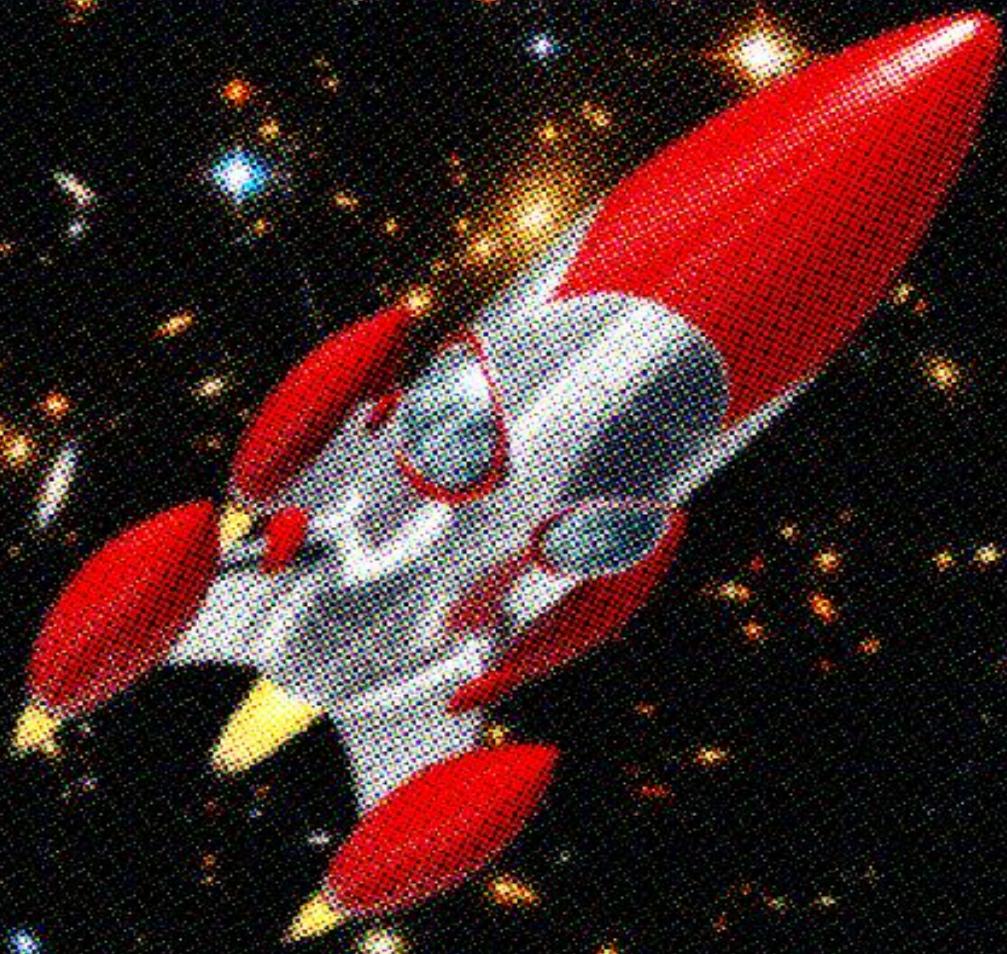


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The Pagan Sorrow of Game of Thrones

From the Editor

Welcome to another issue of The Unnamed Journal, loyal readers. With this issue out, Thomas and I will be taking our much vaunted summer break, where we'll begin work on a podcast. I expect it'll be a pretty wide ranging show. Don't worry, we'll spam you blind when it's ready for you to listen to.

Within this issue we have the second part of a tale from the crew of the *Cantilever Jones*. Senel-4 possesses a polar zone so dangerous, the locals have brainwashed themselves into forgetting it exists. We also have an essay that contrasts the underpinning mythos of both The Lord of the Rings and Game of Thrones called *The Pagan Sorrow of Game of Thrones*. Rounding things out are chapters 17-20 of *Ulysses and the Fugitive*.

This issue marks a major milestone for me, personally. The last four chapters of *Ulysses and the Fugitive* are in this issue, which means I've finished writing my first book. I hope you enjoy it.

Alfred Underhill
Editor-in-Chief

Cantilever Jones Swings Low, Part 2

By *Albert Kuhawlik*

No one on Senel-4 wanted to go to the polar zone. I could have told them that, but it became very clear to me after a night's prana-rat-shooting that it was pointless to tell any of them that. Reaching total self-awareness and then shooting rodents with a sling gun is one of my favorite ways to process uncomfortable realities. And it keeps Norl fed.

The reality was, I had taken on this client without the full extent of their weirdness read out to me, but with enough signs so that I should have known there was weirdness untouched. So I bore a certain responsibility to myself to see the thing through. It had to be done, because it was being done. I had facilitated it so far. I was bound up in it, regardless of what happened.

So it was that I went about the town of Asport, in the warm season, when the blue leaves are bursting on the tumwul trees, and the lazy are drunk in the middle of the day on *bishka*, a kind of spice rum, singing songs about cane harvesting they weren't doing, as that kind of cane doesn't grow on this world. All in all, a merry sort of town. Even the freighter captains and smugglers had an air of bucolic ease, as opposed to the usual paranoia. So I went among them, and spoke in cheerful tones, and we bore each other's wit as best we may.

The first set of locals who ran a shipping concern out along the Great Blue Way (for such the road north out of Asport is called) were very friendly when I enquired about passage northward, and when I said I had a long way to go, they asked with innocent brightness just how far I had in mind.

"The polar zone," I said lightly.

They did not throw me out so much as simply refuse to acknowledge my presence any longer. I walked out after a few minutes and it was as though I had never been in there in the first place.

{That was friendly}

"It was expected"

{Then why did you have to do it?}

"Because I am performing my due diligence"

{Are you okay? Did that Girl put some kind of spell on you?}

"Possible, but you know when my mind is being messed with. Do you sense any such fuckery?"

{No, but I'm confused. If this girl was a bit older, I'd understand your actions. But as it is...}

"Nothing for it, Norl. I must see this thing through."

And I did, through four or five more establishments, each getting the same ghosting. No one jibbered at me that the Polar Zone was forbidden, or called me a fool for wanting to go there. No one warned me of anything. No one breathed a word to me. The Polar Zone was not only Forbidden, it may not be spoken of, and whoever spoke of it was Already Dead in their eyes. In my journeys to this place, I'd heard some things of course - many planets recently colonized by

humans have uninhabitable areas - but I've never seen this much of a planet reduced to a mental blind spot, by unspoken agreement of the bulk of a population. Which only served to make me more curious.

I was considering going back to the ship, just to regroup, find another angle, when I decided I'd do much better to get a snoot full of *bishka* at one of the friendlier canteens. I decided on a place that had the sign of a horse, freshly painted blue. This, I determined, was an auspicious place to mine the culture.

