leviathan suckling on the weepings of the sea-wyrm's stillbirth walls. He smiles. "Water," he says.

#

"We crush and drink the juice of fruits," Phariane replied. "But to replenish the city's water, it must be brought from the rivers of other realms."

"But why does the archivist go?" said Gel.

"Because they are the archivist," murmured Zantalliz.

Gel shot him a questioning look.

"There are books, scrolls, tablets, writings of knowledge in most realms," said Phariane. "While the others hunt out water, the archivist looks for lore."

"More stories?" said Gel. "Does Dragonkeep need more stories?"

"Not more," said Phariane. "All realms have their own legends, but all realms also share the same tales."

Gel shook his head. His mane wafted uneasily. "Why do you want stories you already have?"

"The tellings are different," said Phariane. "It's the tellings that Dragonkeep's archivists and scholars have always scrutinized, comparing names, studying what is the same and what is almost the same and what is found in some tales and missing in others. Chronicles, aetiologies, cosmogonies, eschatologies... Myths, matters, cycles... Tales of beginnings, of battles and wars, of endings.

"Particularly," she went on, "tales of endings. We look for clues, hints, ways of holding back the Uroboros."

"Why would other realms know of the Uroboros?" said Gel.

#

Gemmored speaks this time. His new eye glimmers. He suspects Zantalliz knows too, but Gemmored's glacial voice is the one that says it. "Uroboros comes to all realms in turn. The name changes but the end of all things is unavoidable fate."

#

"The harper used to talk about fate," said Gel, and Phariane winced and dropped her head.

"Not all endings are the same," she murmured. "Some are as much victories as defeats."

"So the blue flame offers a kind of victory?" said Gemmored.

"If it can be found," said Phariane.

"Will the search be through blood?" asked Gel.

"And darkness?" asked Gemmored.

Flames tremored on their faces, darting hammerings of light.

"History is often blood," said Phariane.

"And legend is often darkness," said Zantalliz.

Gel turned to Gemmored and extended his labrys toward a red flame, one of the cleansers. Shadow rills still swarmed along his arm, weaving in and out of his jehad swaddlings. Similar rills coiled over Gemmored's stained cuirass, his blood-grimed face. "Will you cleanse yourself before the journey?" asked Gel. Gemmored said nothing. Gel leaned his head closer to Gemmored's. "Shadow to the bone," he whispered.

And he leapt from the causey into the blue flame and vanished.

Gemmored stood, watched, glacial, specks of Gel's spittle glistening on his face. Then he leapt too.

Zantalliz slid a foot to the brink of the causey in preparation, but Phariane put a hand on his shoulder. He turned and she slid her hand down to his hand, drew him away from the edge. "No," she said, "not you."

She backed along the causey. Her arm stretched out. Her fingers slid across Zantalliz' palm. When fingertips touched fingertips Zantalliz followed her, sustaining the touch. "If there is an archive in the other realm," he said, and she nodded, "I can help you search."

She kept moving back, looking into his strange eyes. "There is still a chance that what might be found might be found here. I need you to search here."

"In the archive? Where every text has been poured over by generations of archivists and scholars?"

#

Zantalliz stares into Phariane's eyes, but knows that her feet have stepped off the very end of the tongue of gneiss into air. Onto air. He follows her.

"There are other texts," says Phariane. "Texts which only a few, even among archivists, have had the skill to study."

Zantalliz hears something ahead, something murmuring, and he understands. The cavern is not entirely silent. There are other texts in Dragonkeep. Secrets written on air rather than page, in voice rather than ink.

He delves more deeply into Phariane's eyes and finds nothing, and understands something else. Her hand drops away from his and he allows the touch to break. He nods.

He walks past her, into the raging fires of the dragonmouth, into the ethereal archive of sounds housed in the flames. The voices enfold him.

#

Phariane steps back onto the causey and walks back to the blue plume. She thinks of Zantalliz' lips on hers, his body against hers in the silvered cavern below the archive. But she does not look back to watch him glide deeper into the dragonfire, does not want to. She wants to be shamed at her betrayal of his care. Wants to feel pity for Gel's Dream-ward who abandoned her charge to bring the news of the blue flame to the archive, who Phariane last saw slumped at the table of convocation with suicide in her eyes. She wants to burn and care that she burns. But no. Zantalliz couldn't give her that. Not all the Wolf-wards she's bedded over the years, not all the flames here in the dragonmouth, could give her that.

There is nothing inside her now but a cold lingering sweetness like a harp's whisper, like forsaken storms.

She looks at the blue flame. What she is about to do she will not do for the sake of hope.

She leans forward, lifting her arms, feet tilting over the edge of the causey.

A distant call reaches her from the dragon's throat. Leviathan has been sighted. But even if she could halt her dive into the blue flame she doubts she would.

Chapter Seventy-One

Sstheness has crawled her way back through the bone and meat echoes, through the barbed, glistening passageways of Leviathan. Her torn throat has closed entirely now. The tears have resolved into scabs that resemble the sigils on the fingerstalls that made the tears. All that bleed now are her hands and knees. She has pulled herself over snapping carpets of skulls away from the roar of the Shadow tsunami. Sstheness knows there is no stillbirth wynd of the labyrinths deep enough to escape the sound, but she crawls on.

One last twist around one last corridor, and it stands before her. A glistening black barrier. A swollen knot of stone.

Sky-wyrms have hearts of fire. Sea-wyrms, like Leviathan, have this.

She drags herself to it, climbs against it, flattens hands and belly and breasts against it. She can feel the pulse of Leviathan. The familiar sullen ghost of a heartbeat. Is it faster now? The motion of Leviathan is different now. Not ponderous but driven.

She smears her cheek against the chill and hardness of the knotwall and its curve distends still further. Top to bottom, a split appears. Sstheness sucks in the fetor from within. It bitterly delights her. The cleft opens into a gelid hollow darkness. This is a special darkness, different to any other found in Leviathan. A darkness which welcomes the eye - transpicuous. She is about to press against the cleft, knowing how it will soften, widen, allow her through, when she catches sight of a movement in the corridor. An undulation on the floor. A squirm in the dimness.

She slides off the knot and reaches for it. It twists sluggishly away but Sstheness' fingertips are already on the handle. Her sigil-thorns curl as her hand closes on it and picks it up. The slim blade continues to weave in the air.

Phariane's kris.

Sstheness holds it in front of her face. She can smell her sister on it. She turns it and clasps the blade between her lips. Can taste her too. She stays there awhile, supine, until she again becomes aware of the roar of the tsunami, and a distant call winding nearer through the labyrinths.

She staggers up and back against the fissured knot. The cleft splays. As she slips inside she hears that Dragonkeep has been sighted.

#

When does the Uroboros begin? Some of the books and scrolls and tablets of the archives across the realms maintain it is the moment when the tsunami begins to fall.

But in a way it has always been falling. It began to fall from the moment it first reared, since one of the three robed and cowed figures on the sea-wyrm's back raised an arm.

It's behind the sea-wyrm now, rather than at its side. Leviathan, longer than a city, has continued to plough on, beneath the arching of Shadow. The tsunami, longer than fifty cities, pushes it on by its fall.

Its perpetual fall.

It perpetually falls as Leviathan perpetually rots.

Now Dragonkeep is sighted.

A distant nub of jade jaggling the smooth horizon of dark sky laid hermetic against dark ocean.

Leviathan pushes nearer, closing the distance between the two wyrms as never before through the tsunami's urge. Leviathan approaches Dragonkeep from the rear. There is no wide glittering line of light beckoning, no crimson-yellow flames flickering between bared dragon teeth the size of spires to chase. But the wyrms are linked by deeper forces than sight. Gradually Dragonkeep's immense tail, climbing to even more immense trunk, becomes a mountain. Jades scales become the size of galleys.

And now the tsunami truly falls.

Chapter Seventy-Two

In his bed in his chamber in the archive, Rorn's fingers trembled each side of the faint white scar on his face. They pulled. His Dream-ward straddled him, clutched his wrists, resisting. She whimpered but had no more strength to spare her voice to shout for aid.

Rorn was silent. His eyes were still closed. His fingers sank deep into his cheek. The skin each side of the scar stretched. The faint indent between eye and mouth was no longer pale but livid.

The tongue of yellow dragonflame in the brazier glowed gently.

The tainted blanket from Leviathan that had swathed Rorn on the journey to Dragonkeep lay on the floor.

Desperation edged into the Dream-ward's whimper.

The scar began to tear.

#

Scrawls of sense touch what remains of Rorn's mind. Sobbing... Fire and darkness... Something passed, something gone... Something slithering beneath his face...

And he feels a shudder of joy as he realizes that he has again forgotten his name.

#

And the scar burst open.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Leviathan leaps from the fall of the tsunami, spurted forward by the force. The Shadow is no longer mirror-still obsidian, but all whipping flickering movement. Leviathan drives through it. The great wrinkled mouth in the smooth, eyeless snout opens, then closes on Dragonkeep's massive tail.

Some of the books and scrolls and tablets of the archives across the realms maintain that this is the moment when the Uroboros truly begins.

And on the top of the sea-wyrm's leagues of decaying back, the torn, headless bodies impaled on the shrike wall go mad.

And within the sea-wyrm all the skulls cobbling its labyrinths open their bony jaws and shriek.

And within those same windings and within the varices, cysts and tumours that are Leviathan's chambers, the members of the Death'shead Cadre halt. From deep inside the eye-sockets of their skull helms, below the skull beneath the skin, below the steel beneath the skull, something begins to glow.

And within Dragonkeep a tremor passes through the city. It shakes the forest, the cropfields, it shivers the city, the wide dolomite-flagged avenues and wynds, the sardonyx plazas, colonnades, ramps, tells, the braziers both empty and enflamed, and the arches petroglyphed with sinuous and angular stories. Cracks appear. Shards fall. The shock is not just the ripple of vibration of Leviathan's jaw closing on Dragonkeep's tail. It is something deeper. Something ancient.

Even the great amphitheatre quivers.

Even the archive.

In the moist dark of the lowest underground seed chamber, the dense array of glazed amphorae judder against each other. Harnak the shape-shedder lays his hand on the nearest and looks up.

Above the vaults, above the tegular floor of the atrium, above the mezzanine and the table of convocation and the cloistered chambers of the archive, above the purple porphyry of Dragonkeep's roof, the dragon's jade scales strain onward.

For a time the sky-wyrm slides on over the Shadow. The sea-wyrm, locked on its tail, is pulled along. The narrow whole is longer than two cities. Jade scales the size of galleys give way to decaying scales of charred flesh, just as huge. Within the sky-wyrm's mouth, the flickering crimson-yellow flames between bared teeth the size of spires, flare even brighter. The Beckoning gate the people of Dragonkeep call it. A sign to Mariners on the Shadow, a call home. Now it beckons even more strongly. But not to ships.

On the back of Leviathan, the spine of the shrike wall still squirms with the frenzied throes of the impaled, from the nearly whole cadavers to the petty oriflammes of flesh. Beside the bony spikes only one of the three robed and cowled figures remains. Now it raises an arm.

And now the mountainous head of the sky-wyrm, the hollow amphitheatre eyes, the snout ending in the Beckoning Gate, begins to move. Begins to turn.

And the rest of the body follows. For the first time since it died, since the last of man discovered it and founded a city within its petrifying bones and tissues, the dragon twists.

And the sea-wyrm, too, begins to turn. Its blackened length begins to curl sluggishly, like some vast rictus. Its tail begins to turn toward the dragon's head.

And the dragon's chalcedony teeth the size of spires begin to part. And the fire within the mouth, fallen silent, begins again to roar.

Within the mouth Zantalliz hears it. He walks on air and through flames still, musing, listening to the voices of the ethereal archive. The flames don't burn. He's a Shadow-Dancer, and fire and shadow, after all, are much the same. It is a lore once set down in his people's books. Shadow-Dancer and then Moon-Ghost, they would read the secrets written in the blood, in the air, under the sea, in the sobs of sirens and the murmurs of krakens. His heritage allows him to hear the words spoken here too, to understand that the echoes are not so much echoes as palimpsests of other and more distant voices. He searches for a word, a truth, a key, a meaning, to even now turn back the Uroboros. One voice – perhaps the same, perhaps different, tells him that he has been betrayed, that he should kill his betrayer. He continues in his task. Listening. Pondering.

Now the flames erupt into deafening thunder. But even though the words are drowned Zantalliz can still hear them, like the sorrowing of a siren or rumble of a kraken an ocean away. All he says is one word.

"Phariane."

Chapter Seventy-Four

Phariane is fire. Blue fire. Cold and infinite. She flickers through realm after realm, raptures as many times before, knowing this to be the last time. She tumbles through thunderous cavern after cavern of inferno, part of each, each part of her.

When she reaches her destination she knows.

She spits out of the final cavern into the day. Above her the sky is wings and scale - the sky is dragon. Each cavern on the journey has been the mouth of a dragon, each inferno the same inferno, a step on the way. And then the sky-wyrm is gone, vast as aurorae, all fury and sunrise and corona and starlight, soaring for the horizon.

Still falling, Phariane realizes that the pluck of sadness she has always felt at this sight is gone. Something else lost.

Then her shoulder hits stone. She rolls. She stands in a new world for the last time.

#

The stone this time was limestone. The realm was karst as far as she could see, a shattered pavement of clints, runnels, pits, pans. A few trees tore the flatness of the landscape. They jabbed out of the fissured limestone and splintered into barren branches, gnarled sculpts of brittle lightning. The wind twitched them.

#

The wind.

No wind blows over the Shadow. Phariane remembers it has always disconcerted those who've raptured from Dragonkeep into other realms - even her. And always the wind is different. It's anxious here, shifting, gusty. The wind is always the first thing Phariane notes.

#

The first thing Gemmored noted of this realm were the clouds. Bruised omens of storm.

#

For Gel it was the light. The bleakness of it.

#

The second thing either became aware of was the other.

#

Then Phariane becomes aware of them.

#

She stood between them.

They stood apart, not close but not shouting distance. Gemmored's blood and Shadow splattered bear-pelt ruffled in the wind. His great sword, similarly soiled, he held out double-handed in front. On guard. Towards Gel.

Gel stood as though on the brink of pouncing: hair whipping about like rips of quicksilver, the slender haft of his twin-bladed ax held at a mocking angle. Towards Gemmored.

#

Phariane looks from one to the other. For the first time she wonders if not one but two of the Phoenix Prey might've been infected by the Nightmare Cadre, that both of them may be destined to betray Dragonkeep and decide the Uroboros. If one were to kill the other... If each were to kill the other...

#

Then something dark flickered nearby.

A crow had perched itself on a barren tree branch. Two jagged shapes fused.

Gemmored lowered Doom. There was the merest drift of the blade across his body, as if the old instinct for sheathing it still remained even though the pale scabbard was gone.

Gel let Bloodbane's pole swing down.

#

Phariane feels death recede. Breathes again.

#

"What do we look for?" smiled Gel. "Water or lore?"

"Lore," said Phariane.

"Where?" said Gemmored.

Phariane turned to look into the flat fissured distance.

#

She has no foreknowledge of what she will see - only that she will see it.

#

Gemmored and Gel also turned. No castle, or temple. No amphitheatre. No tower. But there was a building. Not close but not too distant for sight. It was broad rather than tall, a kind of flat-topped mound. The sides glimmered.

"It bares no resemblance to your archive," said Gemmored.

"Nevertheless," said Phariane. She began to walk and the other two followed. Gemmored lifted Doom easily in one massive hand, resting the stained flat on his shoulder. Gel swung Bloodbane lightly onto his.

"Do you think you'll find it?" he asked Phariane. "Victory?"

"No one ever has," she replied. "Every archivist has searched for a way to postpone the Uroboros, to hold back the tide of Shadow... Something hidden in a book, a scroll, a tablet, in the tales told of the last Uroboros."

"So it's happened before?" said Gel. His stride almost faltered.

"There're such tales in my realm," said Gemmored, "in Darkling."

"Not in mine," muttered Gel sourly, almost angrily. "In Gnomon such things are held in contempt."

"Some realms eschew story at times," said Phariane. "It's a way of denying the truth."

"The truth?" snapped Gel.

"That all realms travel toward the final battle," she replied. "All realms are part of the Wheel, and the Wheel is turned by the Shadow, carrying each realm in its time to the Uroboros."

"There's no Wheel in the cosmogonies of Darkling," said Gemmored.

"The Wheel is a symbol," said Phariane. "With some realms other symbols are chosen."

Gel hawked and spat on the limestone. "The harper said he was a Wheelwalker. Is that what he was? Someone who moved between realms without the aid of a Phoenix or a blue dragon's flame?"

Phariane spoke as if forcing breath into words. "He was. He is."

#

Within her, over and over, the only echo of feeling left in her, the sweetness of harpsong...

#

"He also spoke," went on Gel...

"If vaguely," added Gemmored...

"Of fate. Is that what archivists really search for? Prophecy?"

There was silence for a while as they walked.

"There is no prophecy," said Phariane eventually. "Because nothing is certain. All there is, all there can be, are stories of what has been, because many things that have happened will happen again. Not all things, not always in the same ways, but always the Shadow rises. Always a final battle is reached."

"And then?" said Gemmored.

"Each realm faces the Uroboros in turn," she went on. "Each time the darkness is thrown back. The realm is laid waste. Its people devastated. But the darkness recedes, and the realm is freed - but freed only to take its place at the lowest point of the Wheel. Only to wait for the Shadow to rise again. That is the cycle."

"So the darkness is always thrown back," mused Gel, something puzzling nagging his words.

"Some writings seem to say not so much thrown back," Phariane replied quickly. "Rather that the realm passes through Shadow to a new beginning. At least to begin the cycle anew. But all agree that the tide has never been turned."

"So why did the harper say to me that destiny is fragile?" Gel went on, tone prodding and uneasy. "And why have we come here to find a way to postpone a battle that always comes and that is always won?"

And then the three reached their destination.

The archive was like a dolmen. Pillars of brick raised it off the limestone and a timbered ramp lead into the building. It was a rotunda. The sides had no corners. The walls were slightly angled sections. They sheened because they were glass.

They were stained glass. Tall rectangular windows allowed no views inside. Instead they depicted latticed multicoloured images, vistas and figures and battles in pigment, all at the same time unfamiliar and familiar, hinting at meaning, much like the petroglyphs on the arches of Dragonkeep.

#

Gel stiffens. More stories.

#

The three moved up the ramp.

"The ground is solid and high," said Gemmored. "Why is the archive raised on piles?"

"I don't know," said Phariane.

The metal door at the top of the ramp was wide and twin-valved. It was unnaturally thin, almost bract. It swung inward smoothly.

"Why is there no lock?" said Gemmored.

The interior was one spacious chamber. Like the karst outside there was no sign of human life.

"Has it been abandoned, then?" asked Gemmored, his voice no longer battered by the wind. Here it resounded. Cupped and held by the harsh interior surfaces of the rotunda rather than flung away.

Gel's voice was the same. He brought up the haft end of Bloodbane, pressed it gently to the cleft between Phariane's jaw and neck. "I asked, why bother to postpone the Uroboros." Then he smiled. "And what could you find here to do it?" There were no books or scrolls or tablets to be seen. The rotunda was empty except for an array of slim pedestals on each of which perched an elegant, delicately incised or stippled crystalline vase. "Where are your words to turn the tide?" Gel began to laugh.

He stopped as something smashed against the haft of his labrys, and Bloodbane whirled away from Phariane's throat. Gel let the pole spin about his fingers and then brought it to a halt.

Gemmored's sword blade was poised double-handed in front of his cuirass.

Gel smiled again. His fingers twitched and Bloodbane spun again, the twin blades arcing at Gemmored's head. The swordsman snapped up and angled his blade and the ax sheered over him. His face stayed cold.

Then it began.

Gemmored and Gel silently wove between the pedestals, Doom and Bloodbane a tapestry of flicker.

#

The stained glass of the rotunda colours the bleak light of this realm as it passes into the archive, but leaches what strength it possesses. Yet Gemmored and Gel move through the dimness without stumble across the tiled floor. Gemmored is broader, but still surefooted, the slenderer Gel gliding between the pedestals and crystal vases. Both could simply smash their way through the battle, but this is as much a pitting of skill as of power.

Gemmored switches from one to two hands, Gel stays with one.

Doom arcs and thrusts and stabs and angles and cuts.

Bloodbane arcs and swoops and whirls and soars and spins and sweeps. Now and then it scythes through one of the exquisite vases, but purely through its wielder's design. Gel relishes the joy of the shatter, makes it a part of the rhythm of the battle.

When ax blade meets sword blade, a sound like a metallic snarl sheers away with the spark.

Gemmored is still a supple, cuirassed, bear-pelted berg. But Doom's once sleek chevroned watering is a crazed ruin. Where the red gem formed its pommel is only a dewclaw of antler bone jutting from the end of the handle. Gemmored is aware of the damaged balance of his weapon with every movement. The forces that Doom has gathered with each slaying are still within him since the gem is not lost but socketed in his face instead of the sword. He remembers battles long gone where the martial skill of those he slew entered him, merged with his own. He remembers the elation. The evil that entered him at the same time could always be borne as long as he could finally sheathe Doom in its scabbard and free himself. But the scabbard is lost. And the things Gemmored has slain since its loss have yielded far more evil than skill. And even in the midst of the battle with Gel, the gem still beguiles and distracts him with sights just beyond his grasp.

Blood and darkness and fear.

Blood and darkness and fear.

And something more.

Gemmored still moves as one with his sword, like a war-wise storm. His wards flow into attacks, but Gel is all flow, defence and attack all at once.

One of Bloodbane's slaying crescents sweeps across Gemmored's throat and crimson ribbons after the blade. The battle flickers on. Gemmored's face is still cold - one eye the grey of frosted steel, one crimson and unfaceted.

Again ax blade meets sword blade. Again the clash is a metallic snarl, and sparks stab the dimness, glimmer over the glass of the vases.

It's this sound that brings Phariane forward.

She should rush, she knows, but she simply walks steadily toward Gel and Gemmored. As she nears them Bloodbane sweeps through another vase and shards of crystal spray at her. Her sheer cataphract of otherworldly mail is still in Dragonkeep. She wears a sleeveless tunic. Her right arm turns red with cuts. She doesn't care.

It's not through eagerness to end the battle that she doesn't wince at the pain. Nor because of the urgent need to explain that she's seen the secret of the rotunda. Nor through any wish to stave off the Uroboros. Not through any desire. She has come to this realm

because this is what the archivist does. She watches herself performing what the archivist does. She watches herself doing what others have done before, moving through the Shadow Cycle. Phariane's arm is raked with tears. But Phariane is dead. She imagines her sister, Sstheness, her entire body covered in scars, curled up in the darkness of the heart of Leviathan, shivering with ecstasy, shivering with dread, febrile with anticipation.

Gemmored and Gel stop and turn to her as if their battle had never been.

#

"Bring the blades together again," said Phariane. Gemmored and Gel looked at her. "Over one of the vases."

Gemmored and Gel placed themselves either side of one of the pedestals. A glance between them, and warsword and labrys clashed again. Again the sound resounded through the rotunda. Phariane stared at the vase below the blades. The engraving on its surface shivered, then returned to the original design. Phariane nodded, and knelt before it.

She began to hum, softly, almost beyond softly, somewhere on an edge between breath and voice. The air began to vibrate. Phariane cupped her hands around the vase. It too began to hum. Those nearby also began to hum, then those near them, growing louder all the time, until the rotunda was alive with plangent shrill. The design on each vase began to stir, first to quiver, then to undulate like delicate tendrils.

Phariane stopped her hum. The silence spread from the vase in her hands to each of the others, until quiet was completely returned to the chamber. The engraving on each vase was also still, but the designs were no longer swirls or spirals or arabesques. They had reformed into other patterns. Logograms. They had become language.

"So it is an archive," said Gemmored.

"No leather or parchment," chuckled Gel. "He picked up a vase and juggled it carelessly. "No books or scrolls or tablets..."

Phariane came forward and pulled the vase from his hand and turned her back on him. She cradled it, gazing down at the writing on the smooth crystal as she walked away. "Is it here?" Gel called after her. "The secret? The words to turn back the Uroboros?"

Phariane gave no answer.

The wind blustered over the karst and jostled the stained glass windows.

#

Phariane listens to it. She has no answer for Gel, does not even know what she wishes the answer to be. Then she hears something picking its way through the wind. Numerous sharp clops tapping ominously on limestone.

And she knows then that Gel's question has lost all meaning. That the Uroboros has come.

Chapter Seventy-Five

Dragonkeep and Leviathan were fused now. They formed a single squamous torc of swirl.

Outside the immense circling atoll of wyrm the dragonremes of Dragonkeep had taken to the Shadow. Leviathan's quinqueremes had also launched. These had traditionally

emerged through the Beckoning Fear, the sea-wyrm's mouth, the puckered maw of mucus and Shadow. Finding that the mouth is now clamped to Dragonkeep's tail, the Corsairs have hacked open Leviathan's blackened side.

Both fleets struggled not just with each other but with the Shadow. No longer mirror-still obsidian. Now roiling phantom jet.

Prows sheared through rearing black spume. Oars floundered. Galleys heaved and lurched. Hulls clashed and caved. The agile speed of the dragonremes and the surging power of the quinqueremes were both useless, boarding planks and catapults equally futile. There could be no aiming of either.

Lamellar-jerked Corsairs leapt laughing from ship to ship. Some slipped, fell, and disappeared. The Shadow swallowed body and voice instantly. But as they fell even their screams were mocking. Otherworldly-mailed Sword-Mariners and wolves grimly met the Corsairs who managed their leap. Swords swept and thrust and wounded haphazardly as the decks jerked and rolled. They were slick too. Fluid fragments of Shadow flitted through the air like black spindrift.

And still the wyrms swirled.

Not only did they turn, they twisted. The shrike wall on Leviathan's back displayed the twinning. It was now a coil rather than a straight wall of spines. There were no more robed and hooded figures standing beneath them.

Inside the turning and twisting torc, the Shadow was neither mirror-still nor roiling.

Within the circling wyrms, the Shadow was an endlessly deep conical void, spinning far more wildly than Dragonkeep and Leviathan. A maelstrom of dark.

At its lost pinprick core, somewhere beyond distance, something was seething, convulsing like a swarm of talons, and beginning to climb.

Chapter Seventy-Six

Hooves stamped on the metal doors. The wide twin valves crashed inwards. The horse slid and clattered onto the smooth floor of the rotunda archive. Its rider yanked viciously on his reinless mount's mane to steady its frenzy. His brawny tattooed arm, above the bazuband, rippled with the strain.

But Gel was there already.

Bloodbane's blades sheared up through the horse's breastbone and into the rider's. Both ruined bodies shuddered to the floor. The manic paeon on the rider's lips faltered.

Gemmored was there too. He was past the corpses and on the ramp sloping down to the limestone. The next charging rider failed to reach the doors. As did the next. Blood began to soak the ramp. Gel joined Gemmored. Crimson erupted into the wind.

#

With each sweep or thrust Gemmored grows more familiar, more content, with Doom's flawed balance. The pommel gem nestles in his skull as if it has never rested anywhere else. Sword and swordsman more one than ever. As Doom reaps, the ancient wingless spasm beats through Gemmored's veins.

#

Gel moves like dancing razors. His time writhing on the dragonmouth causey, impaled on the agony of his separation from Bloodbane, is barely a memory now, hardly a smatter of unease amid his elation. Only the sour twitches of his lips, like slashes of cirrus in a desolate sky, betray the last remnants of fear.

#

Inside the archive Phariane still stands at the stained glass window. She watches the Wyrmsnod Cadre circling the rotunda as they once circled the dragonreme as it fled Leviathan. She remembers them emerging from the dark cavern of the sea-wyrm's mouth. Spat out. Distant shreds gradually becoming riders and horses. She recognizes the riders' ululating paeon. But the sound of the hoofbeats is new. The cadre is shod for Shadow. Shod with the daggersharp scabs which vein Leviathan's stillbirth halls. On Shadow they make no sound. Here the impact of scab on limestone lacks the clean ring of farrier metal. It is dull. Scuffed. Tainted.

Phariane imagines the same sound on the Dragonkeep causey in the dragonmouth as the cadre must have thundered along it, until coming to the blue flame. Until rider and mount must have flung themselves into it, one after another. Perhaps some jostled, slipped in their fury. Perhaps some fell into the other flames of the dragonmouth, the reds, the yellows, the burning whites. She hopes so.

As for the rest, they have found her and the remains of her Phoenix Prey even here. The Uroboros has begun, and the Wyrmsnod Cadre have brought it with them.

Presently she comes aware of something charnel behind her and turns.

Gemmored and Gel stand there. Both are splashed with fresh death. Their weapons also. What skin of Gel's not wound in his jehad swaddlings is the same colour, as if splashed from within. The archive's bract-thin doors are pulled shut. The Wyrmsnod Cadre have abandoned any attempt to enter, though Phariane can still hear their hoofbeats circling the rotunda.

"It's time," says Gemmored.

#

"For what?" said Phariane.

"The last convocation," said Gel.

"The last convocation has already begun," said Phariane.

"Then finish it," said Gel.

Phariane looked at Gemmored. He nodded.

There was a snap behind her. It was sharp and spidery. She spun. The window behind her, the window she'd just looked out from, was an image of a long-haired and sweeping-robed woman holding a star aloft on her palm. A piece of green glass, beside the robe, was cracked.

So was the piece next to it.

Then other snaps came, a venomous hail of snaps rushing from window to window. Crack after crack creviced the latticework of glass.

Phariane looked out again. The Wyrmsnod Cadre had unfurled their whips, their barbed whips, from the bazubands on their forearms. They had started to lash the windows as they had once lashed the dragonreme as it fled Leviathan.

As the hail went on, Phariane threaded her way through the pedestaled vases to the centre of the rotunda. Gemmored and Gel followed.

There was a circle of space in the centre. Phariane knelt on the tessellate floor, sat, pulled her legs crossed, and began.

"There are questions I have no answer for," she said softly.

Gel and Gemmored towered over her, like still, solemn golems.

"Why this archive is raised off the ground on pillars, why we found it deserted..."

One of the windows cracked by the Wyrmsod Cadre riders was struck again by one of the teeth barbed whips. Glass shattered this time. Fragments spilled onto the floor. The hail went on. The barbs struck the windows more fiercely. Phariane's head dropped. She cupped her hands behind her head, palms over her ears. Her lacerated arm still glistened with blood and splinters of vase crystal.

#

Gemmored looks down at her. His wounded neck scalds - a needle of burn drawn across his corded throat by the sweep of Gel's labrys. It echoes other wounds. The dagger thrown from the crowd in Dragonkeep's amphitheatre. His own sword piercing him in the chamber in Leviathan with the arcane maggot-faced creature. But these wounds, and the many before them, are nothing more than far, petering balefires.

His gemstone eye still haunts him with glimpses of secrets and promises.

Blood and darkness and fear.

Blood and darkness and fear.

Blood and darkness and fear and something more.

#

Phariane began to rock on the tiled archive floor.

#

Gel looks down at her. But he hears Bloodbane. The screams of the dead. The ax's slaying crescents have let epochs of blood, gathered countless souls. Now they have tasted Gemmored's. A snick of the swordsman's essence, pulled free with the ribbon of blood sliced from his throat. Gel can hear it, loves it, the voice of the snick, tainted as it is, mingling with the fragment of Gel's own essence held with all the rest. He can feel Bloodbane's growing thirst for the rest of Gemmored's song.

#

The siege went on. The barbs still lashed the archive windows. Brittle thunder. Spidery, staccato, circling thunder.

Phariane stopped rocking. She looked up at Gel.

"You asked me one question I can answer," she said. All three of them spoke the words. "Why have we come here to find a way to postpone a battle that always comes and that is always won?"

#

Phariane prepares to give the answer. The last answer to the last question of the last convocation of the last archivist of her Shadow Cycle. A cold panic calls to her but she knows it can never reach her. Phariane is dead. Even the sweetness of harpsong - for so long within her - even that is gone. She again imagines her sister, Sstheness, her entire

body covered in scars, curled up in the darkness of the heart of Leviathan, shivering with ecstasy, shivering with dread, febrile with anticipation.

And she decides there is one more thing to do after she answers Gel's question.

#

Pharlane held out her hand to him. "Give me your ax," she said. Gel frowned. She held out her other hand to Gemmored. "Give me your sword." Gemmored looked at Doom, then back at Pharlane.

"How old is your ax?" she said.

"Perhaps as old as my realm," said Gel, "old as Gnomon."

"Perhaps older," said Pharlane. Almost a sneer. "There are mentions of such weapons in my archive. Bloodbane may have been one of the tools which sculpted Gnomon's dragon into Gnomon's Dragonkeep at the end of a previous Shadow Cycle."

"Or slitting Gnomon's Leviathan," Gemmored added. Almost a sneer but for the depth of his voice.

"Your sword may be the same," said Pharlane. "Even gods may use tools."

Gel spat a breath. "Hardly a noble destiny."

Pharlane's hands still reached out to ax and sword. At Gel's last word she curled them into fists. She stood and started to weave back through the vases to the rotunda's assailed windows. As she passed the first pedestal she paused and picked up its vase. It still had the words that had formed from its original stippled design. Words Pharlane had travelled worlds to find. She weighed the slim crystal piece in her hand, then let it drop.

Even the sound of its shattering was delicate.

"Destiny? Pharlane turned back to Gel. "The harper was right, what he said to you. Destiny is as fragile as these." Then she carried on to the windows.

As she came near, her footsteps began to crunch. The stained glass was riddled with cracks and pocked with holes. Whistlings of wind strained through the gaps. She went to one particular hole. A lower part of the lattice piece was still in the lead. Long. Jagged. Like a dagger. Like a kris. But without a handle. She reached for it, took hold with her bare hand. The window depicted a swarm of skeletons, bones disfigured with lichen, clambering up an endless tower. The glass was pigmented yellow. Now a new colour stained it.

Pharlane worked the shard back and forth. She brought her other hand to the work. The edges of the glass sank into both palms, fingers. There was no hint of wince in her face.

The shard came free. A piece of the tower. One of the skeletons clung to it. She wove her way back to the centre of the rotunda, blood trailing her. She pulled at her tunic and cut and tore a strip, which she wound around the base of the shard.

She sat again between Gel and Gemmored, and lifted the glass to her forehead. As she ran it across her head she began to speak.

"Why have we come here to find a way to postpone a battle that always comes and that is always won?"

A shaved lock of her auburn hair, streaked with its fear grey, fell to her lap.

"Because it's not the battle that always comes and that has always been won."

Another lock of hair.

"Each Uroboros is different."

She tilted her head, took another handful of hair, brought the shard up to it.

"Each has always been won, though each may have been lost."

"What will happen," asked Gemmored, "if the battle is lost?"

"The Shadow - " The glass shard bit into Phariane's scalp as she cut. Blood welled. No wince, but she paused. "If the battle is lost the Shadow will not be thrown back. Or my realm will not pass through to begin again. The Wheel will stop."

"And then?" asked Gel.

"Then the tide of Shadow will wash over the universe, realm by realm, until everything is Shadow." Hanks of hair lay around Phariane, some streaked by white, some with blood. Her head was butchered with cuts. Blood ran down her face. "Then, when there is nothing but Shadow, the Shadow will become something else."

"What?" asked Gel.

"Darkness," she answered.

Gemmored and Gel towered over her without speaking. The Wyrmsbod Cadre's barbed siege battered on.

"How do we go back?" said Gemmored finally.

"We may not be able to," said Phariane.

Gel turned his head to the brittle thunder circling the windows. "Because of them?"

Phariane shook her head. "The way back is the same as the way here. Through fire. The fire of the dragon of Dragonkeep calls back those who rapture to other realms. There's a burning here. A kind of distant roar of heat under the skin." She jabbed the glass shard at her chest. "After a time it grows. Those who pass through the dragonflame become flame themselves. If they don't return they're consumed by it." Phariane jabbed at her chest again. "But I feel no burning." She darted looks at Gel and Gemmored. "Do you?" Neither answered.

"So it may already be too late," said Gel.

"The Uroboros may already be lost," said Gemmored.

Gel hissed at Phariane. "Perhaps by bringing us here you caused it to be lost. Perhaps the two of us could've given Dragonkeep victory - isn't that why the Phoenix came for us?"

#

Phariane stares back at Gel. Perhaps he's right. Perhaps she is the one tainted by the visit of the Nightmare Cadre - the one chosen for betrayal.

#

"Perhaps," she said. "There may still be the chance of victory. We may still be able to go back. But victory isn't a simple matter."

"War is rarely simple," said Gemmored.

"But finally," said Gel, "if Dragonkeep overcomes Leviathan the Shadow is defeated. It will be simple," he smiled, "if we kill every one of the enemy."

Phariane shook her head. "The Uroboros may not be won in that way. Do you think all the archivists through all the generations through all the cycles have searched only for a way to postpone the battle?" She shook her head again, more slowly. Her eyes squeezed against the trickles of blood running down her brow. Her words began to slur. "There are hints, glimpses in the annals, the myths, of past cycles... Hooded phrases, clouded

references... It may be that a single death in the Uroboros decides the outcome... or the sparing of a life... or some other, smaller act... Even a look... Even a word..."

"A word?" Gel laughed - wavering, mewling, incredulous laughter, echoing among the crystal archive. Then he stopped. "So simply the act of returning to Dragonkeep may turn back the Shadow."

"Or be the cause of the Shadow's triumph," said Gemmored.

Gel looked at him. "So you wish to stay here?"

Gemmored gave back the look. "No."

Gel's grin stretched back into being and his gaunt head gave a slight bow. "Where you go, I follow."

They both looked down at Phariane.

She told them what to do in weak shuffling words. Then she began to murmur.

Gemmored and Gel lifted her to her feet and dragged her toward the rotunda doors. They took a straight path, ignoring the pedestals in their way. Vases tumbled and burst into glittering splashes on the floor.

Phariane dully pulled the doors back. They opened easily onto the vast limestone pavement and the ripping wind and the paeon and whipcracks of the Wyrmsnod Cadre. She still murmured. Gel and Gemmored lowered her onto her knees on the rotunda ramp and stood before her, ax and sword ready.

One by one, the cadre came to a stop before the ramp. Throat by throat their paeon died. Their black horses jerked and stamped, necks tossing wilfully. Then the first cadreman snarled and clawed deep into his mount's mane and urged it up the ramp. Before he died, entrails flailing, three more started up.

Three Wyrmsnod Cadre horses, sinewy slicks, were barely able to fit abreast. Balance jostled, they lost pace and power within a stride. Bloodbane and Doom met them and dealt with them easily. But the swarming had begun. Four or more horses charged at a time, barging and biting to get at the ramp. Some slewed off before getting near the top, breaking legs or crushing their riders. Those that reached Gemmored and Gel died. The ramp shook. Battle-yells and squeals of agony went up. Riders and mounts fell from the sides of the ramp at first but soon a low charnel mound formed of horses and riders. One tattooed and bazubanded arm jutted nervelessly. The tattoo had begun to unwind.

Gel skipped onto the precarious corpse-cairn and swept his labrys through the bodies, letting blood stream down the ramp, turning it slick. But still the cadre came.

Behind it all, Phariane continued murmuring - louder now - clearer - "fire is fury, shadow hatred," she intoned, over and over.

A barbed whipcord spat up and coiled around Gel's arm, biting into his jehad swaddling. A moment later another wrapped around his neck. He was yanked off the charnel mound and pulled ferociously down the ramp, skidding and rolling, Bloodbane still fast in his grip. Another whip coiled around Bloodbane itself. The riders urged their horses to speed and Gel was dragged across the brutal karst, his labrys crescents now and then grazing and coruscating on the limestone.

The rest of the cadre continued charging the rotunda. Several thundered up the ramp. Gemmored climbed onto the corpse-cairn. There was no chance of taking steps to enhance the power of his sword strokes, but Gemmored's shoulders were like ramparts. They turned

and the first rider's head left his body. The second rider's mount reared before the mound and Doom sank into its breast. It fell back, screaming, taking its rider with it. Gemmored turned away to resist the pull on his sword as it came free of the horse. As it did he swung it wide one-handed. The motion was both attack and ward. The third rider and mount pulled back a moment before lunging again.