I was right. Before too long I had fallen into conversation with the more cheerful of the drunks, and learned much. I learned that Senel-4 had been colonized three separate times before a settlement had survived long-term. Asport itself had been rebuilt no fewer than five times. Building the Great Blue Way had been so costly that a few folk had advocated bending the knee to the Empire, which had resulted in some truly chaotic political times. There had even been a dictator of sorts, who had seized power over Asport and a significant number of other settlements in order to preserve everyone's independence and freedom. After the whole mess settled down, he'd stepped down and gone into voluntary exile on Rigel-6. His name was Calabus, and the drunks in the Blue Horse spoke of him with respect and approval.

"Only killed a few people, really," said Gaflus, who seemed more on the ball than other drunks and, I intuited, actually did some kind of work some days.

"Let me guess, he gave them decent burial, too," I said. But Gaflus shook his head.

"No, he didn't. That's kind of what caused him to lose power. He might have taken over the whole planet, but..." and he trailed off, and suddenly I was aware that the drunks had fallen silent. I waited a skip or two for them to say anything else but they didn't. I got a sense that the Forbidden was impeding our flow, so I just offered to buy another round. They accepted with enthusiasm.

We kept on like this, drinking occasionally to Lord Calabus' health, and in the process discovering that all but one of the drunks had served in his Ranks during the Blue Way Troubles, as they had become known. The other had fought against him, but also against the Imperialists, so he was okay, they insisted. Gaflus had even been a sergeant of sorts, though the title was different. Sorting all of this out between martial-sounding drinking songs took some time. After a while some of them went off to wherever else they needed to be, and others were arguing about the regional pony races, so I asked Gaflus an idle question, half-surmising the answer: "So how did they ever get that Great Blue Way built?"

Gaflus belched. "Calabus did it. He built it with forced labor from among his political enemies."

"I can see people not liking that."

"That wasn't the problem. People liked that. Good punishment for Imperialists, they thought."

"Then what was the problem?"

"When he got the road built all the way to Garonfall, he...."

I drank a little. He drank a little.

“He marched them into the Polar Zone and left them there,” I said.

Gaflus took another drink, nodded.

“What’s out there.”

“No one knows exactly. We just call them... Demons.”

“Demons,” I said, trying very hard not to let my voice sound inadvertently skeptical.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Ever seen one?”

He looked around, and then stood up, and without even acknowledging my existence, he walked out.

* * *

I got back to the *Jones* and find the girl sitting to the left of the ramp, in some kind of right-angle-lotus position, lying on her back with her legs crossed above her. She was so still that I briefly feared she was dead, but with a moments observation I saw her ribs rise and fall enough to demonstrate respiration. She looked like she’d been knocked over but I suspected she really hadn’t been. I asked Norl what he thought.

{That’s just it...}

What?

{Thought... I’m not getting any from her.}

Is she asleep?

{More like she’s not there. Like, she’s there, but she’s not there.}

Some kind of meditative dissociation?

{Or whatever you humans call it}

What do lizards call it?

{We don’t, because we don’t do it. This is weird human stuff}

I see...

{Want me to bite her?}

Actually, yeah. Why don’t you?

{I was kidding.}

I’m not, though. Do it. See what happens.

{Seriously?}

Yeah, do it. I’m sick of not understanding what’s going on.

{Careful what you wish for...}

Advice that is always unheeded. I distrust it’s wisdom. Now bite the sleeping girl.

{Okay, then..}

And he flapped down off my shoulder and down towards her, but just as he completed a circle and was going to light onto her chest, her arm shot up and snatched him. I started to react but then stopped, observed.

Is she hurting you?

{No...}

She sat up, and held him in her cupped hands. They sat there comfortably for a minute, and then she released him into the air. He flew in a wide arc and then landed softly in front of the ramp. Then she stood, and looked at me, with a strange kind of expression, and stepped lightly back to the ship, carefully not stepping on Norl, who was laying on the ground curled up. I walked over to him

What was all that?

{I don't know}

Are you all right?

{I'm fine. But I understand why you want to help her now.}

Why's that?

{You kind of... have to...}

Why?

{You just do...}

I didn't ask what he meant, just picked him up off the ground and put him on my shoulder, where he nuzzled under my collar and soon was fast asleep. Occasionally I hear his dreams - usually about food - but this time his mind was quiet, at ease. This could either be hopeful or insidious. I decided to prepare for any outcome, and keep going.

I wandered up to the bridge of the Jones and found Vin there, conversing in his usual way with the main nav computer of the Jones. Their relationship was not without its hiccups. Vin has been known to issue despairing laments about the inability of computers to understand anything, which I never cease to find hilarious because Vin is a droid, and only understands what he's been programmed to understand. I could spin that reality to a universal principle, and I probably have when drunk enough.

“How’s it going, Vin?”

“The likelihood of our completing another mission without a nav-computer refit is diminishing.”

“So, normal then?”

“The word ‘normal’ is too elastic to be useful.”

“That depends on the intended use.”

“This sounds like you didn’t really want to know how things are going and are just waiting for me to be silent so you can tell me something.”

“Ask you something, actually.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me then?”

“Do you really think I have a reason?”

“You have a point. What is it?”

“Could we fly the Jones to the Polar Zone of this planet?”

“Do you mean within the atmosphere?”

“Yes.”

“Not well. A starship, even a small one like this, isn’t designed to glide through weather. One

good storm would finish us.”

“Sounds like it wouldn’t react well to the cold, either.”

“That’s not a factor. No planetary atmosphere is colder than space. But the movement and variation of the wind and moisture would make it difficult. We could take off and land someplace quickly, maybe, if there was a known destination. I could make some calculations.”

“Never mind, Vin. I didn’t really want to risk the ship.”

“It might be useful to create a matrix of the ships outward capabilities in extreme scenarios. I’ll make some calculations.”

“Go ahead. Let me know when you’re done.”

“I will.”

And I left him to his work, happy that I’d given my droid, at least, some level of emotional satisfaction. I wandered back towards the aft of the *Jones* where the sleeping quarters lurked. It was time to discuss the day’s work with the Faces.

{Heh.. The Faces. That’s funny}

Oh, you’re back.

{I never left. But I know what you mean. Yes.}

Good, because I’m going to need you.

I knocked, and this time Dark-Face answered. Pale-Face was sitting on the side of the bed, and the girl was lying on it. He was chanting in a language I did not understand, and the girl was chanting right along with him, with her eyes closed. I watched them go through whatever mantra/prayer they were intoning, and after a while it became clear that this wasn’t invoking anything, but almost... programming. Norl helped me with that intuition.

{Really, I just helped draw it out. You were already having it.}

Stop.

{Stop what?}

Being all agreeable, it’s unnerving.

{Okay, if you want...}

Never mind.

I looked at Dark-Face, but he seemed entirely drawn in to the ritual, mumbling with his lips, eyes glazed upward. How he had opened the door while continuing to incant seemed very mysterious, but on a moment’s reflection, and possibly at Norl’s suggestion, it seemed like the sort of thing these star-cult-mentalists would of course be able to do. So what they’re doing now - this weird mind washing on this barely-growing girl - is of course the sort of thing that they’d do. And yet...

I walked up to Pale-Face, waved my hand in front of him for a moment, and kicked him in the shins. Hard.