Nearly all the rest of the cadre had begun staring into the sky before the rider died, and the one after, both falling to raking cleaving cuts.

#

"Fire is fury," murmurs Phariane, "shadow hatred..."

She looks up too.

Phariane realizes that she is not dead. Not quite. She is ice. And ice burns as deeply as fire in its own way.

But fire is the gateway. Fire has brought her and Gel and Gemmored here and only fire can take them back. She has summoned the fire.

#

Even the Wyrmshodcadremen dragging Gel forgot him and looked up.

The sleek frenzy of each of their horses halted in its tracks. They shrilled. Furious nostrils gaped. Heads tossed. Hooves reared.

#

They all look up at the fire darkening the limestone and listen to the thunder.

This is true thunder. Not the paltry thunder of countless barbs lashing stained glass. Not the petty thunder of wyrmshod hooves on an archive ramp. If thunder were song. If thunder were legend. If thunder were death. If thunder were the sky, this would be thunder.

The revered sails which loft Dragonkeep's dragonremes are no more than slivers of this thunder - slivers of dragon. In Phariane's realm Dragonkeep is all that remains of them. A fossilized ember of glory. But here, in the realm of turbulent winds and bleak skies and clouds like bruised omens, dragons still live in all their fury and sunrise and corona and starlight. Vast as aurorae. Fire and shadow.

The Wyrmshod Cadre and Gemmored and even Gel look up at what Phariane has summoned, and feel the universe turning.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Harnak of Aftermath waits in darkness.

When first he came to this realm, from the dim dense-with-vermillion-twilight Aftermath, she knew the difference between night and shadow. No more. Harnak knows nothing. Even pain is uncertain.

Even evil.

He remembers the talk on the voyage to Leviathan with Gel and Gemmored and Zantalliz and, of course, Phariane...

Evil is what casts shadow and what it casts shadow upon - without the two there is no shadow - evil is therefore both without and within - is the casting force 'light'? or something else? - is it truth?

Harnak finds it hard to remember who spoke which words...

Here, under the archive, in the utter dark of the deepest of the seed-chambers, she once could draw some peace. No more.

Blood and pain.

The scars on his back shift. He feels them in the darkness. And there is no tow-headed Dream-ward to fetch him light this time. "There are no scorpions in Dragonkeep?" Harnak whispers. 'Oh yes,' the Dream-ward had nodded, setting down his lantern, 'and all in this chamber. But all of them sleep.' Harnak stares blindly upward. There are scorpions again in Dragonkeep. She can hear them among the other sounds drifting down through the storied amphorae: stone groaning, breaking; shouts; cries; howls - and things her dull imagination struggles to fasten on, things he has no names for and so names them scorpions.

She thinks they may have entered the archive. But there's no certainty in the dark. Blood and pain flow within him as ever, but now she can no longer feel where one ends and the other begins. All his life, she now realizes, his scars have woven him together. Now even they are unravelling. He feels himself ghosting into his true form: wiry, taut, the hair sandy, the skin tawny... She feels herself fluxing into her true form: young but not youthful, high breasts, lean but not thin... Then wafting back again. There is no truth for him, her, it. No trust. No faith.

The scorpions are in the chamber just above, now.

He, she, it stands up amongst the amphorae, among life in abeyance. Death awaiting death.

Uroboros

Pharlane and Gemmored and Gel drift onto the causey in Dragonkeep's dragonmouth. They lie as dead on the gneiss. They have tumbled through fire to return - from the blaze of dragonmouth to the blaze of dragonmouth, an infinity of inferno. But here, in Pharlane's own realm, the fire is all but gone.

There are no more jabbing or serene ethereal stelae, no soaring sheaths of yellow and red and white silk languidly stretching or jetting high into the air. Even the blue flame is gone.

Only mocking featherings of flame remain, spattering the causey.

Pharlane and Gel and finally Gemmored begin to stir. Awareness quickens on coldly numb faces.

The thunder of the dragonmouth is gone with the fire. No roar like molten havoc. No roar like volcanoes breathing. The immense vaulted cavern echoes with the silence.

Pharlane and Gel and Gemmored stand. Footing is precarious. Gel, despite his battering on the limestone karst, despite one jehad-swaddled arm hanging uselessly, is dully but instinctively sure in his balance - but Pharlane and Gemmored sway. The causey is warped, but not by heat. There are cracks in the stone. Not in the way of a limestone

pavement. These are shallower, more liquid. More like the crazes in Doom's watering. The causey winds and buckles its way back to the dragonthroat. All three turn to face it.

For the first time they see the only other living being in the dragonmouth - Gemmored's Dream-ward. The same dark hair, sallow skin, cheeks no longer quite so full. She has waited for his return as she has waited for him before. As she has waited ever since Gemmored pulled her from the Shadow and gave her new purpose. Phariane and Gel move past her without a glance. Gemmored stops before her. She looks up at him, her expression still uncertain, still waiting.

Gemmored holds Doom in one hand. The other is free. He brings it up to the Dream-ward's cheek. Then lowers it to her throat. He closes it. The fingers reach all the way around her slender neck. He lifts her into the air. She makes no effort to struggle. Gemmored's vein-raked arm holds her out over the edge of the causey, over the plunging barren cavern. The splinter of dark at the heart of his gem eye quivers.

#

Gel and Phariane clamber over the distorted tongue of gneiss toward the dragonthroat. Gel is quicker, more agile. His damaged arm dangles misshapenly like something shattered, but Bloodbane is an aid to balance. Phariane needs to tuck the shard of stained glass brought from the other realm into her belt. Her wounds have clotted and her strength is returning, but by the time she reaches the end of the dragonthroat, Gel has already disappeared into the city.

She looks out. The vista is changed.

Dolomite flags erupted and broken, basalt paving ripped apart. The floor and sides and roof of Dragonkeep have twined. Avenues, streets, wynds, loggias, gardens and tells curve up and even suspend overhead. Parts of the purple porphyry roof are wrenched down to the ground. The gemstone ribcage, once part of the city's sky, glints. Malachite and topaz and lapis-lazuli cobbles. In what is now the sky, the roof, there are rents. Something glints through these too. Stars.

Looking out from the dragonthroat before this twinning, but for the buildings, the forest at the dragon's tail might've been made out at the far end of its length. No more. The dragon curves now.

The twisting of the two wyrms has also twisted their light. The if-light-were-decay gloom of Leviathan has mingled with the cleaner brightness of Dragonkeep to produce a kind of bloodshot twilight.

Somewhere the wolves are howling.

Phariane moves into the city.

The Uroboros still goes on, but there is a sense of wake. Battle shambles on. The denizens of the locked wyrms wander about and fall into skirmishes. Only Dragonkeep's Blade-ward and Leviathan's Death'shead Cadre fight with real purpose.

Arches are misshapen and cracked as the causey in the dragonmouth. Granite, jasper, azurite, all stone is unnaturally soft now.

Not only the wyrms are merged. Shadow and fire have become entangled in patches of writhing flicker. Phariane pauses and extends her hand into one of these. She finds it impossible to decide if the pain is burning or freezing. Even heat and cold have entwined.

The city's great amphitheatre is broken apart and angled severely, part way up what is now Dragonkeep's side. But the archive is virtually stabbing out. Phariane climbs a cliff of shattered jabs of dolomite flag to reach the bluestone entrance.

Inside, breathing hard, she crouches on what had been one of the walls of the atrium. It slopes, now more floor than wall. Ahead of her and above her is the now useless stairway leading to the archive's mezzanine and traceried cloisters. To her left, part way up what is still a wall, is the brazen door leading to the ovary chambers and the silvered cavern. She slides herself down toward it. Books and scrolls and tablets scree her way. She can hear them murmur. The Nightmare Cadre infect disarrayed pages, whisper in tablet grooves. Long rills of Shadow, some flecked with flame, stain everywhere.

Squirming and levering herself against skewed surfaces, she reaches the brazen door. She lunges and grasps its handle. She turns it. Now a trap door, it swings downward, its weight crashing against the stone behind it. One hinge rips free. It hangs down into darkness by the other.

The bronze caracol inside still cleaves deep into the dark, but is now virtually horizontal rather than vertical. Phariane carefully climbs onto it, hooking legs around the winding metal, scraping and tugging herself on top. Her way is painstaking, picking her way by hands and feet over the sharp spiralling edges of the steps. Faltering, steadying, carrying on.

As she works her way along, she glances down at the ovary chambers. She can make out the smashed remains of the seed amphorae - jagged hints of wreckage in the dark. The destruction is more savage than might have been caused solely by the tilting of the archive. Yet when she reaches the third chamber the wreckage seems different - not so complete. There is the suggestion of smoothness here and there in the dark jumble of shapes lying below her - as if some of the precious jars remain intact. And there are other shapes. Still shapes. Dead. Phariane clammers on. There is glimmer ahead.

Beyond what had been the floor of the third chamber she emerges into the silvered cavern. Everything the same but changed. The walls are still incised with deep mysterious glyphs laid bare by the glimmering shed. But now the glyphs curl above and below her rather than around her. Ahead of her she sees the bowl that once contained the pool of dragon blood. Once in the middle of the cavern floor, but now a new glyph carved in what is now not ground but wall. The thread of glittering silver still emerges from its centre, still sheds the cavern's light. Still uncontaminated by Shadow. But it no longer arcs back into the bowl. It trickles weakly into nothingness before it can reach the new ground.

Phariane steadies her balance and stares about. She has come here time after time but she seeks something which she had left here, after her return from Leviathan. She finds it. It hangs from almost the end of the spiral stairway. Ethereal in the silvered glow. Neither metal nor leather, not scaled or cut into breeks and jerkins as the armour of dragonreme Sword-Mariners. Phariane's cataphract of otherworldly mail - formed of nictitating dragon membrane.

She reaches it finally. She steadies herself on the stairway and carefully eases off her belt and tunic and breeks and boots. She wavers now and then: her wounds have closed, but her body is stiff with fatigue. Tunic and breeks and boots drop. She lifts the mail,

sheer and sheened with cyan. She pulls it on, leg by leg, cool, smooth. She strokes it over her body, foot to neck.

Suddenly the horizontal stairway jerks beneath her, but Phariane compensates. She looks up into the dark. Leviathan and Dragonkeep are still twisting. The archive has shifted another fraction.

Phariane's eyes become thoughtful. She moves her lips against the fingertips of one hand, then lowers the hand to her thigh. A finger traces a long triangle on the sheer mail. She pinches the edge of the shape between the finger and her thumb, and plucks. And the mail, proof against forged whetted steel, peels away. She lays the longest edge of the triangle on the bridge of her nose, just below her eyes, and ties it behind her head, yashmaking her face.

Then she reaches down to her other thigh. This time she traces and peels away a long ribbon of mail. This she wraps around the torn fingers and palm of her other hand. Then she picks up the stained glass shard that tore that hand, takes it from the place she has lodged it while she changed.

She looks up again. Stares. And begins to clamber back the way she came.

Her movements are surer now. The cataphract of otherworldly mail allows her more freedom and at the same time holds her weary body more tightly. Nevertheless, with only one hand entirely free, the return journey is slower.

The silvern glimmer of the cavern fades behind her. Darkness is left. The bloodshot light of Dragonkeep appears ahead.

Phariane's mail bandaged hand, still clutching the shard, emerges into the sideways atrium first. Then her head. The wall housing the brazen door has now twisted enough to be more floor than wall. She looks up at two pairs of boots, at two plastrons over chests, and above these, two skulls. The skull beneath the skin, the steel beneath the skull. They are Death'shead Cadre. Their eye-sockets glow fiercely like insane coals.

One of them has his sickle-bladed sword raised over his helm.

Even as it begins to sweep down at Phariane, the archive shifts again. More violently this time. The sword wielder, caught between the impetus of his stroke and the jolt to his footing on the wall turned floor, pitches forward. The stroke slices down past the hanging brazen door, through the dark nothingness of the ovary chambers below - and the cadreman follows it. The second cadreman staggers.

Phariane swings and mauls herself clear of the trap door and hurls herself onto the survivor. The floor-once-the-wall of the archive now slopes downward, and the two roll. On and on. The first cloister, now jutting up rather than out, stops them.

The Death'sheadcadreman pulls away, staggers to his feet, draws back his sickle-sword. The cut bites stone. Phariane manages to scale and roll over the balcony-turned bulkhead. The cadreman follows.

Phariane's strength is fragile. Between the first and second cloister she is already slowing. Between the second and third the cadreman almost catches her.

Strands of flame, entangled with the rills of Shadow spattered about, light the pursuit.

Between the third and fourth cloister, Phariane turns and faces the cadreman. His eye sockets blaze. He grips his sickle-sword two handed. She crouches. Spots of blood

speckle her sheer mail on her arm - her wounds have opened. She holds out her shard dagger. On its smeared surface the skeleton still clings to the tower. Then a scraping sound comes from above.

Between the third and fourth cloister juts the mezzanine. In the skewed architecture of the tilted archive, the mezzanine is almost overhead. The table of convocation balances against the edge of the mezzanine. Phariane and the Death'sheadcadreman look up at it - watch it rock above them. Back. Forth. Phariane is the first to break the tableau. She lunges with her dagger-shard. But the movement is caught by the cadreman. He sweeps his sword up. The sickle-blade slices across Phariane's yashmak of otherworldly mail. It fails to cut into the membranous armour or the face beneath. It slides away. But Phariane still reels and falls.

She sprawls on her back. The cadreman lifts his sword over his skull helm. Between them lies the cadreman's thin juddering shadow. Phariane turns the shard in her hand, grips it tightly. She rolls and stabs it into the shadow. Splinters of stained glass jump away. The Death'sheadcadreman coils in agony.

Stillness. Then the cadreman, still bent, takes a step.

Phariane stabs the shadow again. The shard shatters. The cadreman stops again, tremblingly rigid. Then he takes another step.

Phariane climbs to her feet and staggers to the next cloister bulkhead. More slowly than ever she scales it, begins to crawl along one of the pillars of the now horizontal colonnade. Then a hand fastens on her calf.

She and the cadreman drop from the colonnade and roll along the wall-turned-floor of the fourth level. They roll across doors to the various quarters of the Phoenix Prey, until reaching the door to Rorn's chamber. Rorn. The captured Phoenix Prey. The recovered Phoenix Prey. The broken Phoenix Prey.

As Phariane's shoulders press against his door it swings down beneath them. She almost falls. The Death'sheadcadreman, on top of her, holds the sickle-blade of his sword in both hands. Only honed on one side, he forces the cutting edge down across her throat.

Her otherworldly-mailed palm, shored by the other, resists the edge. The yashmak heaves with her breath.

The cadreman bears down, but the blaze in his skull sockets has begun to fade.

Time stretches.

The blade quivers closer. Closer still, but nevertheless she struggles not to arch her back away - not to let her head lower into the chamber she hangs over. Something stirs down there. Bubbles. Something without a voice calls.

Time aches.

The sickle blade no longer moves. The breath from behind the skull is ragged and ponderous now.

Time halts.

The insane coals deep in the sockets of the skull helm are dead.

Phariane levers and squirms her way free of the corpse. She still avoids glancing down into Rorn's chamber.

Climbing down from the archive she walks on through Dragonkeep. The way is not easy.

Buildings, ramps, archways are shaped from the rock of the dragon. They travel upward and even overhead with the twisting. But the cropfields formerly on the sky-wyrm's flanks are soil, and as the ground has tilted and risen this has subsided, carpeting and clogging much of the new ground.

And through rents in what is now the roof, more stars.

The spasmodic battle continues among the rubble.

Yet no one challenges or even notices Phariane.

Finally, after passing through the sloping remains of an orchard, tree limbs hacked away for weapons, she sees her destination. Or at least the gateway to it.

Toward the tail the dragon narrows. The forest that grows there is not so distorted as other parts of Dragonkeep. The boles still reach high. The green canopies splay out. She enters the shade which even now resists the bloodshot taint of the rest of the city's light. The ground is still soft and mossy. And even now there is the sound of wolves.

She moves closer to these. Not just howls. Snarls. Snaps.

A shape, tuniced in lamellar, rushes and stumbles through the trees. Other shapes, lower, more flowing, follow. The Corsair is practically in front of Phariane when the first wolves bring him down, laughing and cursing. Their snarls swarm down onto his body and turn liquid. The first wolves are hoar-greys. Now several blacks, sleeker but more suited for the dragonremes, arrive. One or two of the hoar-greys are already turning away, golden irises and pricks of pupil. The Corsair is still dying. Still laughing as Phariane walks past.

More shapes flit through the trees and dimness. More wolf shapes sinew after them. Only wolves. There are no Wolf-ward now. There is no need for them. The wolves move as swiftly as ever, but their movements seem more natural now - not so aloof from time. The end of the world is their time.

As Phariane makes her way through the forest, eruptions of snarl break out now and then. Some are near, but most are distant, deep in the trees. Nothing crosses her way.

Once the end of the forest was the end of Dragonkeep. Now at the end of the forest the trees end but the dimness continues, though its bloodshot taint returns. Phariane looks back once then steps through into Leviathan.

Her journey is as her last journey through the sea-wyrm, but different. Though the Uroboros has softened the sky-wyrm's stone body, the distortion has still cracked and fissured and fragmented the city. In the battle Dragonkeepers have used fragments of stone and gems dislodged from the purple porphyry roof in home-fashioned slings. Leviathan too is twisted. And despite their flexibility, the labyrinths of Leviathan have also ripped and torn, creating new labyrinths, new passageways in which the battle can be fought.

It still goes on.

The same spasms of struggling and killing as in Dragonkeep, perhaps more claustal, more squalid, more pinched. Still no one challenges Phariane. Yet somehow she begins to lose her way. Just as Dragonkeep's gems have been wrung from roof to ground, so the skulls paving Leviathan's floor are sometimes now above. As with the gems they sometimes fall. One drops onto Phariane's shoulder and lunges at her neck before sliding off her mail. Its jaw continues to snap as she walks away. And even now there are echoes. Even more echoes. She can still hear wolves.

Once, in the bloodshot dimness, through what may be a rent in the labyrinth above her, she wonders if she glimpses yet more stars.

She eventually emerges into a wider space, vast enough to be in Dragonkeep. But the kind of cold here could never be found in the sky-wyrm, or even the rest of the sea-wyrm. The chamber stretches into the distance, and throughout that length, hanging from the vaulting ceiling, are the same fleshy stalactites that strew the labyrinths. Except these are longer. And from them hang bare bodies. Men. Women. Children. Dead. Living. Moaning. And because Leviathan is twisted, some of the stalactites are now stalagmites, flaccid tendrils which still entwine bodies. Moaning.

Once the intestine of the giant wyrm, then the feeding gallery of Leviathan, now it provides the nearest thing to a battlefield. In the garden of living corpses there is space for Leviathane and Dragonkeeper, for Death'shead Cadre and Corsairs and Dragonkeep's hawk-helmed Blade-ward to clash in numbers. There is a staccato wash of steel. Though even here there is a weariness about the fury - a feeling of ending.

And in the distant midst of the bloody turmoil Phariane sees two figures.

Gel.

Gemmored.

Even as she sees them they see each other.

Gel's face is almost black, infused with so much blood from slaying. More gaunt than ever. His cheeks are pits. The twin heads of his labrys flush, almost glow crimson. There is no weariness about Bloodbane's arcs. Gemmored's sword is equally tireless, equally crimsoned. The face he turns toward Gel is dead as ice, but also gaunt - as if anger were bones... Gel's breaks into a pure, contented grin, as razored as his ax.

Phariane turns away as they come toward each other.

She leaves the feeding chamber and returns to the labyrinths.

She walks softly, listening to the echoes, until she finds one particular echo. Not the snapping of skulls, or the shouts and screams and moans. Faint, very faint now, but still she finds it. Ghostly monstrous, like an oceanic murmur of gossamer. This is not so much a sound as a pulse. She follows it deep into twisted Leviathan, past and sometimes through the varices, cysts, tumours that form the sea-wyrm's chambers, along old gravewaxed passages and newly torn gateways. Always following the echo.