{Hahahahahaha!}

Funny, right?

{I did not see that coming. And I’m in your head.}

Not as well as you could be.

{Fair point.}

Everyone jolted up. Dark-Face yelled in pain. The girl shot up like she'd been hit with a jolt of Valsom. Pale-Face said nothing, but looked at me and rubbed his shin.

"Hi," I said. The girl looked at me, sighed with the air of an exhausted mother, and lay back down on the bed.

"That was dangerous," said Pale-Face.

"Very dangerous, said Dark-Face.

"Yeah, I'm sure I nearly just broke Reality itself. But we're all alive, and that's what matters."

"What do you want?"

"A castle on a planet made of gold. Edible gold. Next question."

"Why are you here?"

Should I keep taunting him with literalism?

{I mean if you want to...}

"No one wants to transport you to the Polar Zone. Believe, me, I checked. I even checked with the drunk and indifferent. No dice. They can't even conceive of the possibility of going there. It's a cultural mental block. It doesn't exist. Whatever is out there is so bad you've got to pour spice rum down people's throat for an hour to even talk about it. In short..."

"Too late," said the girl.

"... You have a problem."

"We feared this would happen," said Pale-Face.

"So what's the backup?"

Pale-Face and Dark-Face looked at each other as though there was a conversation they were trying to have psionically.

"You said you would handle it," said Dark-Face.

The girl sat up again on her elbows and looked at me. I smirked at her.

"You have no plan," I said.

"We have no plan," the girl said. "We have a purpose, not a plan."

"True believers," I said. "To plan is to set your stock in your own will and reason, which the Universe punishes. To have no plan is therefore virtue."

"Exactly," said the girl, and she said this without either irony or fanaticism. It was baldly true.

"All right then," I said. "Then it's about time we chatted about your purpose."

TO BE CONTINUED...UJ

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 17: Debrief

By *Alfred Underhill*

O'Flannery scribbled notes onto a legal pad. The cold steel of the table vaguely reminded him of how far underground he currently was. Sure, they kept this particular site climate controlled somewhere in the mid to low 70's, but it had to be all the earth surrounding the rooms and hallways that made the table cold to the touch. He smirked at himself.

The door opened. An MP walked in, followed by Ulysses, whom was followed by another MP. They escorted the young man to the table and shackled his hands to a loop within one of the table's recesses. One of the MPs issued a stiff 'sir' before both men left the room and closed the door.

"Hello, Ulysses," O'Flannery said, before continuing his notes. "Give me a minute to finish up here, and then we can get started." The young man just stared at him and said nothing. The slump of his shoulders gave the agent a pretty good idea of how this debriefing was going to go. If he could get everything he needed out of this session, he'd send the kid home within a day or two.

O'Flannery finished writing his notes and looked up with a tentative smile. "How are you feeling? She's got quite a grip, doesn't she? Looks like you'll have an interesting bruise there for about a week or so." He gestured towards Ulysses's neck with his pen.

He looked at the agent and then shifted his gaze to the surface of the table.

"Look, I understand that you're probably feeling pretty hurt and confused right now. That's understandable. I'm sure you'd much rather not talk to me at all. That said, I'd be lying to you if I told you that that's an option you have right now. I'm sorry you're here, and I'm sorry that Nera surprised you the way she did. She surprised me too. I didn't know she was going to do any of that. True to my word though, as soon as I've debriefed you, I can get you on your way home."

Ulysses didn't move. He just kept staring at the metal surface of the table in front of him. A long, slow sigh escaped from him.

"I want to see Nera," he said, without looking up.

"That's not possible." O'Flannery responded. "I might be able to get you a moment with her later, when you're on your way out, but I can't promise you anything." He was firm. He was professional. He was Jonathon O'Flannery. There was work to be done, and he was on it.

"But before that, I need to ask you some questions about Nera."

"Is she okay?"

It was O'Flannery's turn to let out a sigh. He was trying to be patient, but there was only so much slack he could cut this kid.

"Yes, she's fine," the agent said. "Ulysses? I need to you to listen to me now. Look at me, please." He fixed the young man with a stare. "There are a lot of people within the intelligence community and military that don't think you should be sent home once I debrief you. In fact, a majority of people within those organizations think we should hold you indefinitely."

"Fortunately for you, both Nera and her vehicle are unprecedeted assets that the U.S. Government would like to...hold on to. The people that think you should be kept indefinitely- just in case- are currently being checked by the fact that Nera will cease to cooperate if you are kept here, injured, or killed. It will be easier for everyone involved if she cooperates. They are aware that her cooperation hinges on your cooperation."

"All of this adds up to both you and me being placed in a very stressful situation. The way that we both get out of this stressful situation is by you telling me everything you know about Nera and that saucer of hers." O'Flannery watched Ulysses, waiting for his words to sink in. The agent's phone vibrated in his pocket. He ignored the buzzing until it stopped, and kept his attention on the young man across the table.

"What if I don't talk? What then? Nera will know if something happens to me, then your whole situation comes crashing down on you."

O'Flannery laughed. "Not just on me. Having this whole situation blow up on me is tiny compared to what could happen, and you know it. Yeah, I've got skin in this game, but so does potentially every man, woman, and child in the country." The agent paused for dramatic effect. "In the world, for that matter."

"So are you going to answer my questions? Or are you going to throw a temper tantrum because you can't see your girlfriend?"

Ulysses rolled his eyes and crossed his arms and stared at the table some more. O'Flannery's phone buzzed again, and he impatiently declined the call without looking. Time was not a luxury they had.

"Fine," Ulysses said. "Ask your questions. Then I want to see Nera."

"I'll see what I can arrange," said the agent. He looked down at his legal pad. "Okay, let's begin. When did you meet Nera?"

"A few weeks ago, at Burning Man."

"Do you remember the exact date?"

Ulysses sighed. "I'd have to look it up. It was a Wednesday."

O'Flannery added to his notes. "And she was alone? There was no one else with her?"

"No," said Ulysses. "No one else was with her."

"Can you describe the circumstances of your first meeting? What was the context?"

"Let's see," he said, "Giles noticed Nera and pointed her out. She was staring at an art installation. Giles tried to talk to her." Ulysses grimaced at him. "I don't know what she said to him. Giles just said she didn't want to talk."

"And that was when you first met her too?"

"No. I didn't really meet her until later that night. I was eating some food I'd scrounged. She came over, looking at me strangely. I thought she was hungry, so I offered her some of my food."

"Were the two of you able to communicate when you met her?"

"Not exactly. I'm pretty sure it took her awhile to figure out how to use her...abilities to communicate with me. She didn't really talk in complete sentences at first. It took her a little while to do that."

"So it seemed like there was a learning curve for her to mimic human speech?"

"Yes," said Ulysses. "You make it sound a lot creepier than it really was by putting it that way."

"I apologize," said O'Flannery. "Moving on: how many days did you associate with Nera before you became aware of her vehicle?"

"I think, like, two days almost. She didn't tell me why she need me to drive her to where she was going, but I took her."

O'Flannery nodded and scribbled more notes onto his pad.

* * *

The agent leafed through his pad of notes. He was fairly certain that Ulysses had told him almost everything he knew about Nera. He didn't really want to dig too deep on any of the sex stuff. There was something about asking a hippie specific questions about his sexual experiences with an extraterrestrial that had turned his stomach earlier. O'Flannery wasn't a prude. He'd worked on trafficking cases; he'd interviewed rape victims before. There were always so many gratuitous details, but they had never bothered him. The evil of men was known to him. At times that evil could take surprising and inventive forms, but at the end of the day, no matter how despicable the act committed, they were still done by humans. He could deal with humans. Nera wasn't, and this kid's love for her struck him as almost too pure to be believable. Maybe he was just a sap, or maybe he had other issues. Whatever this guy's deal was, it lay beyond the scope of his investigation. He looked up from his notes.

"I think I've got enough here to file my initial report, O'Flannery said. His phone buzzed again. This time he went to trouble of just turning it off. "I'll go type up my report and send it off just as soon as I leave this room. If the higher-ups are satisfied, I'll start filling out the paperwork to get you out of here."

Ulysses nodded to him, then said, "How long before I know?"

"I'd say a day or two, tops. There's a good chance I'll hear something back within hours. This situation has drawn the attention of some of the most important people in our government. They'll want to respond quickly. They may want other people to interview you before we release you, but we will release you. The big players are aware that we can't detain you indefinitely. They may not like it, but they've already got one hell of consolation prize." He said, referring to Nera and her saucer.

Ulysses nodded again, his expression turned concerned. The agent figured he was probably worried about Nera. Love screws up everybody's priorities, he mused. Still, O'Flannery couldn't help but feel a little sorry for Ulysses.

"Look," he said, "I know you're worried about her, about Nera. I don't know if this will reassure you or not, but, I mean..." He trailed off, then started over again. "From what I know of

our government, from having worked for it for over two decades, the government does not want to hurt Nera. We want to learn everything we possibly can from her. Her unique status alone should be more than enough to ensure that she's kept comfortable and healthy."

Ulysses smiled at him in disbelief and shook his head. "I'd really like to believe that. But I'm a student of history. I've got a pretty good idea of how the U.S. government treats people that are different."

O'Flannery was preparing a retort when an MP burst into the room. The man was wild-eyed and sweating.

"Yes? What is it?" The agent didn't try to hide his annoyance.

"Sir! I'm sorry to interrupt. You need to come with me. The asset has been attacked by some service members. We're putting the whole facility on lockdown."

"When? How many attackers?"

"Five, sir," the MP answered.

O'Flannery looked over at Ulysses who was futilely straining against his handcuffs. He looked back to MP.

"All right. Get the keys to his cuffs," he said pointing to Ulysses. "We're taking him with us."

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 18: Aftermath of a Struggle

By *Alfred Underhill*

An MP followed Ulysses as the young man was lead by agent O'Flannery. They moved quickly through a maze of halls that was periodically interrupted by doors that required keycards or keys and at least one that required both. Ulysses figured out they were close to their destination when a medic pushing a gurney that held an incapacitated soldier almost knocked the three of them over. O'Flannery warned him and the MP of another gurney coming their way, and they flattened themselves against the wall until it passed. The group pushed through a door, and turned down another hall.

Long windows on either side of the entrance made it possible for Ulysses to see inside the only room on this section of hallway. In one of the far corners stood Nera. One side of her face was swollen and she dabbed absently at a cut above her eye. She was talking to one of the military personnel inside. He was flanked on both sides by soldiers with machine guns trained on Nera. Two MPs were posted outside the door.

O'Flannery asked the MPs to let them in. They refused initially, but complied a minute later once O'Flannery got their superior on the phone. They opened the door, admitting the agent and Ulysses; the MP accompanying them returned to his post.

The man inside the room flanked by soldiers turned his head to look at the two entering the room. Ulysses thought he looked like a doctor or a medic of some kind.

"You can stand down," said O'Flannery. The soldiers glanced at the man in the middle. When he nodded, they lowered their guns.

"I'm guessing you're the guy that brought her in?"

"Correct. Special Agent Jonathon O'Flannery. And your name, soldier?"

"1st Lieutenant Kent Stockmeir. I'm a medic assigned to this facility."

"You mind telling me what happened in here?"

"What we know for sure is that five unauthorized personnel gained access to this room. They were armed, for what good it did them: none of them got off a shot. One witness said she actually pulled the last guy back into the room as he tried to flee." He said, gesturing to Nera.

"Any casualties?"

"No, surprisingly. She messed them up pretty bad though. There's at least one soldier that's going to be eating her meals through a straw for awhile."

"Luck takes some strange shapes."

The medic nodded.

"Ulysses," Nera said, her voice trembled. She took a step toward him, but then stopped when the soldiers pointed their guns at her.

"Hey, Nera," said Ulysses. Then he addressed the two soldiers. "Hey, guys. I know you're just doing your jobs and that this a really fucking weird situation. If it's all right with you though,

I'm just going to step over to where she is. I'm pretty sure me being near her will help diffuse this situation a little."

"Lieutenant?" The soldier closest to the door called without lowering his gun.

"I'll allow it, but standby," he said. Then to Ulysses, "son, make sure you don't block line of sight on that girl. We're past the point of taking chances here."

Ulysses nodded and took slow, metered steps toward Nera. He stopped less than a foot away from her, standing beside her.

"I wasn't sure I'd get to see you again."

"I know. I'm sorry," she said, fighting back tears.

"Really wasn't sure what to think when I woke up. I definitely feel hurt. I can understand the logic of what you did, but I think it's going to take me awhile to sort through my feelings about it."

She nodded to him and brushed the corners of her eyes with her fingertips.

"I'm hoping I'll get the chance to work through it with you around. But we've got more pressing things to talk about right now."

"I'd like that," she said, followed by, "You're right, we do."

He reached out, lightly touching the swollen side of her face. "What happened?"

"There were five humans who came with guns. Each was inhabited. I could sense them coming because of these," she gestured to the weird fabric that were the alien corpses. "Their bodies still resonate with one another, even after they've died. It saved my life. Though I wasn't spared injury."

"You were too fast for them, but they got a shot or two in, huh?"

She smiled a crooked smile at him.

"What happened to the parasites that were inhabiting the grunts? Did you get them all?"

Nera pulled up her weird dress and pointed to her legs. They were wrapped neatly in the fabric that Ulysses knew were the corpses of the hyssopshebolith.

"I killed two more. The other three escaped."

"That isn't good," said O'Flannery. "They could be anywhere."

It should have been obvious to Ulysses that the agent was listening in, yet he was still surprised. Nera didn't seem concerned.

"Can you tell us how to find them?" O'Flannery said.

"They're not anywhere within this facility. In fact, I can't sense any of them within a mile."

"You're sure?" Even after all of his experiences with Nera up to this point, Ulysses was taken aback by how certain she sounded.