Until she finds its source. Its heart. A glistening black barrier. A kind of growth. Some kind of goitre. Swollen. Stony. A knot. She recognizes it. Whimpering comes from inside.

In the bloodshot gloom the thread-fine cleft running down the knot is scarcely visible. Unlike many of the blood-sutured entries into other chambers, this has not been rent open. Phariane approaches it slowly. Then she glimpses something at her feet.

A slim, undulated piece of metal ending in a finely carved handle.

Her kris.

She eases onto her haunches and reaches out her otherworldly-mail-wrapped hand. As her fingers near it the blade starts to move, to sidewind away from her. She stops. The blade goes still. She reaches out her other hand, hesitantly, and the kris starts away again. She stops. The kris goes still. For a time Phariane looks at it in the dimness. Then she stands.

She takes the last few steps to the knot. She pulls away the otherworldly mail yashmak and lets it float to the floor. Then she lets something breathed pass from her lips to the cleft, and the needle-thin seal thickens, softens, distends, and she slides inside.

The darkness encysted inside is different as she knew it would be. Transpicious.

On the cold stone floor something is curled around itself, shivering, all skin and scar. Her sister. Sstheness unwinds from the foetal. She lifts her head. From somewhere beneath dark hair matted and stringed with slime her eyes see Phariane. Her whimpering tears and bursts into shrieks, and her long sigil-thorns leap up.

Phariane feels the fingerstalls clawing over her brutally-shaven head, plunging down her forehead. Then the transpicious dark is gone. The dark which replaces it is red. If darkness were blood... And it burns.

Phariane staggers back. Falls. Jars on the slick stone. She feels Sstheness' sigil-thorns flailing over her mail, feels the clawing come to life when it rakes the bare skin on Phariane's thighs where the patches of mail have been stripped away.

But pain is something Phariane only remembers.

She reaches through the gouging storm and fastens on one of Sstheness' hands. With the touch Sstheness' shrieks fade instantly back to whimpers. Phariane feels her sister's body collapse onto her, hardly moving. She fumbles along Sstheness hand until she reaches the sigil-thorns. She grips one. Tight.

The thorn is as sharp, point and edges, as the glass shard had been, but Phariane's palm is mailed. She levers. The thorn gives, slowly at first, then breaks. Sstheness squirms a moment, like the dream of a shudder.

Phariane turns her sister carefully, gently, laying her on her side on the slick hard stone. She lies herself beside her, behind her, and takes hold of another sigil-thorn.

Then the next.

One by one.

Sometimes the finger breaks before the sigil-thorn. The sound is different. Phariane can tell the difference. The bone snaps cleanly, a neat sound. But the sigil-thorns are stubborn, break grudgingly, resentfully, fibre by fibre, like something rotted.

Sometimes Phariane grasps the thorn with her bare hand - not through error but through indifference. Pain is only another, sharper, kind of darkness.

After the tenth, final sigil-thorn is broken, Phariane eases Sstheness against her, cradles her. She no longer even whimpers. She still shivers.

They wait.

They wait.

Though the heart-knot's cleft is sealed up now, even through the thick stony walls, Phariane can hear echoes. Even if only the echoes of echoes. She can still hear the wolves.

Phariane can feel the darkness beyond her own blindness changing. Contracting. This heart-chamber, the core tumour of Leviathan, is shrinking - crushing itself in death. Crushing its dark into nothingness.

Sstheness is still shivering. So softly. The vibration little more than a purr. The tremble passes from Sstheness' skin through Phariane's sheer otherworldly mail into her skin.

And Phariane finds the thing she has come back from the realm of karst and stained glass to find.

She waits.
She cradles her sister in blood and darkness and fear.
And waits.
Listening to the dim cool cadence of wolves.

THE END.

SECTION THREE

AFTERTHESIS

Following the examination of sword-&-sorcery's origins and definitions and the pivotal part played in this by Robert E. Howard, and Howard's influence on other writers of the form, this part of the thesis is devoted to explicating how my fantasy *The Shadow Cycles* drew on this research to support its creation. The aim was to innovate, not simply to interrogate what Howard was doing technically and to understand the underlying effects of his writing, but to achieve similar effects in different ways and in so doing to build on those effects and develop sword-&-sorcery as a form. This is why the original thirteen motifs listed earlier have subsequently been modified— because these are motifs of sensibility not surface technique. For example, the motif 'The sword-&-sorcery protagonist is a loner - a figure apart or other' has since been reworded to 'The sword-&-sorcery protagonist is alone – a figure apart or other' – thus moving away from surface to sensibility. Also, in pursuing a literary development I have recruited techniques and concepts from the wider pool of literary fiction and theory.

For clarity this section is divided into three parts. Since Howard's sword-&-sorcery, as discussed earlier, can be analysed as three 'violences', being physical, emotional, and stylistic, this section broadly mirrors these with general narrative technique, methods of characterization, and style of language. However since some of my strategies fall into two or even three of these categories there will inevitably be some crossover.

GENERAL NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

The Chthonic

'Blood and Darkness and Fear' is the epigraph of *The Shadow Cycles*, a multi-valenced phrase which I have used as an emotional touchstone. Violence, the unknown or unresolved, and the numinous are loose analogues of these three, all examined previously in the thesis, all with deep roots in the Howardian Ur-text. Even a scattershot sampling of Howard's story titles echo the three elements.

Blood: 'By this Axe I Rule', 'Swords of the Purple Kingdom', 'Red Nails'.

Darkness: ‘The Dark Man’, ‘People of the Dark’, ‘The Children of the Night’, ‘Pool of the Black One’, ‘Black Canaan’.³¹⁰

Fear: ‘The Skull of Silence’, ‘Garden of Fear’, ‘A Witch Shall be Born’, ‘The Devil in Iron’.

The epigraph is also analogous to the title of the form itself, ‘sword-&-sorcery’, sword equating to violence (not simply physical) and sorcery to the numinous. The ampersand, often used in place of ‘and’ in labelling the form, is appropriately sigil-like, and might stand for the unknown ‘dark matter’ that links the other two elements. It is this ‘&’ that allows the melding of violence and the numinous necessary for the Ur-text form. Central in more than one sense, this *lack* or *negative* is crucial, intensifying both other elements. It is an endlessly multi-valenced ‘chthonic’ which Howard and subsequent sword-&-sorcery writers have exploited, or in some cases failed to exploit, as addressed more fully earlier in the thesis. A good example occurs in the Solomon Kane story ‘Red Shadows’:

Again, somewhere in his soul, dim primal deeps were stirring, age-old thought memories, veiled in the fogs of lost eons. He had been here before, thought Kane; he knew all this of old - the lurid flames beating back the sullen night, the bestial faces leering expectantly, and the god, the Black God, there in the shadows! Always the Black God, brooding back in the shadows.³¹¹

Sword-&-sorcery’s relationship to the chthonic extends to time, where it is often present in concentrated, often imagistically vague but intense knots, as in ‘People of the Black Circle’ and many other stories.³¹² In his introduction to *The Black Stranger*, Steven Tompkins comments on Howard’s ‘ability to telescope and streamline history’, which he here attributes to an accumulation of regional and historical detail dramatically presented at the beginning of the unfinished story ‘Nekht Semerkeht’.³¹³ He often relies on dream or hallucinogenic sequences or references to ancient texts to access this effect. It is an effect characteristic of the short story form - novels or novel-length stories tend to treat time in far more expansive, spread-out manners. Actually Howard telescopes time in different ways for different functions: for story as Brule’s account of the serpent men in ‘The Shadow Kingdom’, or in characterizing (giving racial background) in ‘The Garden of Fear’, or simply scene-setting, or

³¹⁰ Darrell Schweitzer noted that de Camp felt there were too many Conan stories with ‘black’ in the title. (*Conan’s World*, p.41.)

³¹¹ Howard, *Solomon Kane*, 1995, p.42, originally published in *Weird Tales* August 1928.

³¹² Howard, *People of the Black Circle* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1974), pp.106, 109.

³¹³ Howard, *Black Stranger*, p.xiii.

generally to create a sense of deep-time for his milieus as with the use of ancient manuscripts in, for example, 'Isle of the Eons'.³¹⁴

The chthonic is found also in physical milieu. Even a story like 'The Tower of the Elephant', taking place largely in a confined upward if not downward vertical space, creates a kind of reverse chthonic.³¹⁵ 'Worms of the Earth' conflates a confined physical underground with a confining of the protagonist's knowledge: a physical *and* metaphysical darkness.

What is known is compressed by the short story form in general, but in sword-&-sorcery secondary worlds this effect is intensified, particularly in unanchored secondary worlds which have little or no reference to historical periods, whether these take place in 'Lands of Fable' or more imaginary milieu.

The more nightmarishly ahistorical sword-&-sorcery milieus can affect or certainly contribute to that Shelleyan pre-sublime frisson, closely related to the numinous, required for the disorienting verging sense, the moment before reification, to hold successfully.³¹⁶

The Shadow Cycles extends this disorientation by acting as a scaffold of expectation, a scaffolding composed of narrative and character as well as milieu, leading toward generic solidity but then refusing to resolve: the 'verging' mentioned. To reengineer the door metaphor cited earlier, in effect I am opening a door onto something unexpected or ambiguous – or approaching and then turning away from that door. Howard, without decades of sword-&-sorcery to both allude to and modify, did not have recourse to this method of creating intensity.

The numinous experience, evoked by various other literary forms in some degree or another, such as Gothic, is inherently violent in its intensity. And so it is this effect which I was most intent on engineering in *TSC*. The hope was to recover the numinous (religious experience unfiltered by articulated reason as Otto would have it) from the generic heritage of sword-&-sorcery from the pulps onward. I wanted to evoke its pungency.

³¹⁴Howard, *The Gods of Bal-Sagoth* (New York: Ace Books, 1979).

³¹⁵ There was, incidentally, an uneasy correspondence generated by Marvel's Conan/Elric meeting in *Conan* issues 14 and 15 - because of the epic/cosmic dimension and perhaps because of the very different approaches to the form of Howard and Elric's creator, Michael Moorcock: 'The introduction of Melniboné, a world in another plane, pushes Conan into a cosmic picture, and the barbarian becomes a 'superhero''. (*The Hyborian Page*, Conan no.18, p.23. This also argues for a compressed chthonic 'short story' essence to Ur-text sword-&-sorcery as against a more expansive chthonic.)

³¹⁶For further discussion of this issue, see Paul Endo, 'The Cenci: Recognizing the Shelleyan Sublime' in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol.38 (1996), pp.379-97.

If the readers of *The Shadow Cycles* had too strong a feeling of genre then my feeling was that they would also have an unwelcome sense of predictability. Graham Dunstan Martin suggests that:

In short, fantasy gives us a breathing space. It throws open the comfortable, well-fitting doors [perhaps doors related to those of Stephen King and other writers?] and windows constructed by our rational belief-systems, and it allows us to gulp in fresh draughts of air - a fresh air that is named 'Uncertainty'. It reminds us that we do not know everything, or even very much. It restores doubt and wonder, and with them, infinite possibility.³¹⁷

Martin's description suggests a feel of expansion and also optimism, rather than my concept of the chthonic (or indeed the Gothic) which has more of a constricted sensibility intended to achieve 'depth' through uncertainty.

Brian Attebery, however, reluctantly champions the effectiveness of the oblique and by (my) extension the chthonic:

If [H.P.] Lovecraft errs in his inventions, it is in the direction of overconcreteness, [...] I find his oozy inventions pedestrian in comparison to the elusive night-gaunts [...] Many readers and critics, indeed, find considerable psychological depth in the most macabre tales and dismiss brighter fantasies as shallow.³¹⁸

Writers as diverse as Burke and Lovecraft examine obscurity in earlier prose, in connection with fear rather than wonder. 'To make anything very terrible, obscurity in general seems to be necessary,' says the former and Lovecraft writes, 'Children will always be afraid of the dark, and men [...] will always tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless'.³¹⁹

Howard was quite capable of deploying such strategies. The constriction built into working predominantly in short story form produces the most intense of his sword-&-sorcery, focusing on a single numinous event or object.³²⁰ Even the several numinous encounters in 'The Tower of the Elephant' all take place within the 'meta-encounter' of the tower. A novel, such as *The Hour of the Dragon*, may create powerful encounters of a similar nature, but the

³¹⁷Graham Dunstan Martin, 'How to Ruin a Novel, Or, Modernism, Realism and the Fantastic', *Foundation*, 66 (1996), 82-92 (p.91).

³¹⁸Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p.132.

³¹⁹Burke, *Enquiry*, p.58; Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror', 365-436 (p.367). Both prominent *Weird Tales* writers, Howard and Lovecraft entered into a lengthy correspondence beginning in 1930 which has been collected in a two-volume set, *A Means to Freedom* (New York, NY: Hippocampus Press 2009) edited by S.T. Joshi, David E. Schultz, and Rusty Burke.

³²⁰ See my concept of the numinous envelope discussed earlier.

very length of the novel means that the number of encounters inevitably lead to a kind of 'awe-fatigue'. In effect a novel by default of its length and the repetitions incurred almost becomes its own genre. Though not novel-length, 'The People of the Black Circle', cluttered with magical incidents, suffers from the same pitfall, perhaps because of its Mundy-esque emphasis on adventure rather than atmosphere. This area of concern is pertinent to my identification of 'numinous envelopes' within a fantasy narrative mentioned in connection with Howard earlier in the thesis. The single numinous envelope of the typical Howard short story is unavailable to *The Shadow Cycles*, but due to its book length a variety of numinous envelopes become available. For instance the first envelopes of the Phoenix Prey's original worlds/realms/milieus 'detach' in the characters and enter the shadowsea world milieu. A further realm (creating almost a mise-en-abyme of envelopes) is the realm they enter with the rotunda archive near the end. Even the PP's entrance into the two un-dead dragon 'castles' of Dragonkeep and Leviathan can be seen as transitions into further numinous envelopes.

Darren Jorgensen outlines two phases to an encounter with the sublime - the first movement equals disorientation, the second movement equals a resolving of the experience/feeling into transcendence.³²¹ Paul Endo states:

The sublime event is not allowed to fully 'mature' into meaning; instead, it is arrested at a presublime stage. [...] the negative sublime actively challenges the high sublime [high fantasy?] and its generation of a 'finished' meaning. [...] of its movement out of the meaningless into meaning [...] the negative sublime suspends [suspense?] the crystallization into hard, dogmatic meaning through an 'awful doubt' that respects all that must be excluded.³²²

This also is reminiscent of what Farah Mendlesohn calls the transliminal moment, 'which brings us up to the liminal point and then refuses to cross the threshold, has much greater potential to generate fear, awe, and confusion, all intensely important emotions in the creation of the fantastic mode'.³²³ This is what I have attempted to do with *The Shadow Cycles*: for as long as possible hold onto such moments of suspension in such a way as not to exhaust the reader through foregrounding the moment too much. By subverting the genre subtly - subverting rather than satirizing, distorting rather than destroying - I hoped to achieve a kind of disorientation that simulates the numinous effect Howard achieved with the earliest sword-

³²¹Darren Jorgensen, 'The Sublime Cognition of Science Fiction Narratives', *Foundation*, 98 (2006), 116-130.

³²²Endo, 'The Cenci', p.379.

³²³ Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics*, introduction p.xxiv.

&-sorcery. After all, subversion cannot exist without some acknowledgement of orthodoxy to move against, in terms of plot or character-type or milieu; the generic codes can be violated, but only after those codes are adumbrated or put in place.³²⁴ *TSC* attempts a kind of disorientation which does not dampen tension through confusion but rather extends it through thwarted and indefinitely postponed fulfilment of expectation in terms of character and/or plot, through eschewing generic resolution, avoiding what Kathryn Hume calls the 'sense of release that comes when the unknown converts to the known and chaos turns into Cosmos', and creating a climactic anti-closure.³²⁵

That so much is left uncrystallized, or uncategorized, or ambiguous, gives the title of my book another interpretation. Genre, however, works in contradiction to obscurity in narrative strategy. Worlds are mapped and largely understood by the reader, implicitly or explicitly. Fantasy, particularly since the Brooks/Donaldson 'singularity' of the mid-1970s, according to Stableford, has been dominated by generic conventions.³²⁶

Genre creates, via default, a sac of heightened reader response, with regards to sword-&-sorcery the equivalent to SF's megatext, a *cognoscenti*. In effect readers enter a story 'clothed' (in fact 'closed') in a generic cataphract of anticipation and expectation. According to Samuel Delany, 'all reading becomes genre reading and genre concepts are inescapable.'³²⁷ However Delany also differentiates between genres of SF and fantasy, in which the events of the narrative could not happen in our world, and those of mainstream or mundane fiction in which they could. The tension/friction generated by the 'could not happen' of even generic fantasy, it follows, is potentially the strongest, the most intense. Yet the size of the modern fantasy genre, spreading beyond books into games, films, online games, actually dulls the sense of the 'could not happen'.

I wanted *The Shadow Cycles* to be not so much a dialogue between the real and unreal, as between the singular unreal and a generic unreal which becomes the real through familiarity. I wanted a sense of reality without familiarity, an analogue to Otto's conception of the

³²⁴ 'The objection makes an appeal to the law and calls to mind the fact that the subversion of La Folie du jour needs the law in order to take place.' Derrida (trans. Ronell, 'The Law of Genre' in *Critical Enquiry* Vol.7 No.1, 1980, 55-81 (p.72).

³²⁵ Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Methuen, 1984), p.193.

³²⁶ Brian Stableford, 'Science Fiction in the Seventies', *Vector: The Critical Journal of the BSFA* [British Science Fiction Association] 200, 1998, 21-24 (pp.23-4). Stableford's claim is that with the publications of Terry Brooks' *Sword of Shannara* in 1977, and Stephen Donaldson's first *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* trilogy in the same year, fantasy became a formulaic commercial publishing area.

³²⁷ David N. Samuelson, 'Necessary Constraints: Samuel R. Delany on Science Fiction', *Foundation*, 60 (1994), 21-41 (p.24).

numinous. M. John Harrison states that reading the modern short story requires experiential input from the reader; however I would expand this idea to assert that all reading requires this, and that what has been read, even in fantasy, then becomes part of the reader's experience, sometimes as real and significant as any other kind of experience. Sigmund Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919) posits one element of the uncanny as something unfamiliar: 'something one does not know one's way about in', a definition closer to my aim and strikingly anti-generic.³²⁸

Tolkien, by contrast, champion's reason and logic: 'The keener and the clearer is the reason,' he says, 'the better fantasy will it make.'³²⁹ Robert Irwin also sees fantasy as primarily logical, insisting that 'the logic of fantasy denies any privilege of ambiguity'.³³⁰

In 'The Wearing Out of Genre Materials', Joanna Russ states that 'part of the story must be given over to rationalisation.'³³¹ However if a work is part of a genre, then much of the rationalisation happens outside the story in that a certain knowledge of conventions and givens is assumed for the reader. It becomes more interesting still when a writer subverts the assumptions, then, by resisting development and (dis)closure. Furthermore, Russ herself lays out a three-stage process, defined alternatively as innocence-plausibility-decadence or primitivism-realism-decadence, whereby genre fiction might eventually become something more akin to lyric, and where narrative elements might be recruited for use in 'a totally different artistic whole'.³³² This process charts, or at least suggests, a method of revivification through resisting the rational. In Russ's essay, the 'story' moves away from the pristine, the undeveloped and unexplored idea (numinous?) as it enters the second stage of rationalising. However it might be said to move back towards it with the third stage, possibly supporting the wisdom of my chosen strategy of 'chthonic' obliqueness or obscurity, a concept now extended to include an element of the non-rational. To return to Otto again:

It is not simply that orthodoxy was preoccupied with doctrine and the framing of dogma [...] It is rather that orthodoxy found in the creation of dogma and doctrine [is] no way to do justice to the non-rational aspect of its subject.³³³

An analogy might easily be drawn with the generic and its formulation of narrational dogma and, again, the grounding of the numinous. Lyotard says the sublime is a post-modern

³²⁸Norton *Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2001), p.931.

³²⁹Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p.51.

³³⁰W.R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible* (London: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p.72.

³³¹Russ, 'Genre Materials', p.46.

³³²Ibid, p.50.