"As I told you and Jonathon before: it seems that the more of their corpses I collect, the stronger my ability to detect the hyssopshebolith becomes." She paused, suddenly lost in thought. Nera inhaled a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly. "I think I understand why they were so quick to retreat."

"If I had used the two I had just killed immediately, I could have used the additional resonance to paralyze the remaining three. After that, I would have just needed to touch them."

"We can't recapture missed opportunities," said O'Flannery. "It's shame you couldn't get them all when they were here." He began pacing his side of the room. The only sound in the room was the agents footsteps for a few moments. "So there's at least four still at large, and we don't currently know the whereabouts of your comrade or her vehicle. Nor do we know if she has more, unaccounted for parasites with her."

Nera nodded.

"That's not great. We're now in a position where we can't be sure what they'll try next. If you had aced the other three parasites, then we'd be down to just your friend with the saucer."

"She's not my friend," said Nera. Her honest vehemence made her sound defensive.

"Figure of speech, dear." O'Flannery continued pacing.

"If they've all gone to ground, then the only way we could actually find them would be to take you out of this facility until you could pinpoint their locations."

"I am willing to search for them," said Nera.

"Yeah, that's great. Too bad there's no way I can get authorization to take you out of here."

"Do you think they'd try to get to Nera again?" Asked Ulysses.

"I don't know," said O'Flannery. "She doesn't know," he said pointing to Nera. "You don't know. This attack could've been our only shot. On the other hand, if the other lady with a saucer found out that none of those parasites survived this attack, then her plan-B might've been to leave and come back with reinforcements. So this could be the better outcome, but we just don't know. Nobody does. And that is exactly what the problem is with this situation."

Uncomfortable silence settled on the room. Ulysses kept standing next to Nera, holding her hand and facing the soldiers. O'Flannery continued to pace the back section of the room. The lieutenant watched him, while the soldiers with guns held their weapons in front of them.

The quiet of the room made it so Ulysses could hear a low, pulsing rumble that he hadn't been able to hear earlier when everyone was talking. He thought it must belong to some sort of strange government machine because of how irregular and intermittent the vibrations were.

Nera's hand tightened on his like a vise until he had to whisper to her to loosen it up.

"What is it?" He said.

"I think...I think..." She trailed off.

O'Flannery's phone rang. He made a face then answered the call, his pacing uninterrupted. The agent faced away from the rest of the people in the room. Ulysses wasn't sure what the conversation entailed but it didn't seem good based on the amount of swearing that O'Flannery was doing. The call ended as abruptly as it came. He turned around and began walking toward Nera and Ulysses. The vibrations seemed to be getting more frequent and intense.

"Looks like your friend's outside," said the agent. "She's taking shots at this facility with some kind of energy weapon. Do you know how we can stop her?"

"Yes," Nera said. "But only I can do it. Show me where she is."

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 19: Fighting

By *Alfred Underhill*

Running, O'Flannery lead them toward an exit. His phone appeared to have merged with his hand. He shouted into his phone, only pausing to shout at whoever obstructed their journey. They wound their way to an exterior door following a rhythm of several components: stopping at a checkpoint, yelling at whoever was guarding it, making a phone call, having guns pointed at them, and being let through. Not every part of the rhythm was always present at every checkpoint nor were all the parts in the same order each time.

The vibrations grew more intense the closer they got to the exterior walls of the complex. Ulysses knew the building was at least partially above ground. As they reached the surface levels of the facility the damage went from subtle to obvious. It was around this point in their journey, that the three of them had to start taking detours around collapsed walls, missing floors, and blocked stairwells.

"Are you getting anything," O'Flannery would occasionally yell to Nera.

"Almost," was her response each time. Sometimes this elicited a grunt from the agent, who then barked about regulations or authorizations at someone on his phone. Nera seemed serious yet relaxed. She wore her usual, impassive expression. Ulysses could tell that she was concentrating pretty hard despite everything else that was happening around them.

Detouring down a hall, they reached an unguarded door. O'Flannery swiped a key card and went through, followed by Nera, then Ulysses. The young man ran, trying to keep up.

He didn't know what happened, and he didn't know why he was face down on the floor. The ringing in his ears was so loud that he couldn't hear anything else. He felt a tug on his shirt. It was Nera. She picked him up and threw him over her shoulder. Ulysses looked backward down the hall as Nera ran. He could see outside through the wall now.

Nera began running much faster. Ulysses saw agent O'Flannery as she passed him. He could feel the impacts of whatever weapon was being used against the base. He saw the Agent fall into a roll in the middle of an all-out sprint when one of the impacts took his balance. O'Flannery kept running as soon as his feet were underneath him again.

Nera turned a corner without slowing down. She pushed through a door that set off an alarm. Fire door, Ulysses thought as Nera ran down the narrow hall to another door where she stopped.

"Ulysses? Are you okay? Can you walk?" She still had him over her shoulder. Her breathing only slightly more labored than normal. "Ulysses?"

"Hey, Nera," was what he could manage to get out of his mouth. It was hard to hear anything over the ringing, but he could hear her just fine. His brain seemed to still work, just very slowly. It was like someone had mixed his thoughts with tar. Good thing my alien girlfriend's a psychic, he thought to himself, followed by, I think I'm in shock.

Nera set him down gently against the wall by the door. She was in his face, snapping her fingers, asking him questions. She looked back down the hall, and said something Ulysses

couldn't make out. O'Flannery was there now, straining to shout loud enough for the young man to hear. Either the ringing in his ears was starting to vibrate the rest of his body, or whatever was attacking the building was getting closer.

"Follow my finger," O'Flannery was barely audible. Ulysses obliged him by following the path of the agent's index finger. It was hard work, and it made him tired. He really wanted to take a nap, just for a little while. If he could just rest his eyes for a few minutes, maybe he'd even be able to hear again. He closed his eyes.

* * *

"Ulysses! Wake up!" O'Flannery was getting hoarse from screaming. "I don't see any injuries. Do you know if he was hurt?" The young man had exhibited signs of shock before passing out.

Nera, crouched next to him in front of Ulysses, shaking her head.

O'Flannery quickly examined Ulysses's for signs of trauma but didn't find any. He glanced around the hallway for something to elevate Ulysses's feet, but there was nothing. The vibrations in the hall were getting intense. The klaxon of the fire alarm wasn't helping the growing sense of urgency the agent felt. They needed to move; they needed to do something.

"You got anything?" O'Flannery said to his alien comrade.

"I think so, but it's faint."

"Can you do anything about it?"

Nera nodded solemnly.

"All right, well, you better go do whatever you can right now, or I'm pretty sure we're all dead. I'll watch him."

That was all the encouragement Nera needed. She pecked Ulysses a kiss on his forehead, and less than a second later, she was out the fire exit, displacing one of the door hinges in the process. The door wouldn't close without assistance now. Nera moved so fast that it took O'Flannery several seconds to figure out exactly what he'd seen.