³³³Otto, *Holy*, p.3.

condition, something not reducible to the known.³³⁴ Yet Otto sees the sublime as a pale imitation of the numinous, differentiating the two. Indeed Longinus claims that fear, grief, and pity are of a 'lower order', and not part of the sublime.³³⁵ Otto continues his exposition of the numen by putting forward the idea that conceptual theories attempt to 'fit over' emotional-intuitional ideas. I began to wonder if the sublime might be seen as a developed artistic response to the numinous, just as Otto conceives religion as the development of certain non-rational apprehensions. Maybe the numinous could advantageously be viewed as the para-literature of the sublime as sword-&-sorcery is sometimes regarded as a para-literature of fantasy? Semantic nuance apart, sword-&-sorcery is generally seen as a 'lower order' of fantasy. It occurred to me to equate lower with 'chthonic' rather than 'lesser' - then I could move back toward viewing the form as closer to the non-rational, where I believed its power largely derived, or could/should derive.

The chthonic degenrefication attempted by *TSC* is at base a variation on formalism's defamiliarization: to make the strange strange again.³³⁶ A non-rational element seemed useful in this.

Magic and Madness

Often, as noted previously, Howard and to an extent later sword-&-sorcery writers conflate magic and madness. In *The Shadow Cycles*'s treatment of this conflation I added an extra element. I identified the unquantified and unquantifiable potential of both with Otto's absolute unapproachable.³³⁷ This is something the Howardian Ur-text mode of sword-&-sorcery revelled in, but something which was subverted by the de Camp and Carter additions to the Conan series.³³⁸ In an interview from 1977, Lin Carter talks about rationalising fantasy - the need to systematize magic.³³⁹ Howard, with his discrepancies and anachronisms seems against this if only in spirit!³⁴⁰ I directly recruited Howard's approach (and on one occasion

³³⁴ Norton, p.1611.

³³⁵ Longinus, *On the Sublime* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1935, rpt.), p.59.

³³⁶ Though in order not to lose touch with the genre, *The Shadow Cycles* attempts to be a kind of imperfect palimpsest, in that earlier formulations of sword-&-sorcery genre are only partially scraped away. Sstheness' self-scarring is a kind of erasure - her throat is the last blank page - when she 'writes' upon it it is time for the Uroboros. The Uroboros is itself the clearing of the page.

³³⁷ And further examined the conflation in my short story 'Twilight's Four'.

³³⁸ Don Herron, likens their influence on the Conan canon to August Derleth's influence on Lovecraft's oeuvre. 'The Dark Barbarian' in *The Dark Barbarian*, p.168.

³³⁹ 'The Fantastic Interview' conducted by Darrell Schweitzer (*Fantastic* no.1, vol.26, February 1977), p.123.

³⁴⁰ Schweitzer attacks this element in Howard's sword-&-sorcery in *Conan's World* (p.35). Though Howard has his defenders. Jeffrey Shanks in 'Hyborian Age Archaeology' in *Conan Meets the Academy*, states that Howard's Hyborian world carries 'a strong sense of verisimilitude' (p.14).

added a reference to his use of the eye motif mentioned earlier: ‘They are Death’shead Cadre. Their eye-sockets glow fiercely like insane coals.’) Additionally, the irrationality I tried to inject into *TSC* by way of obscure poetic flourishes, is part of the story’s approach to magic:

The arcane thing’s harangue, louder with each step taken, now changes again, turns higher. The maggots rippling under its face become even more frantic. The rotting siege ripples too, infested with the same maggots. And Gemmored’s arm is frozen.

Destiny balances on the moment.

Then Gemmored drops the sword and dies.

Then Gemmored plunges the sword into the thing.

Then Gemmored drops the sword.

Then Gemmored plunges the sword.

Then Gemmored.

Then Gemmored.

Then.

It is not like forcing the sword through brain and bone, nor does the Thing’s head offer only the desiccated resistance of the dust men outside the chamber. The chevroned steel bites into hate - the thing is fleshed and skeletoned with hate.

Making the nature of magic/the fantastic/the numinous undefined, utilizing anti-closure, was a way of generating an equivalent form of tension - layering unresolvedness through the eschewing of too much information.³⁴¹ The lack of closure in *TSC* is certainly extreme: when the Phoenix Prey’s minds are invaded by the Nightmare Cadre are their dreams accurate recounting of their pasts, or modifications or distortions? Or even alternate pasts created by the cadre? And if alternate pasts are they then the pasts the Phoenix Prey believe are true from that point on? A single Howardian omniscient narrator’s sentence of dialogue or exposition could define this, but this is deliberately avoided. Thus, intensity is hopefully created, but an intensity without subsequent orthodox reward. The reader is sent not through

Moorcock in *Wizardry and Wild Romance* even goes so far as to opine that Howard's anachronisms 'begin to form the main appeal of the [Conan] stories.' (p.80). In his article 'Hyborian Technology' in *The Blade of Conan*, de Camp picks apart technological historical inaccuracies, but still maintains 'Howard's world stacks up very well, in the matter of internal consistency, with others of the genre.' (p.64).

³⁴¹ Bergstrom states that sword-&-sorcery magic is inconsistent, whereas high fantasy magic is more complex and consistent. (Bonnie Bergstrom, ‘From Lemuria to Lugburz: A Comparison of Sword and Sorcery and Heroic Fantasy’ *Mythlore* (Vol.1 no.3), 23-24 (p.24), July 1969. Complexity and consistency are certainly more easily conflated by a writer working on a book – or books – length narrative than on an often only loosely planned series of short stories.

a recognizable story (that is a sequence of expectation and fulfilment) or even stories – but through story itself. The consequent prioritizing of vividness over understanding also fits with Otto’s characterization of the numinous.

Todorov’s hesitation around the ‘fantastic’ is based upon a hesitation between natural and supernatural.³⁴² My usage of hesitation is different and wider-ranging: between ‘defined’ and ‘non-defined’, withholding the right amount of information to keep the reader on the brink between imagination and non-imagination, between the approachable and the absolute unapproachable. This obliqueness compensates for the loss of natural/supernatural friction powerfully utilized by Howard.

The Visual

The visual, strangely, proved a problematic area for *The Shadow Cycles*. Jackson observes that ‘fantastic’ derives from the Latin ‘fantasistus, meaning to make visible or manifest.’ And yet Burke promotes the primacy of word over visual arts in evoking the sense:

When painters have attempted to give us clear representations of these very fanciful and terrible ideas they have I think almost always failed; insomuch as I have been at a loss, in all the pictures I have seen of hell, whether the painter did not intend something ludicrous.³⁴³

It is easy to come unstuck, particularly when imagining monsters post-Beowulf. The above quotation reminds me inexorably of the living carnivorous rocks of John Jakes’s Brak story ‘The Mirror of Wizardry’.³⁴⁴

Nevertheless the visual-imaginative strength of S&S is undeniable. Visual interpretations of Howard’s Conan stories, for instance, began almost from the start of their publication. The pulp magazines’ interiors, although poor-quality paper, contained black and white illustrations of the fiction. However, in regard to Howard’s material, the thick blacks and murky reproduction actually aided the artist in rendering the writer’s quality in visual terms. The areas of solid black help to convey a sense of power that characterises the prose. The indistinct and often vague backgrounds parallel Howard’s technique of painting a suggestive setting or settings for his stories by detailing one or two telling points. The best individual illustrations of the form imply a

³⁴²Todorov, *Fantastic*, p.103.

³⁴³Burke, *Enquiry*, p.63.

³⁴⁴*Worlds of Fantasy Worlds of Fantasy*, vol.1 no.1, Galaxy Publishing Corporation, 1968, 89-95, (p.90).

narrative as do images in many of Howard's poems.³⁴⁵ Eng notes Howard's ambivalence toward jewelled language and his preference for narrative movement and consequently his avoidance of elaborated metaphors and similes in his verse.³⁴⁶

Though the complete eschewing of imagery is impractical in terms of narrative, the visual element suggested another method for rationing information and so resolution, indeed a possible way to *sustain* a novel-length sword-&-sorcery at a necessary intensity.

The Barry Smith comic magazine story 'Kull of Atlantis', a retelling of 'Exile of Atlantis', was presented unfinished.³⁴⁷ It was comprised of an understandably slightly disjointed sequence of images where the narrative was underpinned by captions with various plot lacunae, the artwork carrying most of the interest. But the effect of those lacunae stayed with me; I found a certain potency in the story's structure. The plot could still be followed, or rather pieced together, even if the reader had no previous knowledge of the story - but it demanded a higher, writerly (to use Barthes's term), intensity of reader involvement.

In my efforts to move sword-&-sorcery toward a more literary form, an interview with playwright Anthony Minghella added more fuel to the idea:

It used to be that the audience required complete phrases to understand a sequence.

[...] Now the intention to move can motivate a cut. I start to pack up my papers, I can jump time to a car and the lecture has finished and I'm going home. Thirty years ago the audience would have been lost, now they fill in all the missing action.³⁴⁸

Perhaps employing a verbal equivalent of such visual synecdoche in my story would work?

Booth touches on the effects of what is left out by the writer:

When we read even the least conventional story, we bring to bear on it a vast repertory of expectations and inference patterns derived from our experience with other stories. And a reconstruction of each story would be impossible if we could not work with hunches about how it resembles and differs from stories of other kinds.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁵ Bergstrom also comments that sword-&-sorcery imagery tends to be less developed (p.24) - this lack of elaboration ties in with my strategy of anti-closure, giving such imagery power by avoiding too much narrative detail while emphasising external visual detail.

³⁴⁶ Steve Eng, 'Barbarian Bard: The Poetry of Robert E. Howard' in *The Dark Barbarian*, p.58. But 'The Last Hour' in *Always Comes Evening* (p.59) actually refers to itself in terms of an image in the last line.

³⁴⁷ *Savage Sword of Conan*, vol.1 no.3, 30-32, December 1974. The original Howard story appears in *Kull* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1985) pp.13-27.

³⁴⁸ *New Writing* no.1 vol.2 2005: 'a recent talk at the Tate Gallery, London by academy award winning writer and director Anthony Minghella', 58-67 (p.63).

³⁴⁹ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.422.

A case in point in *The Shadow Cycles* would be my resistance to stating plainly the reason for the summoning of the Phoenix Prey: the classic ‘Seven Samurai’/‘Magnificent Seven’ recruitment of heroes/warriors offers eminently culturally accessible material for Booth’s hunches. I found a similar idea discussed in a Michael Moorcock interview from 1977, not on the subject of Elric but of his Jerry Cornelius tetralogy:

some of the narrative connections of the stories are left out. That creates atmosphere, a strange multipossibility, nonlinear structure. It allows interpretation from the reader. You want to try and keep all those possibilities running rather than, as in much conventional fiction, collapsing into a rigid framework. All through the Cornelius stories are little fragments of different ideas: the same ideas making new connections...³⁵⁰

Thus the idea of image rather than narrative as the dominating element in sword-&-sorcery is one I experimented with, making my chapters in *TSC* highly detailed ‘tableaux’ - making the reader ‘interpret’ the narrative as a viewer interprets a narratively loaded painting. On a number of occasions Howard refers in his stories to scenes as ‘tableau’ – the first paragraph of the Kull story ‘Swords of the Purple Kingdom’ is one example. Adrian Smith’s ‘Chronicles of Hate’ fantasy graphic novel largely eschews words and presents several tableaux panels, reinforcing the visual and tableau potentialities of S&S. My use of a karst limestone pavement and several instances of tessellate flooring in *The Shadow Cycles* milieu are oblique pointers to my adopting of the tableau strategy. Howard’s intensity may come in part through Coffman’s adjectival and adverbial ‘action packing’ of action scenes, and hopefully mine comes in part through a less overt visual loading of sentences.

The same idea licenses a strategy, not unprecedented in literary fiction, of fragmenting the narrative, adding to my alternatives to Howard’s ‘violences’ and making another connection with the numinous/sublime. Shaw, in his examination of the latter points out: ‘If the beautiful relates to notions of unity and harmony, then the sublime refers to *fragmentation* and disharmony.’³⁵¹ He also quotes from Burke: ‘The mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused *images*; which affect because they are crowded and confused.’³⁵² The term ‘crowded’ might be applied without strain to my use of density of description in *The Shadow Cycles*.

³⁵⁰ ‘and I type rather fast...’, Interview with Mark Abient, *Vortex* no.4 vol. 1, April 1977, 36-40 (p.40).

³⁵¹ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), p.148. My italics.

³⁵² Burke, *Enquiry*, p.57, my italics. Shaw, p.52.

The tableau method also reinforces a strategy of restraining access to the inner lives of characters, and it fits well with the idea of managing what the reader sees or knows through my technique of 'giving', something particularly important to characterization in *TSC* as detailed below. Howard would draw on a kind of para-rhetoric which I place within my umbrella term 'berserker synecdoche', conflating the vivid and the vague in action scenes and potentially conflating potential and kinetic violence by mediating information in this way. As noted earlier, chase sequences are particularly amenable to this conflation, not only in Howard's work, but also in the stories of later sword-&-sorcery practitioners such as Roger Zelazny and Dennis More.³⁵³ Night or darkness, again, a kind of chthonic, nurtures and enhances the effect. The Solomon Kane story 'Skulls in the Stars' and the first Conan story 'The Phoenix on the Sword' contain two cases in point.³⁵⁴

This again seems to move away from the idea of narrative domination - an attractive consideration for my book-length story, but surely more viable for short stories, which can adopt an experimental tableau with less risk as it demands less investment by a reader. In O'Connor's study of the short story he suggests that a reading of James Joyce's 'Araby' is 'less like one's experience of reading than one's experience of glancing through a beautifully illustrated book.'³⁵⁵ This also implies a concept of distance which resonates with my agenda for *The Shadow Cycles*.

The pressure for a narrative line at book-length was still something I felt.

Indeed, after the first few chapters I began to have reservations about such an extreme strategy. Even though I intended to experiment, the deep-seated linearity of a written story, particularly a traditional sword-&-sorcery story, even down to sentence level, began to dominate. Word pictures were unable, for me, to match the immediacy of true visuals. As it turned out, the solution was within the story already.

Tarot-Reading Dynamic

Early in *The Shadow Cycles*, Sstheness uses a kind of tarot pack to predict the arrival of the Phoenix Prey. I decided to try for a tarot card reading dynamic for the story itself. Each chapter or scene would become one card - one unit. Reading a tarot layout has similarities to reading a story, generic or otherwise, but there are significant differences. The sequence of units/events is important. Greer Gilman states that while 'stories are temporal', 'myth is

³⁵³ Roger Zelazny, 'Passage to Dilfar' in *Dilvish, the Damned* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982); Keith Taylor writing as Dennis More, 'Buried Silver' in *Fantastic* no.1, vol. 26, February 1977.

³⁵⁴ Howard, *Solomon Kane* (Baen), pp.7-18 and Howard, *The Coming of Conan* (Random House), pp.7-27.

³⁵⁵ Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1963), p.116.

spatial. It has a crystalline structure [...] A sort of molecular mythology kit'.³⁵⁶ Levi Strauss sees myth as a kind of language which can be broken down into individual units or 'mythemes' which, like the basic sound units of language, or 'phonemes', acquire meaning only when combined together in particular ways. Though a pre-understood set of characters, situations, underlying dianoia is one way to define genre, in *TSC* the significance of the order is not handed to the reader straightforwardly, but must be *interpreted*. So the tarot provides a useful metaphor for a reader interpreting or filling in gaps of plot or character motivation or missing generic elements. It implicitly licenses the reader to dwell on individual cards/narrative units more than might be the case in a more conventional reading dynamic. It also licenses the writer to slightly extend descriptive passages beyond narrative conventionality: as for example my description of the Dragonkeep roof: 'And the vaulted roof-sky was porphyry. Purple porphyry ribbed with rainbows. Emerald, garnet, spinel, sapphire, ruby, opal, chrysoberyl, topaz, amethyst, jasper, a hundred other precious crystals.'

It equally licenses a greater tendency for a reader to review previous cards/units more often than would be the case in said conventional dynamic. Also the overall tarot layout sensibility exposes more blatantly the gaps that exist in all novels/narratives. Even in terms of internal structure, any number of units/sequences within the story suggest this overarching sensibility: details are placed with particular emphasis on their effect in relation to the next detail. The taut sentence/clause/phrase style of *TSC* adds extra emphasis to this. This is admittedly simply an extension of existing narrative technique. Indeed an example exists in the Howard story 'Black Colossus'.³⁵⁷ In a long paragraph Howard introduces princess Yasmela with a typical prose-poem style general description before focusing in on a precise and ominous moment in time. Only in the following paragraph is the 'shapeless shadow' which menaces her revealed. The sequence builds slowly, layering on detail after detail.

This set of observations enabled me to choose to 'facet' *The Shadow Cycles* in terms of plot structure. Rather than fragmenting drastically, this method would keep the story in touch with traditional sword-&-sorcery while subverting the form, in keeping with my aim to subvert rather than destroy. (The word 'facet' is used repeatedly in both critical and creative parts of this thesis.) In *TSC* the tessellate floors in both archives and also the tessellate-like

³⁵⁶Michael Swanwick, 'Inside Jack Daw's Pack: An Interview with Greer Gilman', *Foundation*, 83 (2001), 52-72 (p.61).

³⁵⁷Howard, 'Colossus', p.33.

karst and the (fractured) stained-glass archive found in that other realm all allude to the tableaux/tarot/faceting layout strategy.³⁵⁸

CHARACTERIZATION

The Technique of ‘Giving’ – An Aesthetic of Glimpses

Hugh Kenner described Ezra Pound’s early poetry in terms of ‘An aesthetic of glimpses’. I considered this an aesthetic suited to *The Shadow Cycles*, both in general description of the ‘other’ and in terms of characterization. To provide a momentary ‘glimpse’ of the inner life of the characters, ‘giving’ rather than telling or showing, enables them to remain unknown on a domestic naturalistic level, but at the same time allows the reader some emotional involvement. Such eschewing of domestic touches extended to the social-cultural details of my milieu, reinforcing the numinous alterity of effect, including characterization, which I hope dominates the story. In order to reinforce this effect I elected to largely eschew free indirect style in *The Shadow Cycles* except in those glimpses – and even there use it sparingly. This ‘giving’ creates intimacy combined with distance, a mediation between modern novel and myth; the inner lives of characters are presented in snatches, or, to again recruit Kenner’s phrase, an ‘aesthetic of glimpses’:

Long after Zantalliz has left the table, Phariane sits. She dwells on his hands. Not so much the pulling away but the manner of the pulling away. There was bitterness in the movement. Phariane has heard bitterness in his voice before. But what robs her of sleep that night is how sharply he reacted. Anger is something she had not suspected in him before.

Thus, when the call comes in that selfsame night that a Shadowfast had been sighted, she finds herself welcoming it. She frowns. Another token of strange times, of the approaching Uroboros. To welcome the sighting of a Shadowfast.

In this example, the misdirection of suggesting that the token is the sighting, quickly overturned by the revelation that it is the welcoming, is an example of the momentary misdirection of characterization the technique afforded me. Similarly the opening tavern scene where an anticipated fight never occurs demonstrates the subtle undermining of genre attempted throughout.

³⁵⁸ In the published version of the book, as detailed in the Double Shadow appendix, sequences are combined for ease of plot development; thus this faceting element is greatly reduced. In fact this version is actually more chronologically fragmented, less linear than the thesis version.

Two Ravens (1977) by Cecelia Holland is another influence on this strategy.³⁵⁹ She employs a mythic treatment of character by rarely explicitly stating emotions and thoughts, and when so doing using omniscient voice – ‘giving’ rather than telling to complement the showing of the visual narrative. Developing this, and again drawing on wider literary reading, I decided that no detailed naturalistic character backfill was required. Narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan gave impetus to this strategy, referencing non-naturalistic characterizing practices of such writers as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and D.H. Lawrence.³⁶⁰

Though *The Shadow Cycles* is third person throughout, I also bore in mind A.S. Byatt’s comment, that in the first person novel, ‘the characters, seen through the narrator’s eyes, tend to be systems of behaviour rather than centres of consciousness’.³⁶¹ In ‘giving’ the main viewpoint characters³⁶² are both; emotional involvement should occur through means other than naturalistic reader-character identification, something Moorcock is preoccupied by in *Wizardry*.³⁶³

I did, however, aim for a depth to my characters, though not of a naturalistic type and one useful thought was to consider an analogy between my approach to characterization with the effect of the tragic mask in ancient Greek theatre. Sir Peter Hall commented at length on the intensity achieved with masks in the 1997 radio series ‘The Sound of Masks’, noting that ‘The extraordinary thing about all mask work is that it makes the emotion more possible not less. The mask enables intensities of emotion to be expressed. [...] The masks have to be absolutely ambiguous’. Utilizing characters who are non-naturalistic, in effect masks, I hoped would allow them to operate over several levels of resonance and enable horror to be more directly addressed, emotions to be more extreme *through* the distancing rather than in spite of it. Again, this is a more direct, less naturalistic manner of characterization. Although this entails the risk of creating formulaic characters, the ambiguity of emotion and motivation facilitated by the giving technique hopefully allows me to avoid this pitfall in *TSC*. Additionally, as far as is known, Greek theatre characters with masks are not seen as

³⁵⁹ Cecelia Holland, *Two Ravens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

³⁶⁰ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1983), pp.29-39.

³⁶¹ Byatt is quoted in K.V. Bailey, ‘Alien Gifties: The Reflexive Perspective’ in *Foundation*, 49 (1990), 23-34 (p.27).

³⁶² My original intention was to switch viewpoint character chapter by chapter to emphasize isolation of characters, which I abandoned in favour of a detached selectively omniscient mode of narrative. O’Connor characterizes the short story as favouring characters outside the social mainstream – this exactly fits the Phoenix Prey. His concept of a ‘submerged population’, essential to the short story form in his opinion, could be likened to either the Phoenix Prey *or* the citizens of the wyrms.

³⁶³ Moorcock, *Wizardry*, p.104.

stereotypical or dull - the style of acting is the focus of attention for an audience. I hoped for a similar focus on style rather than three-dimensional personality. Diana Devlin comments that:

It might seem strange that a beautiful mature woman would be played by a man in his fifties, but only an actor who has spent many years on the stage is considered to have the power and skill to evoke the full poetry of the role, and to use the subtleties of light and shade falling on different surfaces of the mask.³⁶⁴

The light and shade in a prose story becomes verbal: another meaning for the 'Shadow Cycles' title.

Furthermore, the use of masks is not exclusive to ancient Greek culture. Devlin's comment refers to Noh theatre, but Herzog observes: 'The cultic use of masks occurs all over the world, and from folk-lore and ethnology it can be collected that the mask was a means of representing the dead or the Death-Demon.'³⁶⁵The connection (resonance) with death was useful, given my conviction that Howardian sword-&-sorcery contains an element of deathwish in its sensibility.

In summation, the use of 'giving' would be a major element in maintaining otherness of, or at least distance from, character. The obvious difficulty which the technique presented was how to decide which parts should be giving: just thoughts and feelings or character knowledge? It became clear early on that the first two would be regarded as restricted to the 'giving' sections. Character knowledge, and indeed knowledge external to characters, was more fluid in its deployment.

The Visual (2)

Howard's return to popular prominence in the 1960s coincided with the rise of the artist considered an important interpreter of his oeuvre, Frank Frazetta. In the mid-sixties the Conan stories were collected and published as mass market paperbacks. The cover paintings for the series established Frazetta as the definitive Howard interpreter. In many ways the characteristics of the artist's work parallel those of Howard's work.

In the painting 'Berserker',³⁶⁶the focus of the painting is a warrior on horseback. This figure dominates the picture just as Howard's powerfully realised heroes dominated his tales, the supporting characters rarely more than sketched in. The colours are toned down, except for a vivid crimson fire that skirts the background and a jagged crimson lightning flash in the

³⁶⁴Diana Devlin, *Mask and Scene* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.61.

³⁶⁵Edgar Herzog, *Psyche and Death* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966), p.79-80.

³⁶⁶ Frank Frazetta, *The Fantastic Art of Frank Frazetta* (London: Pan, 1976).

sky. The colour is highly suggestive of blood and violence. The warrior on horseback (Conan) is the essential hero of the school of romantic primitivism. Savage and mighty-thewed he sits his horse with sword aloft: an almost god-like posture. Frazetta imbued his Conan with the same energy that Howard imparted to the original.

Reminiscent of the effect of pulp illustrations mentioned earlier, Frazetta often employed a technique of sharp foreground and vague background. This is something I have echoed in *The Shadow Cycles* by focusing strongly on the major characters and only vaguely sketching in others, never accessing the latter's viewpoints or describing them in detail.

Again acknowledging the significance of the visual in Ur-text sword-&-sorcery, *TSC* attempts to present those major characters more through vivid images rather than articulated histories; the restricted access to inner lives becomes a necessary, serious, oulipo.

Ambiguity

As high/epic fantasy has developed, characterization has become more naturalistically complex; M. John Harrison warns against fantasy turning what was originally metaphor into the literal – the same could be said for the naturalistic psychological impulse in modern fantasy. I view sword-&-sorcery as potentially more suited to ambiguity – my ‘Storm of Shadow’. Wayne Booth distinguishes a difference between ambiguity and complexity with ‘clarity’ in terms of characterization, and I believe my restricted character development, partly via an emphasis on the visual, beneficially pushes my protagonists toward the former.³⁶⁷

The ambiguous effect facilitated by the ‘giving’ technique offers another benefit. Sword-&-sorcery has always paid lip-service to the idea of amoral protagonists and is potentially amoral (another aspect of alterity). In *The Shadow Cycles*, my characters Gel, Gemmored and Zantalliz have all acknowledged the concept of evil within as well as without in different ways – a theme in common with characters in literary fiction.³⁶⁸ The chthonic ambiguity of character I employ in *TSC* is in one sense an attempt to push the form further toward a truly ‘other’ amoral effect.

This strategy resulted in having to find an alternative to the intensity produced by the emotion of dread. Howard’s Ur-text characters, including Conan, generally experience a sharper sense of dread when confronted by or confronting the numinous than later sword-&-

³⁶⁷ Booth, *Rhetoric*, p.135.

³⁶⁸ As for example Joseph Conrad. <<http://Research/Joseph%20Conrad%20%20biography%20-%20British%20writer%20%20Encyclopedia%20Britannica.htm>> [accessed 2 February 2015]

sorcery creations, certainly more than high fantasy characters tend to. This may be another instance of the similarity of sword-&-sorcery to the Gothic, where dread is often predominant. Terry Heller quotes G. Richard Thompson's remark: 'the key development of the Gothic novel is not so much terror as more broadly, dread.'³⁶⁹ Certainly the balance between potential violence (dread) and kinetic violence (in this case actual revelation of a horror) can be crucial to sustaining interest over a Gothic novel, the balance necessarily favouring the potential over the kinetic. The short story form can give the kinetic a greater role, as is sometimes the case in sword-&-sorcery short stories. However, the characterizing methodology which I employed for *The Shadow Cycles* with necessarily limited access to characters' feelings (making them almost as much 'other' as the otherness they encounter) largely closed off this option for me. I came to view Shelley's conception of the 'negative sublime' effect as being closer to what I was after than the Todorovian 'fantastic'. However, the Howardian leitmotif of a berserker rage utilized by his protagonists at times of crisis to combat supernatural threat was something *TSC* developed in making the protagonists continuously part of the 'other'. In effect they became mobile versions of the 'numinous envelopes' posited earlier. The Howardian balance of relative human-ness and occasional otherness is thus here reversed.

Development

Character development is a subject sometimes discussed in connection with sword-&-sorcery protagonists who typically continue over a series of stories: 'The story reveals a lot about why Elric acts the way he does,' Allen suggests of *Elric of Melniboné* (1972).³⁷⁰ Interestingly it is Moorcock's first true novel-length Elric, earlier books being sets of interconnected stories such as *Stormbringer* (1965) and *The Sleeping Sorceress* (1972). Although Moorcock claims such sequences of stories were planned together, Allen recommends readers read the Elric stories in the order of publication rather than internal chronology.³⁷¹ Stretched to include the order of writing, this recommendation echoes current critical orthodoxy regarding Howard: 'Such a presentation not only respects Howard's intentions, it also casts a very different light on the character [Conan] and his evolution,' writes Patrice Louinet.³⁷² Allen goes on to outline his own rationale:

³⁶⁹ Terry Heller, *The Delights of Terror* <www.public.coe.edu/~theller/essays/delights/contents.html> [accessed: 31 August 2007]

³⁷⁰ Paul C. Allen, 'Of Swords & Sorcery' in *Fantasy Crossroads* no.13, June 1978, 31-40, p.33.

³⁷¹ Colin Greenland (ed.), *Death is no Obstacle* (Manchester: Savoy, 1992), p.1.

³⁷² Louinet's introduction to Howard, *The Coming of Conan* (Random House), p.xx.

An author creates a given hero and his world initially in the first story he (or she) writes,' he says. 'In subsequent stories, the hero and his world are further embellished; they take on subtle hues and shadings and they grow and mature in the author's mind. [...] Whether the author intends it or not, the hero and his world are constantly developing.'³⁷³

I fully intended to avoid not only naturalistic characterization but also character development, wanting the characters in my story to remain less than entirely human and consequently part of the otherness of the milieu. Here, I again wanted to develop Howard's effect of protagonist alterity mentioned above. Paul Shovlin, in discussing 'Beyond the Black River', notes that Conan is unchanged by events.³⁷⁴ However I felt that this often, albeit retroactively, reduced the power of the supernatural and violent encounters of the stories. Longinus's comments on triviality also apply: naturalistic characterization gets in the way of evoking a numinous effect.³⁷⁵

Literary sword-&-sorcery or fantasy, or fiction thus categorized, champions character development and gives great access to characters' inner lives. This makes a story more naturalistically sophisticated, but tends to reduce its intensity. Novel-length sword-&-sorcery, for example *Prisoner of the Horned Helmet* (1988)³⁷⁶ or Wagner's Kane novels, retain some of the protagonist's otherness by utilising supporting characters as empathic surrogates in whom the reader can invest naturalistic concern. Like Howard, Wagner also alternates viewpoint modes between restrained access to his protagonist's inner life and times where he is merely observed at surface level: 'But this did not appear to greatly influence Kane.'³⁷⁷ This, however, only succeeds to a limited extent. Simply by moving through a novel-length story with a protagonist, the reader develops a familiarity with the character by default, as is the case with Kane and Elric.³⁷⁸ The problem is not entirely absent from characters moving through a set of short stories, but is less pronounced. It was while wrestling with this problem of character development that I decided to avoid using the term novel to refer to *The Shadow Cycles*. In his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye argues that:

³⁷³ Allen, *Swords*, p.33.

³⁷⁴ Paul Shovlin, 'Canaan Lies Beyond the Black River: Howard's Dark Rhetoric of the Contact Zone' in *Conan Meets the Academy*, 91-102 (p.95).

³⁷⁵ Longinus, section xliii, p.151.

³⁷⁶ James Silke, *Frank Frazetta's Death Dealer: Prisoner of the Horned Helmet* (London: Grafton Books, 1988).

³⁷⁷ Wagner, *Dark Crusade* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), p.83.

³⁷⁸ See Allen's comment on development, above.

The novel tends to be extroverted and personal; its chief interest is in human character, as it manifests itself in society. The romance tends to be introverted and personal; it also deals with characters, but in a more subjective way. The characters of romance are heroic and therefore inscrutable.³⁷⁹

The term 'romance' has its advantages, one of which is that it does not contain, either connotatively as the novel or denotatively as the short story, a suggestion of length. Yet questions of nomenclature aside, I found that working at novel-length, character development was unavoidable. Simply by existing and acting over several hundred pages, consistency of motivation could be imagined by a reader - and several of my characters went through epiphanies or anagnorises. Thus practically I could only reduce their 'humanness' rather than keep them entirely 'other'. I tried to fight against this humanizing effect by making epiphanies oblique, as Harnak's realization:

She takes a length of the whip between her hands and lays it across her back, from one shoulder to the opposite hip. Then she begins to saw it, slowly, back and forth. The barbs cut across the sometimes ancient paths of the scars, and the not so ancient, ripping their calloused seals and releasing the pain again.

Yes.

Now she knows why she took the whip.

This pain, this old pain, this pain feels like faith.

If the 'absolute unapproachable' is a fundamental element of the kind of sword-&-sorcery I was attempting, then any realistically psychological character arc, any kind of Jamesian reflector, lucid or otherwise, was not only unattainable but undesirable. The moral codes of the characters in *TSC* are alien - again part of the absolute unapproachable.

Of all the main characters, only Phariane begins as 'approachable' and even she becomes otherwise. Characters become part of a metonymic meta-otherness which all aspects of the story contribute to. I found Ewan's idea, cited by Rimmon-Kenan, of characters occupying a point on a combination of three continua, complexity, development, and penetration of inner life, helpful here.³⁸⁰ All the main characters of *The Shadow Cycles* experience development, as mentioned above. Penetration of inner life, effected by my technique of 'giving' is, if partially oblique, certainly present. The complexity of the characters is largely a by-product of the former complexity and development categories (though for 'complexity' read 'ambiguity' as mentioned earlier).

³⁷⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 1990 rpt.), p.308.

³⁸⁰ *Narrative Fiction*, p.41.

STYLE OF LANGUAGE

Register

The Thieves' World fantasy stories use a very contemporary style which mars any sense of otherness.³⁸¹ They, among many others, carry the familiarising legacy of Dungeons & Dragons and similar role-playing games. But this trend toward naturalism and away from Howard's Ur-textual romanticized aesthetic began with Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and Grey Mouser stories, which I term Neo-S&S. This trend has become ubiquitous in twenty-first century sword-&-sorcery and fantasy as a general migration from alterity.³⁸²

Even Howard could lapse into this on occasion. In the Bison Howard manuscript version of 'The Black Stranger' there is what might be considered un-S&S-like language: 'Damn' peculiar things going on along this coast [...] They're all crazy as hell.'³⁸³ This is more in keeping with Howard's westerns, the colloquial feel giving energy but denying estrangement.

But did he have a conscious vision for what sword-&-sorcery language should be? Possibly not. Redraftings of stories, such as 'The Phoenix on the Sword' tend to show that he hardly retouched language, concentrating more on structure.³⁸⁴ In *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, Moorcock quotes DevandraVarma's essay 'The Gothic Flame' in a discussion of castles' architectural roughness and savagery - perhaps an analogue to Howard's prose.³⁸⁵ Tempting as it was to equate Gothic architecture with Howard's style, on re-reading Howard extensively I found that a 'rough-hewn-ness' was by no means a consistent quality. In fact despite de Camp's praise in *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers* and acclaim from many other and various quarters, Howard's prose is sometimes little more if never less than functional,

³⁸¹ A series of shared-world anthologies edited by Robert Asprin and published by Ace Books and Penguin in the 1980s. There is a prime example of what I'm discussing on p.20 of the first *Thieves' World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984): "'Was that the Prince?' 'My dad says he's the best thing for this town.' 'My dad says he's too young to do a good job.' 'Izzat so!'"

³⁸² Examples abound: 'Some food sure'd be nice.' ('Bloodgold' by J.R.Schifino in *Fantasy Tales* magazine no. 4, spring 1979, 34-41, p.37); in 'The Running of Ladyhound' by John Jakes (*Savage Tales* magazine no. 10, 1975, 26-33, 46-55, p.46), a lute player 'did two more numbers'. Longinus (*ibid.*), section xliii, p.151, discusses triviality of expression.

³⁸³ Here 'The Black Stranger' refers to the story of that name rather than the collection of Howard stories with the same name (p.54).

³⁸⁴ The original opening of this story is mainly dialogue, the published version far more atmospheric and descriptive. Both versions can be found in *The Coming of Conan* (Random House).

³⁸⁵ Moorcock, *Wizardry*, p.33.

his rhythms prosaic.³⁸⁶ No Tolkien-style elegance, certainly, but often Howard's characteristic driving style could be extremely skilful - not to say sophisticated - in merging muscular pulp prose with a more exotic tinge created by diction and/or syntax. (My comparison of Howard's original prose with de Camp's edited versions earlier in the thesis demonstrates this.) Possibly the former aspect of his style conveys an impression of roughness - an abrasiveness which creates a linguistic friction .

A crystallization of my concept of Howard's style as 'berserker synecdoche' can be found, ironically enough in one of the poorer Conan stories, 'The Pool of the Black One': 'Details stood out, briefly, like black etchings on a background of blood.'³⁸⁷ This encapsulates Howard's 'broad stroke' style commented upon by countless critics, including Leiber in his contribution to *The Dark Barbarian*.³⁸⁸ (Leiber also mentions 'words and phrases of power' - vague and impressionistic images which I've noted combine with vivid closely observed precisions of detail. Howard favours the word 'thing', which is at once solid and specific, and vague.) In evoking berserker synecdoche, Howard's vague or clichéd words are not signifiers exactly, more like sounds, semi-signifiers, semantic ghosts in the Howardian storytelling machine.³⁸⁹ Passages with both specific concrete detail and ghosts combined produce best effect. Too much solid detail can be pedestrian, too much ghost too vague...

Howard's partial reliance on near cliché, which Leiber admits *and* defends, actually aids narrative drive, for the reader must not be brought to a halt attempting to elucidate a meaning in the middle of a confrontation or chase. Rather, such familiar constructions function as slingshots of rhythmic impetus more than as language. Howard's use of alliteration, onomatopoeia, active verbs and adverbs, flickerings of hyperbole, all contribute to the overall effect. There is also, inconsistent yet marked, a spirit of anapaest in Howard's rhythms: Spencer refers to 'Howard's exhilarating rhythmic sweep.'³⁹⁰ Tellingly, a classic example of anapaests in dictionaries of literary terms is Byron's 'The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold', which strikes a Howardian chord.

³⁸⁶de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen*, p.162. Howard's speed of composition may be a factor in this, as well as his 'instinctive-emotional' approach to writing where an emotional low might impact on his style.

³⁸⁷Howard, *Pool*, p.65.

³⁸⁸Leiber, 'Howard's Fantasy' in *The Dark Barbarian*, p.4.

³⁸⁹Howard, *Solomon Kane*, p.272 provides an example.

³⁹⁰ Paul Spencer, 'A Voice from the Past: An Overture from December 1943' in *Barbaric Triumph*, 3-4 (p.4).

Something rarely found in Howard's sword-&-sorcery, perhaps the other side of the contemporary style issue, is usage of archaisms. Indeed de Camp argues for judicious use of archaisms and archaic language in fantasy.³⁹¹ This echoes Eagleton's comment on the disproportion between signifiers and signified in 'literary' works: language which draws attention to itself.³⁹² He goes on to cite Jakobson's comment about literary writing as a kind of 'organised violence', which again resonates with the concept of Howard's stylistic violence. Certainly a novel or novel-length story has the advantage/ability to draw a reader into a style/register which then over such a length can become to a degree transparent, but thereby it risks becoming useless in evoking otherness, in engineering defamiliarization. The central concern of the Russian Formalists was to identify and define what distinguishes a literary work from any other kind of written expression, to define what constitutes literariness. Far from reflecting reality in some direct way as nineteenth century realist fiction pretends to do, the literary work tends to upset and disorient readerly expectations.³⁹³

This hints that generic fantasy and more literary work, in effect if not intent, might not be completely dissimilar. However, as Moorcock remarks:

This fascination with the antique is combined, of course, with a preference for archaic style. Most of the current attempts at this 'high' English are pretty pathetic, reminiscent of children trying to write historical stories by peppering the text with phrases like 'shiver me timbers'. They borrow largely from Tolkien as usual and produce from his original porridge a gruel increasingly thin and lumpy.³⁹⁴

I remain ambivalent on the issue. However, I do believe that sword-&-sorcery needs to avoid the mannered. Thus *TSC* initially attempted to allow otherness through a predominant simplicity, possibly equating to Otto's urgency, one of the six violences outlined previously. Longinus discusses the merits and demerits of plain versus ornate styles, and advocates periphrasis (circumlocution), as typified by some of the fantasy of Clark Ashton Smith, Jack Vance, and Adrian Cole, as a method of evoking the sublime.³⁹⁵ This may have a bearing on the characteristic elegance of the cosmic/macabre (Weird-S&S) form of sword-&-sorcery and some high fantasy, but the surface simplicity of Howard's prose style may allow for a more forceful contact with the numinous. My attempt to produce such a 'forceful otherness' partly

³⁹¹ de Camp, *Spell*, introduction.