Muted daylight shone on the agent's face. The building's shaking vibrations were getting further away. He looked over at Ulysses and sighed. O'Flannery tried to revive him with light slaps to the face and yelling, but it did no good. He didn't have any smelling salts on him either. The agent stood up, then heaved Ulysses onto his shoulder. He pushed the broken door out of his way and stepped outside.

Dust filled the air as a result of the attack. O'Flannery trudged forward with the unconscious Ulysses on his shoulder until he was out of the dust cloud. In the distance he could see a saucer like Nera's raining down something akin to lightning at a tiny figure moving very quickly along the ground.

The agent knew it was Nera. Both the saucer and she were retreating out of sight. They seemed to be playing a weird game of tag or keep away, and Nera was 'it'. Whatever the game was, it wasn't balanced. The sheer insanity of what he was witnessing began to register for O'Flannery. He stopped walking. He and his unconscious charge were out in the open, yet he set

Ulysses down on the ground anyway. O'Flannery sat down next to him to watch the game play out. If he had to guess, the agent figured the craft was about a mile off the ground. It kept a fairly constant altitude, firing bursts of plasma at Nera.

Then the saucer seemed to blink out of existence.

Nera rapidly turned in a circle for about a dozen seconds. O'Flannery figured she was checking every direction she could. Then she started running south in a zigzag pattern. It reminded O'Flannery of some of the training he'd received years earlier for advancing on and retreating from someone with a firearm.

The saucer popped back into existence as quickly as it had vanished. It maneuvered a bit, then resumed blasting lightning at its target below. The uneven game was back on. O'Flannery's viewing of the supernatural spectacle was interrupted by Ulysses's groans. He looked over at the young man, and helped him sit up.

"She's doing her best," he said. "But I don't think she can get close enough to finish this fight. When she gets tired enough, that's going to be it, I think."

"I've got to do something to help her," Ulysses said, trying to get to his feet. He was still too discombobulated from the blast in the hallway earlier, and inadvertently flopped over on the ground.

"I don't think there's much either of us can do to help."

"Does she have her containers with her?" Ulysses asked.

"What? Those plastic containers full of sand or dust or whatever? I didn't see her with them earlier."

"Did she have them with her when you brought her in?"

"Yes," said O'Flannery. "I didn't see them in the room with the lieutenant earlier, which means they're either in her cell or thrown away. Why?"

"She said the dust interferes with the parasite's ability to sense her. I think that was how we were able to move around in her ship without them showing up."

"How did they find her here then? This is a top secret facility." Said the Agent.

"The grunts," said Ulysses. "I'm guessing those things used the military's resources to monitor whether or not she was brought in. When she was, it didn't matter that they couldn't detect her on their own anymore because they had military intelligence to do it for them."

O'Flannery swore. Then said, "Looks like the plan worked as intended. Let's hope we can get those boxes and get back out here."

* * *

The roughly ten minutes it took them to retrieve the boxes felt like an eternity. Every vibration, tremor, and rumble made Ulysses's stomach drop. Running back through the maze of rooms and hallways was no less fraught than getting out had been. O'Flannery cycled through a few different people that all sounded roughly the same to Ulysses as they made their way through to Nera's cell. Ulysses immediately spotted the containers from the doorway. He

scooped them up the moment the door opened, and then he and O'Flannery were on their way back out.

Their trip back up and out the second time was smooth until they reached the door where Ulysses had been knocked prone. Four soldiers were there surveying the damage. One just stood there gaping at the saucer in the distance firing plasma. That is, until O'Flannery and Ulysses approached. When the group noticed them, they immediately pointed their guns at the pair.

O'Flannery screamed at whoever was on the other end of his phone. The ranking soldier in the group screamed at O'Flannery. The agent in turn screamed at him, then screamed into his phone some more. After a few tense seconds of screaming, O'Flannery held his phone forward so the man on the other end could scream at the soldier. After the man's face blanched, he and the other soldiers lowered their weapons and allowed the agent and Ulysses to pass. They started running as soon as they were through the door. Outside again, they paused.

"How do you think we should get these to her?"

"I'm not sure," said O'Flannery. "If I understand what you've told me correctly, the critters in the saucer won't detect whoever's holding the containers. That means they won't know to target whoever's carrying those out to her. But there's no cover out there, and no way to protect against a stray shot. I noticed that they just blanketed some sections in lightning, so I don't know how close either of us can get to hand those off."

"What if I just get as close as I can, like say within earshot, and shout to Nera?"

"That would probably work. Only downside would be exposure during your retreat. I don't know what kind of sensors or detectors those things have inside that craft. If you get close enough to get her these containers, and then they can't sense her anymore, they may mistake you for her."

Ulysses and O'Flannery looked at each other for a few tense seconds. The crack and boom of plasma striking the earth was the only sound. They turned their heads to watch Nera's dance with saucer.

"Any other ideas?" Ulysses said.

"Nothing that's any better than what you've suggested."

"That settles it," said the young man. "I take it you already know how to get in touch with my parents and the rest of my family?"

"Yes, that information is in my dossier."

Ulysses nodded. "If I don't make it, please tell my family I love them."

"Agreed. Good luck."

Ulysses checked the lids of each container, then carefully arranged the stack of them so he could hug them to his torso while he ran. He took off sprinting toward Nera. Watching the continuing cat and mouse game playing out in front of him made Ulysses feel like he was moving under water no matter how fast he ran. The speed of the craft, the plasma, and Nera made all three blur into each other. His eyes just couldn't keep up. A few times, he thought he saw Nera get hit by a bolt, only to realize he was seeing afterimages intersect.

Nera ran in variations of her zigzag pattern to the East, away from him. The saucer burst in and out of existence as it continued to strike at her. Ulysses got to about a hundred yards from where he thought he'd seen Nera first engage with the craft. He set the containers down on the ground. He began waving his arms and yelling as loud as he could, despite still being out of breath. He kept this up for what felt like way too long, even though he was pretty sure it was only a minute or two. He couldn't be sure, but Ulysses thought she'd seen him.

Then Nera was running and dodging toward him. Ulysses waved and pointed toward the containers as best he could. He shouted that he'd brought them. When he could see that she was roughly a few hundred yards away, Ulysses turned around and began running back to where he and O'Flannery had assessed the situation minutes earlier. The agent must have already fled to safety because Ulysses couldn't see him anywhere.

His chest pounded as he ran. It felt like he was trying to run through mud. Summoning every bit of speed he could muster still seemed to render him no faster than a lethargic turtle. The cracking of the plasma got much louder; the overpowering smell of ozone made him feel dizzy, made his vision dark at the corners. He'd been running for less than a minute, but it was going to take him several to get back to the installation's emergency exit.

Ulysses thought he could hear the faint sound of Nera's running feet. His hearing hadn't recovered from his close call earlier, he couldn't afford to turn his head to look back, so he just kept running.

Intense heat accompanied a blinding light and deafening boom. It lifted Ulysses off of his feet, pushed all the air out of his lungs. He could feel himself flying through the air. He braced himself for a hard landing. Instead, he felt his body fold at the waist as a strong, careful arm held him in place. The rumble he felt now were the rapid footfalls of someone running. He knew it was Nera. She had caught him, and he was over her shoulder again.