³⁹² Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.2.

³⁹³ 'Defamiliarization' in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, p.207.

³⁹⁴ Moorcock, *Wizardry*, p.69.

³⁹⁵ Longinus, *On the Sublime* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1935), sections 30-31, pp.115, 119.

relies on my combination of the predominantly visual, with its emphasis on the external, with the poetic flourishes also mentioned above to create a challengingly suggestive ambiguity at certain moments. Also, through using a subtly periodic syntax and a subtly over-weighted level of detail, the latter relating to the tableau effect and tarot card layout reading dynamic discussed elsewhere, I attempted to make the language of *TSC* poise itself on the point of deconstruction. In fact the periodic effect extends beyond syntax to the faceted plot structure of the story. This technique also evokes an effect of the negative sublime, a form of sublimity closer to the numinous. As Paul Endo writes:

the negative sublime suspends [the] crystallization into hard, dogmatic meaning [...] [It] is less an outright repudiation of the sublime, then, than an attempt to isolate and mine its critical potential, that moment when comprehension, still emerging from incomprehension, retains its own negativity.³⁹⁶

Naming

Language plays a significant part in the ‘familiarising of the unfamiliar’. Otto allows me to push this point further, insisting that:

All language, in so far as it consists of words, purports to convey ideas or concepts [...] and the more clearly and unequivocally it does so, the better the language. And hence expressions of religious truth in language inevitably tend to stress the ‘rational’ attributes of God.³⁹⁷

Continuing my policy of modification or omission of generic orthodoxies, I decided to avoid ‘grounding’ the numinous effect by avoiding the use of generic names and modes of expression.

Graham Dunstan Martin continues:

I also believe that the normal world overflows our ability to grasp or comprehend it. Facing a wild sea, a snow-infested mountain, the infinitely black and glittering depths of the night sky - or even a single autumn leaf - we feel unable to encompass it, to contain it, *to reduce it to words*.³⁹⁸

Notwithstanding his stance on fantasy and logic, touched on earlier, Tolkien’s definition of Faerie in his essay ‘On Fairy Stories’ also nudges the idea favourably. ‘Faerie’, he says, ‘cannot be caught in a net of words [...] one of its qualities is to be indescribable though not

³⁹⁶ Paul Endo, ‘The Cenci: Recognizing the Shelleyan Sublime’ in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol.38, 1996, pp.379-97 (p.379).

³⁹⁷ Otto, *Holy*, p.2. C. C. Eastwood in *Life and Thought in the Ancient World* (Ipswich: Brechinset, 1964) links civilisation to language, language being the enabler of religion.

³⁹⁸ Martin, ‘Ruin’, p.91. My italics.

imperceptible.³⁹⁹The strategy of avoidance gains attraction also when Marina Warner, in *No Go the Bogeyman* (1998) maintains that the practice of ‘naming’ defuses fear.⁴⁰⁰Many other, diverse, sources point in the same direction, including Herzog:

Horror gets its special character from its incomprehensibility, its formlessness, and from the absence of any image, as well as from its invisibility. So long as the feeling of horror has no object *everything* becomes an object of terror, and (paradoxical as it may seem) both the terror and its object become unlimited. The ‘world’ becomes uncanny, and man feels that his whole existence is threatened and called into question. In such moments it is not so much that a man fears for himself as that he experiences nameless horror because he is confronted by something nameless - he is not confronted by a demon (which he would have to name).⁴⁰¹

Returning again to the Gothic, the 1823 stage version of *Frankenstein* ‘Presumption’ or ‘the Fate of Frankenstein’ by Richard Brinsley Peake produces an interesting aside. In a letter, Mary Shelley comments on the use of the dash to indicate the monster, played by Thomas Potter Cooke: ‘this nameless mode of naming the (un)nameable is rather good.’⁴⁰² Martin Esslin in *Theatre of the Absurd* comments: ‘Adamov’s usage of ‘god’ has been for so long degraded by usage that it has lost its meaning.’⁴⁰³

All the above led me to consider if resistance to naming is anti-generic at the deepest level.

As noted by numerous commentators, Howard seems to take an instinctive approach to naming, one which would suggest an approach favouring the *feel* of the numinous rather than a transparently rational and systemised approach suggestive of religion.⁴⁰⁴In avoiding

³⁹⁹J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p.15.

⁴⁰⁰ Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998). Rosemary Jackson’s classic study *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1995) pursues a similar path, though diametrically opposed to Warner: ‘Because it is nameable,’ she comments, ‘it is not easily exorcized. It exists prior to nomination as good or evil.’ (p.112).

⁴⁰¹ Edgar Herzog, *Psyche and Death* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966), pp.23-4.

⁴⁰² Letter, September 9, 1823.

⁴⁰³ Martin Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974, 3rd rev. edn.), p.68.

⁴⁰⁴ Coffman, in his ‘The Shadow Singer’ no.17, ‘Even the Great Howard Sometimes Nods’ <<http://www.robert-e-howard.org/crossplainsman/CPv2001n2archive.pdf>> [accessed 18 September 2013] makes both positive and negative points about Howard’s naming of fictional characters and places. Howard himself, in the foreword to *Worms of the Earth* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1974) talks about his choice of name for his Bran Mak Morn character in terms of a mix of scholarship and instinct. Louinet argues against Howard’s naming as instinctive. It is more systematic

generic safety, I've eschewed certain words, the very appearance of which have a grounding/damaging effect.⁴⁰⁵ A sample of these is listed below:

Forbidden Words:

Poniard, Barbarian, Magic/Magician or related terms e.g. Sorcery/Sorcerer, Vampire, Curse, Foul, Unholy, Foetor, Countenance, Thew(s) mighty or otherwise, Clad.

Indeed, forbidden words might be divided into three categories:

a) generic clichés (as above).

b) in keeping with my belief that sword-&-sorcery has an element of the irrational, words which mar the numinous/supernatural paradigmatic scaffolding of the milieu through being derived from science or science fiction because of their connotation of reason and logic.⁴⁰⁶

Howard is not immune to this, as in 'Black Colossus' where a character stands, 'the one atom of life', and contemporary and subsequent sword-&-sorcery writers including C.L. Moore, have also used such language, with expressions such as 'gravity pull' in Moore's Jirel story 'Black God's Kiss'.⁴⁰⁷ Karl Edward Wagner, in his Kane novel *Bloodstone* (admittedly more science fantasy than sword-&-sorcery in feel) refers to 'energy bolts' and later 'a lance of destroying energy hurled itself from his flame-wreathed fist'.⁴⁰⁸

c) Word-choice that trivialises, for instance, in the story 'Guardian of Rage', in Pitchblack's 'Flashing Swords' e-anthology (2006): 'trousers' squished' (22), and also, in the story 'The Bloated Curse', : 'daft' (twice – 52, 57). M. John Harrison, in the Viriconium story 'Lords of Misrule', includes words such as 'cartoons' in his descriptive prose and 'tarts' in his dialogue.⁴⁰⁹ Such words and expressions have, as mentioned earlier, become more prevalent over decades as the language of sword-&-sorcery has gravitated more towards a naturalism which suggests Russ's second category of genre evolution.⁴¹⁰ Both readers and writers seem

in his opinion but he cites no sources or references to back up this assertion. Howard, *The Coming of Conan* (Random House), p.xxii.

⁴⁰⁵ Diana Wynne Jones, in *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (London: Casell, 1996), makes a feature of such generic words and terms.

⁴⁰⁶ See my comment on Gardner Fox's sword-&-sorcery.

⁴⁰⁷ Howard, *Colossus*, p.11; C.L.Moore, *Black God's Shadow* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1977), p.70.

⁴⁰⁸ Wagner, *Bloodstone* (New York: Baen, 1991), pp.202, 251.

⁴⁰⁹ Harrison, *Viriconium*, p.158. Though in Harrison's case my earlier comment on the satiric/parodic intent of his sword-&-sorcery must be taken into account.

⁴¹⁰ This seems to be a very recent development: in *Swords of Darkness 2* (New York: Zebra Books, 1977) the editor Andrew J. Offutt, in his introduction to the story 'The Coming of Age in Zamora' recounts how he initially rejected the submission partly because it was 'too riddled with very modern phrases and expressions that jarred me out of the hf [heroic fantasy?] mood' (p.118).

untroubled by modern usage, which suggests less priority and value is being placed on atmosphere and less tolerance is being ceded to stylisation of language.

Hyperbole

A common perception of Howardian style sword-&-sorcery tends to focus on elements regarded as negative such as hyperbole, particularly in dialogue, a style brittle, even bombastic, straining for effect; perhaps achieving in effect an illustration of Russ's postulation that genre materials wear out.⁴¹¹ Linguistic pedestrianism equates possibly to what W.H.Auden referred to as 'Drab style' or a 'quiet tone of voice' in his essay/talk collection *Secondary Worlds*.⁴¹² He contrasts this with High style, which he maintains is no longer viable for poetry. Modern readers tend to find overtly stylised writing difficult to accept generally, particularly in speech. Moorcock notes the 'idiomatic language' of the chivalric romance.⁴¹³ For my own purposes, a later comment of his is more significant. 'While it is easy to grow tired of the chatty or intimate style in which a lot of generic fantasy is now written,' he says, 'it is sometimes almost impossible to get to grips with the excessively distanced narratives typical of Morris or Dunsany.'⁴¹⁴ My desire to create a language or register which conflates the energy of the former style with the alterity of the latter is again brought to mind. What I aimed for, then, was the *frisson* of estrangement in language, narration and dialogue, and the *energy* of economy and clarity, something Howard largely achieved. Howard's strong points are his description and narration but his dialogue edges toward the melodramatic at times, though this is possibly less noticeable than with many epigone writers because of his overall vividness and energy. Longinus refers to stylistic 'tumidity' and 'bombast' and refers to hyperbole again later.⁴¹⁵ Leiber in his *Fafhrd and Gray Mouser* stories uses the occasional arch/melodramatic phrase, but this is laid on a textual bed of irony, something the Howardian Ur-text avoids. Archness and melodramatic effect can be particularly problematic in sword-&-sorcery dialogue; yet because of the heightened nature of the overall register of the form, both in style and content, such dialogue can be appropriate and less jarring or destructive than overly modern or naturalistic speech.

Hyperbole may enhance physical violence, but it diminishes potential (anticipated) violence, which often dominates and heightens the intensity of a story overall, especially a

⁴¹¹Albeit the Weird-S&S form can utilize brittle or arch dialogue under the justification of its ironic tone.

⁴¹²W.H.Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p.116.

⁴¹³Ibid. p.24.

⁴¹⁴Ibid. p.94.

⁴¹⁵Longinus, *On the Sublime*, pp.25, 47. In section 38, he actively counsels against hyperbole (p.130).

book-length story, where physical violence page after page serves to dull intensity. This point is demonstrated, perhaps intentionally, in Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* and less advertently by Wagner's Kane novels.

In *The Dialogic Imagination* Mikhail Bakhtin talks about literary language as a mix or dialogue of languages: a heteroglossia.⁴¹⁶ Sociolinguistics' diglossia refers to two different 'varieties' co-occurring within a 'speech community', generally referred to as 'high' and 'low' as in Auden's *Secondary Worlds*. Both these sets of theories offer the possibility of some kind of tension within a story through a hybridisation of language, which I gave thought to.

Once again it was the style of Cecelia Holland, interestingly someone standing to one side of genre recognition, who demonstrated to me that the tension I was looking for in style was achievable without recourse to crude hyperbole.

Over the years, Cecelia's style hasn't changed drastically [...] Her research is thorough, and critics frequently mention how her tense [...] writing style gives readers a sense of immediacy. Her plainspoken dialogue has a similar effect: its very lack of adornment keeps the focus on the words, the characters, and the action.⁴¹⁷

Though *Two Ravens* has no sorcery providing a direct numinous element, it is set in a fantasy-like milieu of twelfth century Ireland and Norway. Its sparse language, dominated by short paratactical single-clause sentences gave me a touchstone to help me avoid the generic sword-&-sorcery style which is identifiable even when done well, as reference my forbidden words list above. This style, from Howard onwards, though not necessarily as overt in Neo-S&S or Weird-S&S, strives for effect in use of emphatic adverbs and adjectives. However if not executed carefully (admittedly a problematic and possibly subjective judgement), it can result in an arch overblown style which is unintentionally self-parodic.

Kinetic (Physical) Violence

As the metaphoric 'sword' in my definition of sword-&-sorcery, treatment of physical or kinetic violence is an essential consideration. Moorcock's style was considered in this context in *Fantasy Crossroads* no. 13. Moorcock's depiction of violence is often brisk, almost suggesting squeamishness as does perhaps a painterly detachment - there is very little elaboration in description, or flourishes in imagery:

⁴¹⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁴¹⁷ Sarah Johnson, 'Such Great Stories in History: An Interview with Cecilia Holland' <<http://www.historicalnovelsociety.org/interview-with-cecelia-holland/>> [accessed 27 November 2013]

Elric's black blade struck with frenzied force at the throat of the leading axe-man and sheared off his head. Howling demoniacally now that it had again tasted blood, the sword began to writhe in Elric's grasp, seeking flesh *in which* to bite.⁴¹⁸

Note the 'in which' (my italics) above. Moorcock's violence is always elegant and controlled. The speed with which he famously wrote is a trait in common with Howard. Moorcock claims he could type on a manual typewriter at over 120 words per minute. Yet there is a kind of stylistic self-possession about his work which will not allow him to write an inelegant sentence, at least, not accidentally. Whereas generally Howard, as noted above, in passages of kinetic violence, and even sometimes in evoking atmosphere, gives an impression of hardly reining in his images:

But he [Conan] sensed here a cosmic vileness transcending mere human degeneracy - a perverse branch on the tree of Life, developed along lines outside human comprehension. It was not at the agonized contortions of the wretched boy that he was shocked, but at the cosmic obscenity which could drag to light the abysmal secrets that sleep in the unfathomed darkness of the human soul, and find pleasure in the brazen flaunting of such things as should not be hinted at, even in restless nightmares.⁴¹⁹

Moorcock's style, less visceral and clearly more self-conscious, also often incorporates an element of irony. It might be argued that it is the *sense* of Howard sometimes *resisting* such overblown passages which adds a kind of homeopathic tautness to much of his prose. In 'The Pool of the Black One', the sword fight between Zaporavo and Conan could present an analogy to the contrast of Howardian and Moorcockian styles:

There was no man in the world more deeply and thoroughly versed than he [Zaporavo] in the lore of swordcraft [...] Against his fighting craft was matched blinding speed and strength impossible to a civilized man. Conan's manner of fighting was unorthodox, but instinctive and natural as that of a timber wolf.⁴²⁰

Wagner's depiction of violence in his Kane stories feels calculated: 'The werewolf glared at him balefully, its bloody tusks gnashing hideously.'⁴²¹ There is something almost deadpan about Wagner's use of stock Howardian verbs, adverbs and adjectives in a subtly

⁴¹⁸Moorcock, 'The Dreaming City' in *The Stealer of Souls* (London: Mayflower Books, 1969), 9-39 (p.28).

⁴¹⁹Howard, *Pool*, pp.41-2.

⁴²⁰'Pool', pp.33-4.

⁴²¹Wagner, *The Book of Kane* (Rhode Island: Donald M. Grant, 1985), p.63.

more restrained (grimly restrained?) manner, though the grimness is effective.⁴²² I found myself considering if the more controlled prose of such stories actually dampened their energy. Szumskyj observes that ‘Wagner was not a poet by nature, nor was he one by trade.’⁴²³ Only rarely does his prose seem to exploit rhythm and sonority as strongly as Howard is prone to do in his fiction. Wagner’s *Dark Crusade* contains a passage suggesting the difference between Howard and himself: ‘Kane’s attack was that of a berserker – headlong and unstoppable. Yet a careful observer would note that this was no suicidal frenzy - rather that each movement, each blow and parry was finely calculated.’⁴²⁴

If not in William Hodgson’s manner⁴²⁵ or quite in the way of *Beowulf* I did feel that the language of *The Shadow Cycles* should be poetic in some sense - just not bloatedly pseudo-lyrical as is sometimes the manner of Stephen Donaldson. Abstract metaphors form part of the characteristics of my 'Berserker Synecdoche' model. Yet Donaldson predominantly relies on similes which license their abstractness because simile ‘grounds’ or ‘anchors’ the effect with ‘like’: ‘And through the dawn, Atiaran and Covenant moved heavily, unevenly, like pieces of broken lament’.⁴²⁶ I decided that my previously mentioned tactic of sparing use of obtuse poetic flourishes, converting understanding into effect or resonance rather than communication, gave me what I was after to give my sequences of violence a Howardian intensity.⁴²⁷ In fact such violations of surface transparency become more frequent towards the end of the story, underpinning the breaking down of order initiated by the Uroboros and also referencing the disintegration of (reasoned) language when approaching the absolute unapproachable of the numinous. David Murray, writing on Carlos Castaneda, touches on the use of such fragmentation of language: ‘In other words, the sentence keeps disappearing into the ‘other side,’ leaving gaps in our syntax, discontinuities, breaks of meaning,’.⁴²⁸ Howard himself included such flourishes in his fiction from time to time. Leiber mentions Howard’s use of ‘swift thought-arabesque’.⁴²⁹

⁴²²Wagner, *Dark Crusade* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), pp.78-9.

⁴²³ Benjamin Szumsky, 'Sharpening the Silver Dagger: Karl Edward Wagner's Poetry for the Damned' in *Star*Line* magazine, vol.30 no.2, March/April 2007.

⁴²⁴Wagner, *Dark Crusade*, p.104.

⁴²⁵ William Hope Hodgson’s massive novel, *The Night Land* (London: Everleigh Nash and G. Bell & Son, 1912) relies on a hypnotically rhythmic prose style making heavy use of polysyndeton.

⁴²⁶Stephen R. Donaldson, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p.141.

⁴²⁷Harrison says: ‘language is an invitation to meaning, not a set of prescriptions.’ 'The Profession of Science Fiction, 40: The Profession of Fiction' *Foundation*, 46 (1989), 5-13 (endnote 11, p.13).

⁴²⁸David Murray, 'Anthropology, Fiction, and the Occult: The Case of Carlos Castaneda' in *Literature of the Occult*, ed. Messent (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc, 1981), 171-82 (p.178).

⁴²⁹Leiber, 'Howard's Fantasy', p.3.

Some kind of poetic ambiguity, on the other hand, I hope, breaks down some of the distancing effect of a more measured prose style and additionally produces a mild disorientation of the reader. This, I hope, helps subvert generic dullness and touches on the numinous effect of strong fantastic fiction - which is emotional rather than rational.

Giving – the use of past-present tenses

Longinus makes a comment which strikes an intriguing chord. ‘If you introduce things which are past as present and now taking place,’ he says, ‘you will make your story no longer a narration but an actuality.’⁴³⁰ Could present tense passages be thought of as actually outside time in some way? There was certainly an immediacy gained by the present tense sections which I thought was potentially beneficially estranging. It also gave a desirable stylistic variation, possibly akin to the variety of language employed by Howard noted earlier. To differentiate the giving sections from the rest of the text I decided to use present tense for giving.⁴³¹ Though it had an advantage of clearly dividing the two kinds of narration, it also brought with it the danger of jarring the reader by abruptly switching between past and present tenses. Bearing in mind the importance of the visual in sword-&-sorcery, in effect this made the story consist of all long shots (past tense) and close-ups (present tense) adding to the possibility of jarring effects. However such effects have advantages: the stylistic violence created and the switches between distanced past tense and sudden intimate character insights deliver another analogue to the Ur-text touchstone of intensity.

There was a consideration of rhythm, another Howardian trait, between past and present tense sequences. I eventually decided to add line breaks to try and lessen the potentially disorienting effect, but also to suggest a set of narrative cards rather than a continuous prose sequence, which encourages the tarot reading effect.

I also found, not through design but by happy accident, that the giving sequences were generally shorter and fewer at the beginning of the story, allowing the reader to ‘acclimatize’ to the technique. This may be an advantage of working at novel rather than short story length. Certainly my use of present tense becomes more fluid as the reader (and writer!) become more confident in its use: even one-sentence present-tense interjections can be found. A technique found in both literary and less often genre fiction, William Morris in his translation

⁴³⁰Longinus, *Sublime*. section xxv, pp.109-11.

⁴³¹This and other crucial aspects of the experimental nature of *The Shadow Cycles* are entirely absent from the commercially published version.

of Volsunga Saga alternates between past and present tense, and more recent writers such as Moorcock have also employed it.⁴³²

I also came to realize that, as the present tense incidences grew longer and more frequent, an effect of drawing the reader ‘deeper’ into the significance of events was produced – an effect which mirrored the chthonic dynamic noted and explored earlier in the thesis.

Repetition

The use of repetition in *The Shadow Cycles* crosses all three of the above categories of narrative strategy, characterization and style of language.

As the story is book length, I considered that repetitions of information would be useful, perhaps even necessary, to help the reader follow changes of scene and re-introductions of characters. This is often the case with the conventional novel, but such repetitions, especially since these are often phrased in exactly the same way, again mimic the tarot card reading dynamic, not to mention echoing the use of epithets in epic poetry. Although the book cannot be laid out chapter-by-chapter side-by-side as a tarot layout, stylized foregrounded repetition of this kind I hope embeds a subtle suggestion of this. Repetition can also be viewed as a structural metaphor for cycles - an echo is a form of cycle.

In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade maintains that man becomes archetype through repetition (perhaps as story by repetition becomes genre?).⁴³³ Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* comments: ‘The symbol (in this phase) is the communicable unit, to which I give the name archetype: that is, a typical recurring image.’⁴³⁴ Perhaps this might apply to genre. Frye goes on to say: ‘It is clear from all this that archetypes are most easily studied in highly conventionalised literature. That is for the most part naive, primitive and popular literature.’⁴³⁵ But generic characters or actants, to use the term slightly differently to Greimas, and situations tend to decay into stereotype rather than archetype as Russ’s essay referenced above posits. Such a ‘bad cholesterol, good cholesterol’ differentiation is not easy to make.

At sentence level Howard in his hurry to produce copy sometimes repeated words close to each other, as in ‘The People of the Black Circle’.⁴³⁶ In fact Howard, besides using

⁴³² Michael Moorcock, ‘When the Dragon Wakes’ in *Interzone* no.54, April 1991, 50-61.

⁴³³ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (trans. W.R.Trask). Princeton: University of Princeton, 1954.

⁴³⁴ Frye, p.99.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., p.104.

⁴³⁶ ‘Circle’, pp.48-9, 51.

repetition on the level of prose style, utilized another kind of repetition when he cannibalized elements from ‘Black Colossus’ and ‘The Scarlet Citadel’ for *The Hour of the Dragon* as Wagner points out in his afterword to the Berkeley-Putnam edition.. In the use of repeated phraseology and imagery, *The Shadow Cycles*, takes Genette’s idea of ‘frequency’⁴³⁷ and, by utilizing the faceting technique discussed earlier, extends its application beyond events to language and even character, thereby possibly influencing the reader’s perception of time, undermining (rather than totally abandoning) linearity⁴³⁸ and consequently again subverting the traditional orthodox narrative style of sword-&-sorcery.

Conclusion: The Writer’s Evolution Through Research

In one of the interviews Colin Greenland undertook for the book *Michael Moorcock: Death is no Obstacle*, Moorcock expresses the opinion that, ‘When a genre alters, what you get isn’t really a new genre as such, but a new synthesis.’⁴³⁹ This is close to what I attempted in writing *The Shadow Cycles*, ambitiously aiming to push sword-&-sorcery toward a greater seriousness and sophistication, but still creating something which remained sword-&-sorcery *per se*. The methodology I developed to attempt this is detailed in the previous parts of the thesis. Although elements of any number of theoretical models were utilized, to allow these to shape the ongoing project’s research infrastructure would have felt unsatisfyingly ‘synthetic’ rather than ‘holistic’. In the case of ‘Revivifying the Ur-Text’, though both creative and critical work began simultaneously, the approach to the overall thesis grew out of the creative side’s interaction with the critical. This is reflected in the thesis structure, where the creative section is embedded in the critical material rather than prefacing or appending it. While *The Shadow Cycles* took form relatively quickly and evolved only slightly, the critical matter not only continued to evolve throughout the project but also ‘revolve’ around *TSC*. Thus, my understanding of that creative core of the thesis, what I had done, what *TSC* is, what it exemplifies, developed greatly.

The commercially published version of the book, far less complex and experimental, nevertheless accrued almost universally negative reviews from the S&S readership. Yet I retain the belief that, quite possibly like the later stories in Harrison’s *Viriconium* series,

⁴³⁷Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p.46.

⁴³⁸Though not abandoning narrative fragmentation as mentioned earlier. Another way that I’ve attempted to produce the level of intensity generated by a short story through a novel-length is in the relative isolation of characters. The protagonists rarely communicate extensively with each other, so *The Shadow Cycles* could be seen as a collection of interwoven short stories.

⁴³⁹*Obstacle*, p.1.

without a pre-existing genre *TSC* in either existing form could not exist. The reader, in order to experience the intensity of thwarted expectation, needs first to resort to an experience of the genre to construct interpretations of plot and character.

The reaction to ‘The Last Scream of Carnage’, a short story prototype of *The Shadow Cycles*, prefigured the response to the latter.⁴⁴⁰ One review pointed out techniques such as visual experimentation with line breaks and indents and likened some effects to avant-garde poetry. However the reviewer questioned the stylization of characterization, and commented ominously : ‘the most impressive thing to me [is] that the story exists, and it found print here’.⁴⁴¹

Many of the reviews of *The Shadow Cycles* pointed at some of the technical aspects of the book discussed in the Afterthesis, which were at variance with commonly expected features of the genre. One reviewer commented that the ‘style [was] curiously lacking in emotion’ – i.e. not employing a simplistically heightened or hyperbolic style characteristic of some sword-&-sorcery?⁴⁴² Another noted the use of extended verse sections which were used to texture and differentiate the dream sequences.⁴⁴³ The reviewer mentioned an amount of verse in my publication history, but commented that this was ‘no excuse’ for the change to poetic form, ‘except to emphasise the experimental nature of the book’. This overlooks the role, often albeit subsidiary, of verse in fantasy to enhance milieu in, for example, the fantasy of William Morris and Tolkien, which would suggest that no ‘excuse’ is needed for inclusion. The same reviewer expressed an opinion that ‘trying to rewrite what already exists is [...] a problem’ – though this seems a good definition of how all genre operates.

A third review condemned usage of ‘obscure’ vocabulary such as ‘tatterdemalion’, ‘quinquereme’ and ‘porphyry’. A comment that the book was ‘in desperate need of some tighter editing in so many places’, may point to a misinterpretation of the deployment of repetition discussed in the Afterthesis.⁴⁴⁴

In summary, though reviews sometimes touched on structure, particularly the fracturing/faceting of plot, issues were predominantly issues of style (the non-naturalistic use of language was considered ‘pompous’ by one reviewer). There were also misinterpretations

⁴⁴⁰ Jason M. Waltz (ed.), *The Return of the Sword* (Saginaw, Texas: Flashing Swords Press, 2008), pp.25-33.

⁴⁴¹ <<http://bryanhitchcock.blogspot.co.uk/2008/03/last-scream-of.html>> [accessed 23rd June, 2015]

⁴⁴² <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13386731-the-shadow-cycles>> [accessed 26th June, 2015]

⁴⁴³ <<http://sfcrowsnest.org.uk/the-shadow-cycles-by-philip-emery-book-review/>> [accessed 4th July, 2015]

⁴⁴⁴ <<http://www.britishfantasysociety.org/reviews/the-shadow-cycles-by-philip-emery-book-review/>> [accessed 26th June, 2015]

of intent, such as the glimpse technique which seemed to be regarded as a failure of characterization, and a condemnation of technical aspects considered inappropriate to the genre.

This brings this thesis back to the most contemporary form of sword-&-sorcery, grimdark. To reiterate, the grimdark protagonist tends to be morally ambiguous rather than amoral. Carl Sherrel's novel *Raum*, with its eponymous demonic protagonist, provides a good case study of the difficulties in creating and maintaining a truly amoral character.⁴⁴⁵ (This is in contrast to my TSC characters; being 'other', at least in part, allows them to approach real amorality.⁴⁴⁶) Imagery in grimdark writers tends to be muted, or perhaps 'prosaic' in the neutral meaning of the word, rather than poetic. Erikson produces perhaps the most aesthetic prose of the writers mentioned, but his imagery, though vivid, remains conventional, particularly tellingly when describing magic.⁴⁴⁷ Abercrombie's language is generally naturalistic and modern as is that of Richard K. Morgan, something noted earlier in the thesis as a growing and now dominant trend in fantasy.

But, to reiterate again, perhaps the most important characteristic claimed for grimdark is a marginalizing of the supernatural element. It seems not so much that the numinous is deployed sparingly (not necessarily a bad thing, as reference my earlier observation concerning 'awe fatigue') but that it is sidelined as just one story element among many, in favour of psychological complexity of character and realistically graphic violence.⁴⁴⁸

All of which raises the question: in a form valorising gritty naturalism can there still be a place for romanticism? Howard is acknowledged as including this aspect in his work. Steve Eng notes that 'an overriding mood in Howard's poetry is one of romanticism.'⁴⁴⁹ And Waterman comments on Howard's affinity for romanticism.⁴⁵⁰ In fact it is the combination of romantic and Gothic influences, themselves historically linked, filtered through Howard's highly personal if ostensibly commercial approach to writing which shaped his sword-&-

⁴⁴⁵ Carl Sherrel, *Raum* (New York: Avon, 1977).

⁴⁴⁶ As mentioned earlier, my technique of 'glimpses' into my characters allows only an occasional and often oblique window into their psychology. Thus such rare visits into their partial humanness makes even this a kind of 'other'.

⁴⁴⁷ As in *Gardens of the Moon* (London: Bantam, 1999), pp.74-8. Pages 532-7 of Abercrombie's *Last Argument of Kings* (London: Gollancz, 2008), for example, displays some of the same characteristics.

⁴⁴⁸ A feature of fantasy role-playing games. Perhaps significantly in this respect, both Erikson and Abercrombie are on record as having been influenced by such games.

⁴⁴⁹ Steve Eng, 'Barbarian Bard: The Poetry of Robert E. Howard' in *The Dark Barbarian*, p.56.

⁴⁵⁰ Waterman, 'The Shadow from a Soul on Fire' *Barbaric Triumph*, pp.37-57.

sorcery Ur-text.⁴⁵¹ The idea of a Gothic-adventure continuum has been mentioned earlier in this thesis, charting a gradual ascendancy of the lighter adventure element after Howard until Moorcock's Elric stories in the sixties and Wagner's Kane stories in the seventies. However adventure orientated sword-&-sorcery has always been capable of incorporating gothic elements, though placing less emphasis on these through, for example, irony or protagonists who retain optimistic personalities.

One of the effects of such an affinity, is perhaps to encourage an aesthetic treatment of violence which employs poetic techniques. I attempt to follow and again extend Howard's example in *The Shadow Cycles* in the belief that descriptive excesses of the physical world run counter to and potentially mar a numinous effect. Grimdark fantasy, however, by both accentuating violence in a Gothic but naturalistic manner, perhaps a usage and development of the realism noted by de Camp in his sixties sword-&-sorcery anthologies, and deprioritizing the supernatural, in effect doubly excises the numinous from the equation. There is more of the post-modernist attitude to the sublime of otherness as Shaw characterizes it: 'whilst post-modernism retains the romantic feeling for the vast and the unlimited, it no longer seeks to temper this feeling through reference to a higher faculty'.⁴⁵²

However in the case of grimdark fiction, for the reasons outlined above, I detect if not a complete lack then at least a muting of that romantic awe.

Tompkins, in his essay comparing Tolkien and Howard, ends:

Not to beat the subject, like Fingon, to death, but neither writer is trod into the mire by a comparison to the other. The shortest distance between these two towers is the straight line they draw and defend against what John Clute has memorably dubbed 'the dehydrations of secularization,' against disensoulment, commodification, and the slow death of imagination denied.⁴⁵³

The increasing sophistication of CGI in filmic and televisual fantasy means in effect that the impossible is no longer impossible, thus the numinous/sublime in that context does not exist any longer, as, according to Lacan the 'real' is impossible. When a special effect is clearly a 'special effect' there is a tension in the suspension of disbelief, of the Lacanian tension of the sublime. It may be that in a similar manner grimdark's conflation of transparent

⁴⁵¹ The claustrophobic atmosphere characteristic of some early gothic novels is reminiscent of sword-&-sorcery's chthonic sensibility.

⁴⁵² Shaw, *The Sublime*, p.115.

⁴⁵³ Steven Tompkins, 'The Shortest Distance Between Two Towers' <<http://www.robert-e-howard.org/vgnnws02.html>> [accessed 7 August 2015]

modern style and the relegation of the supernatural to little more than a particular mode of natural is resulting in making the numinous/sublime element in these stories no longer ‘other’.

This is the reverse of my *TSC* aim which was to create a challenging combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar. When the different becomes too different and the familiar retreats then the writer steps outside the genre, including its Ur-textual origins, and the reader loses the security of the generic cataphract. Grimdark has succeeded in making the unfamiliar familiar, in retaining that security and thus reader acceptance.

Earlier in this thesis I referenced a comment by M. John Harrison regarding how a modern reader brings and employs experiential knowledge to their reading, an observation which I modified to include fantasy reading as part of that experience. This would be one type of reader for *The Shadow Cycles*: a reader of generic fantasy, if not necessarily exclusively of the form, who can bring this experience to bear in reading the book. This would result in a set (cataphract) of interpretation and expectation to drive them on.

Another potential readership for the book is suggested by Mike Ashley’s extensive entry on anthologies in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (p.37) which mentions ‘this discussion recognizes fantasy as [...] that field of literature that has myth and folklore at its roots’. This reader rarely reads generic fantasy but may recognize *TSC* as having similar underpinning, much as the soap opera taps into much older narrative heritages.

In a 2014 blog entry, James Lecky describes Richard A. Lupoff’s neglected 1976 novel *Sword of the Demon* as close to a post-modern sword-&-sorcery.⁴⁵⁴

Although sword-&-sorcery’s present direction of travel is very much toward the grimdark approach, it’s my hope that in *The Shadow Cycles* I may have at least provided an alternative.

⁴⁵⁴ ‘Of course in many ways such a radical from conventional narrative was never going to revolutionise the field of sword and sorcery, but its good to know that there are (and hopefully will be again) writers who aren’t afraid to break the mould.’
<<https://jameslecky.wordpress.com/2014/01/16/sword-of-the-demon-by-richard-a-lupoff/>> [accessed 25 August 2017]

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APPENDIX

DOUBLE SHADOW

The differences between the published version of *The Shadow Cycles* (Immanion version) and the earlier thesis version can be divided into two: structural and stylistic.

Structurally, although both versions are broadly chronological in plot, the thesis version is heavily fragmented, the Immanion text far less so. The reasons for this are detailed in the ‘Visual’ sub-section of the ‘General Narrative Technique’ section of the thesis ‘Afterthesis’. Though only used once in the Afterthesis, my preferred term would be ‘faceting’ rather than ‘fragmenting’. The use of fragmentation, as mentioned, is a well-worn literary technique, and by ‘faceting’ the plotline, rather than taking the strategy further, I felt I could avoid pushing the story too far from orthodox sword-&-sorcery as is recognized by a readership. (Oblique diegetic cues, such as the use of tessellated flooring and buildings, and the emphasis on precious stones, were laid to nudge the reader into discovering this.) Thus, by again holding out the hope of a conventional generic progression, I hoped to further a ‘liminal’, ‘verging’ effect.

The Immanion version reduces even this faceting, by combining sequences focusing on a certain character into larger passages. One example of this is the combining of chapters two and eight of the thesis version into a single chapter two in the Immanion version. Another is the sequence where a number of the protagonists invade the Leviathan city. In the thesis version, the swordsman Gemmored’s experiences cover chapters 33, 36, 38, 40 – however in the Immanion version the experiences are combined into chapters 36 to 38.

To pursue this point, what follows is a breakdown of early chapter layouts of the two versions:

Thesis version:	Immanion version:
1	1
2	3
3	8
4	10
5	2
6	11
7	12
8	2
9	4
10	2
11	16
12	6
13	7
14	13
15	14
16	15

This is by no means a direct correspondence. Chapter contents sometimes differ, as does wording. Thus, this is intended as a broad indicator of the differences and complexity of differences between the plot structures of the two versions.

Even more significant, I feel, is the major stylistic difference between the two versions of past-present alternations (thesis) and present tense dominance (Immanion). The relationship between this former strategy and the thesis is detailed in the ‘Giving – The Use of Past-Present Tenses’ sub-section of the ‘Style of Language’ section of the ‘Afterthesis’.

The stylistic difference can itself be split into micro and macro differences. In the former, early in the story in particular, beginning an ‘internal’ present tense unit with some external detail was intended to ‘ease’ the reader into the alternating effect. (Again, the switches between internal and external, foregrounded by this technique, are intended to mirror the reading dynamic of a tarot layout: the card is seen, then its meaning/significance considered.) For the predominantly present tense Immanion version the conversion of past to present tense sections was no straightforward or automatic process. (Although over one hundred and twenty-two conversions of ‘began’ to ‘begins’ provides an example of the size of the alteration!) *TSC* relies heavily on rhythm and sound echoes for its effect, and so many of the past-present shifts necessitated a consideration of modifications in syntax and wording. One early example is on the first page. In the thesis version: “Presently a second swordsman came over and stood over the table of the first.” However to convert this straight into present tense edges the sentence perilously close to suggesting the opening of a joke, as in “A barbarian walks into a bar...” So the Immanion version thus became, “Presently a second swordsman, rangy and assassin-faced, comes over and stands over the table of the first.”

The macro stylistic change is of course the removal of the past-present alternations from the Immanion text:

First Example:

Someone moved, leapt beside him and he turned his head to see. Young. Naked. Seethingly feral. With long straggly auburn hair and bared teeth. And talons longer than her fingers. And scars, some still bleeding, across her shoulders and breasts and arms and belly and legs. She lay beside him. Her face was a breath's width to his face. She stared into him and he recoiled sluggishly,

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groping for desperation or anger or humiliation – for anything to sting his mind and body into quickening, to wrench it from this sucking, shambling morass of a state.

Second Example:

"I know there are cattle because I've eaten meat. And I know there are silk-worms despite this," said Harnak, fingering the Dream-ward's linen shift but still not taking it.

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He has no need of it. He's not really naked.

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"But I thought most living things of this realm had been lost to the Shadow."

"Some," said the Dream-ward. "But many are stored here, in these chambers. In these containers."

Third Example:

A gangway was slid across from dock edge to galley. Several dockers crossed it onto the ship. Phariane stepped onto the gangway. She looked down at the rock bed of the bay, up to the cavern roof,

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looked anywhere but behind her. She remembers sensing the Coronach Storm fade away, taking the Nightmare Cadre with it, leaving barely any time for sleep before the uneasy dragonflame procession and aubade and the beginning of her next day's duties. The drowsiness banished last night by the arrival of Gemmored at the table of convocation has not yet returned.

Fourth Example:

And what horses. Sinewy slicks of tremulous ferocity, unnaturally loosely jointed, eyes bulging and darting through bone chamfrons. As he admires them

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a cry broke from the other side of the ship. A Sword-Mariner staggered away from the rail then jerked back toward it, hands clawing at his neck, blood spitting from his throat. Harnak was the nearest of the Phoenix Prey and for an instant

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is the only one aboard the dragonreme who knows what is happening.

All the above examples demonstrate how the sharpness (but often also fluidity) of the switches between the external and the internal, is almost entirely lost in the Immanion version.

To summarize, then: both structural and stylistic aspects outlined above are integral to the relationship between the creative and academic parts of the thesis; both are lost in the Immanion version.