Ulysses thought she'd send him flying a few times while she continued to run in her weird diagonal patterns. He blinked his eyes, trying to recover his sight. It was impossible for him to tell if Nera was still being fired upon through the renewed ringing in his ears. He could feel her heavy breathes and the strain in her body as she ran. The jarring combination of ozone and Nera's sweat wasn't a smell he'd ever forget for the rest of his days.

He felt her stop. She opened the emergency exit door, stepped inside, and set him down against the wall he'd rested against earlier. Another set of hands was propping him up, slapping him lightly on the side of his face. It must have been O'Flannery.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay," he said. His vision was starting to return, yet he was still deafened.

"Ulysses," Nera said. Her voice made clear by telepathy. "I'm glad you're all right. Thank you for bringing me the dust. I am going to take it with me now, so I can bring an end to the rest of hyssopshebolith on this planet. I love you, please rest." She pressed her mouth against his.

Ulysses could see the blur of her silhouetted against the open door. He saw a second silhouette follow, which he figured must be O'Flannery. He blinked furiously, trying to get his

vision to recover. Ulysses tried to stand up, yet found that he barely had enough strength to stay sitting up. He started breathing deep, slow breaths resting the back of his head against the wall.

* * *

O'Flannery ran through the door after Nera. He had no hope of keeping up with her, nor was he about to try. At this point, the agent was more concerned about being the U.S. government's official witness to whatever happened next. He held up his phone and began recording video.

Nera was running toward the saucer. The alien craft was raining down plasma as it went. It appeared to be winding a miles-wide circle-- or more accurately, a spiral-- that encompassed the area in which it had engaged Nera. Her straight line trajectory didn't seem to register to the occupants of the saucer and neither did O'Flannery.

She stopped roughly a quarter mile from where the saucer was tracing its path. She stood motionless for a moment. Despite all appearances, the agent was sure something was happening.

A few seconds later, the craft stopped and hovered in place. The plasma that had been bombarding the ground also stopped. The saucer hung in the sky. Nera gave no hint of motion where she stood. O'Flannery kept recording the encounter, though he knew he personally would never need the video to recall this moment.

The saucer fell from the sky. The impact could easily be heard for miles. Somehow, the craft didn't break apart when it hit. The saucer rested in a shallow crater formed by the impact. Even as the thought was occurring to him to move closer, Nera was already running toward the downed saucer. The agent saw her vanish in a flash of light. He knew that meant she had entered the vehicle.

He kept recording while he waited.

Ulysses & the Fugitive - Ch. 20: The Return

By *Alfred Underhill*

A month had passed since Nera had brought down the other saucer and wiped out the remaining hyssopsheolith on Earth. Ulysses sat in a conference room inside the CIA's Denver office. He waited for O'Flannery to enter the room. In theory, he was there to provide the final account of the events that transpired after Nera's victory, yet Ulysses figured he'd be answering questions about what happened for the rest of his life. He stared indifferently at the TV in the corner that silently broadcast CNN.

He didn't feel too bad today. The past month had thrown his emotions in every direction. He wasn't sure if he had really processed it all yet. If he was being honest with himself, it would probably take him years to really work it all out. But at least for right now most of what he felt was annoyance at being forced to wait for agent O'Flannery.

After another fifteen minutes of tedium, the door to the conference room opened and O'Flannery stepped in. He smiled at Ulysses and set his planner down on the table.

"Ulysses," the agent said, "thanks for coming in. I know you must be getting tired of having to answer questions and make statements. Hopefully today will be it; at least for a little while. Do you need anything before we get started? Drink of water? Use the restroom?"

"I'm good," said Ulysses. "I appreciate the offer, but I just want to get this done."

O'Flannery nodded to him. "All right. Let me get setup and we'll jump in." The agent produced a small digital recorder from his planner. He flipped through some printed papers and turned to a fresh page in his legal pad.

"First question: what is the nature of your relationship to the ET known as Nera?"

Ulysses shifted in his seat. "She's my girlfriend, or I mean, she was my girlfriend."

"How did you first make contact with her?"

"My friend Giles and I went to Burning Man earlier this year. I met Nera wandering around the playa."

"Do you know why she was in that particular geographic location?"

"Yeah. Something about the alkaline nature of the playa dust made it so the parasites couldn't detect her. By the time I met her, she had already collected some of the dust into containers that she carried with her wherever she went."

"Where you able to communicate with her directly during your first encounter with her?" Asked the agent.

"Only a little bit. There was a lot of pointing and gesturing. I thought she was like, from Europe and on drugs, or something."

"But as you continued to spend time around one another, you were able to communicate more readily through spoken words?"

"Well, sort of," said Ulysses. "I know you how this works, but I guess I'm here to state this for the record: Nera uses a kind of telepathy to spoof human speech. To you and me, it

would look and sound like she was speaking English, but I think if we'd recorded her it would've sounded like she was speaking gibberish."

O'Flannery nodded. He gave Ulysses a reassuring, avuncular look.

"How long were you acquainted with her?"

"In total... only a few weeks. It feels like longer, but I know that it was less than a month."

"In that time, she explained to you her reason for coming to our planet?"

"Yes. Nera had fled for her life. The first hyssopshebolith that tried to take her over dropped dead the moment it touched her, so she ran. Eventually, she ended up here. I don't know how long it took Nera to travel here. It might have taken her years. From what I could gather, her people and those parasites live in a different universe from ours. Like, a different dimension. Her ship made the trip possible, but I have no idea what that means for our concept of time and space."

"And you had the opportunity to travel inside her craft? Her ship, as you refer to it. Could you briefly describe that experience?"

"Sure. It was really weird and disorienting. Once I got inside the ship it was like it became my body. I could see in every direction but it made me so dizzy. It was like there was just too much happening for me to process when we flew in that thing. I vomited immediately upon exiting the ship after my first flight. I never felt at ease traveling in that thing."

"And that first trip was to Siem Reap, Cambodia?" Said O'Flannery.

"Yes. She said she had picked up on my memories of a backpacking trip I took there."

"You were there for roughly twenty-four hours?" The agent jotted down a note.

"I think so. With the time difference and the disorienting nature of the flight, it could've been more or less. It certainly didn't take us long to get there."

"How long would you say your travel time was to Cambodia?"

"I don't really know. Probably only like a couple of minutes," Ulysses cleared his throat. "I know we went to Australia in about ten minutes. I checked my phone when we got there."

O'Flannery whistled. He looked genuinely impressed.

"That's one for the record books, eh?"

"Yeah, too bad all of this is like, beyond classified." Ulysses said, with a slight smile.

"Indeed," said the agent. "So you, Nera, and Mr. Taylor went to Australia after our encounter at your apartment, correct?"

"Yes, that's right," he shifted in his seat again. "How did those cops end up? Were they okay?"

"They were a little banged up, but I was able to smooth things over with their precinct. You shouldn't have anything to worry about, unless you run into those particular officers again."

"Still might not be a bad idea to move."

"Couldn't hurt, if you're staying in Denver. But I digress," O'Flannery flipped down a page in his legal pad, where he had previously written some notes. "So you were in Australia for a few days, waiting for Mr. Taylor to return via a commercial flight, and then you contacted me.

I met up with you, Nera, and Mr. Taylor and we discussed the plan that led to Nera being taken into government custody. Approximately eight days later, you and Nera departed Australia in her vehicle and arrived at the rendezvous point we had previously agreed upon. Correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"When you and Nera surrendered yourselves, she asked that you be returned to your home in exchange for the surrender of her vehicle and herself. It was at that point that she incapacitated you."

"Hey, uh, Agent O'Flannery?" Ulysses interrupted. "I've already made statements a few times previously about that part of what happened. Can we skip it today?"

"Well, we can, but that'll all but guarantee that you'll get asked about it again in the future. You might not be done after today, unless you answer the question."

"Fine," Ulysses said with a sigh. Ulysses answered all of O'Flannery's subsequent questions as well, until they got to the aftermath of Nera's victory.

"What happened after Nera downed the second UFO?" Asked O'Flannery.

"Let's see," said Ulysses. "I was still kind of out of it. I remember stumbling out that emergency exit door. My sight had kind of come back. I still couldn't hear a damn thing. I don't think the ringing in my ears is ever going to go away." He sighed. "I saw the crashed saucer, and I saw you walking towards it. I remember seeing Nera in the distance with another person. I didn't know what was going on. So I started running towards her."

"What happened when you got there?"

"You were trying to say something to me, but I couldn't hear you. Nera was all smiles. She was holding more hyssopsebolith pelts. The woman standing next to her was just like her. She had pointy ears like Nera, but they didn't look related. That woman, I think her name was Ryla? She was injured from the crash but she was awake and lucid. Nera was helping her stand up."

O'Flannery nodded, scribbled something down. "Let's pause for a break there," he said, turning off his recorder. He then held up the note pad for Ulysses to see. It read: stick to the story about what happened next.

Ulysses gave O'Flannery a thumbs up. "I know I've already thanked you before, but thank you."

"You're welcome," said the agent. "But just because I'm not recording right now, doesn't mean that someone else isn't, if you catch my meaning?"

"Right, yeah, CIA field office and all that."

"Do you want to take a real break before we continue?"

"No. I'm good," said Ulysses.

"Very well." The agent turned his recorder back on. "What did Nera say to you when you approached?"

"She was pretty happy. Nera shouted that we did it. She hugged me, and kissed me like she would right before we'd have sex. I guess she must have caught herself, because she broke

off the kiss to introduced me to Ryla. And then...Well, keep in mind I could only hear Nera because of the telepathy. "

Agent O'Flannery looked up at Ulysses and nodded reassuringly.

"We were making some chitchat. Just like, 'we should get a drink to celebrate'. And, 'we should tell Giles about this'. It was pretty amazing moment. The four of us standing there were pretty happy. But then, Nera got this really sad, faraway look on her face." Ulysses voice caught.

"Take a moment, if you need to," said O'Flannery.

"Sorry. I know it's been a month, but I'm still kind of raw about it," said Ulysses.

"Anyway, it was then that she started talking about going home, like back to where she came from. She was saying that she needed to try to rescue the rest of her people, and that leaving Earth would ensure that the parasites wouldn't come looking for her. Nera said she could do it with Ryla's ship, since it was intact despite falling out of the sky."

"You weren't okay with that plan. You tried to reason with her and get them both to stay, but then she choked you out."

"That's right," said the agent, giving Ulysses a thumbs up. "What did she say to you after I was unconscious?"

"Nera said she loved me, and that she would never forget me. I begged her to stay. I cried and pleaded, but it didn't work. Then I begged to go with her instead, but she wouldn't take me with her. She said it was too dangerous and that she wouldn't be able to go on if something happened to me."

"I kissed her and held her and cried. We said goodbye when you started to wake up. Then her and Ryla went into the ship and took off. I haven't seen her since."

"You will, of course, notify me immediately if she contacts you?"

"I will. I seriously doubt that she will, though."

"Thank you, Ulysses," said O'Flannery. "On a personal note, thank you for helping to get me back inside afterwards, to receive medical attention."

"Not a problem."

* * *

Ulysses stared at the mountains in the distance. There were still a few hours of daylight left. It wasn't too warm standing outside his apartment building. Not that he'd have noticed if it was too hot.

I'm going to need to find a job, he thought. Probably ought to move out of this place when the lease is up in the spring. Going to need groceries soon too, and rent will be due in a week. He distracted himself with thoughts like these because each was something concrete that he needed to deal with. They were all true. It was easier to deal with the material elements of his life than the emotional ones. This was how he avoided all the unpleasant things he felt. Then he caught himself.

"I can't keep doing this," Ulysses said. Realizing just how much and how often he didn't deal with his feelings had sneaked up on him. It had made him externalize his internal

monologue. Ever since he'd been a teenager, there had been a mass of conflicting emotions in his head. They were always so convoluted, so messy, that it had just been easier to focus on what was in front of him. He could usually find ways to solve whatever problem presented itself outside his head. Solving the problems inside required help. He knew he couldn't do it alone. But right now, he didn't have help. He was all by himself, and what was in his head couldn't be ignored.

Ulysses let the sadness and grief of Nera's departure wash over him. His eyes filled with tears almost immediately at the bitter truth. He missed her terribly and would never see her again. He sobbed quietly to himself as he walked up the stairs to his apartment. He cried until the sun went down within the privacy of his living room.

He knew that some of the upset he was experiencing had nothing to do with Nera. Some of it was just old damage bubbling up to the surface. It had been there long before he met Nera. Some of his tears were born of real frustration at his current lot in life. He had no job, little money, no healthcare, and no car. These were things that he knew he could manage, but they added their weight to the issues that currently pressed his psyche.

Underlying everything else that distressed him right now was the knowledge that he didn't have a plan. Ulysses didn't know where he was going or what he was doing with his life. Sure, maybe no one really knows where they're going, he thought to himself. But he also figured most people end up where they end up because of whatever they're trying to do. What was he trying to do? He didn't know the answer.

Ulysses wiped his eyes and blew his nose. Once his face was relatively dry again, he let out a sigh. He got up and went to his fridge for a beer. He paused after popping the lid off. Ulysses looked around his apartment from the kitchen, then wandered through the rooms that made it up. He casually surveyed his material possessions as he went. The physical traces and clues about his life. Ulysses wondered what all of it said about him. Did it tell a coherent story about who he was? Did what it say matter, or was he the one that had to decide what it all said? Was it really up to just him to decide who he was?

He was pretty sure he already knew the answer. He didn't look forward to the amount of uncomfortable work it was going to be. He let out a long sigh as he came to a stop in the middle of his living room.

"To figuring it out!" Ulysses said, raising his bottle. **UJ**

The Pagan Sorrow of Game of Thrones

By Andrew Patrick

I. Introduction

There is an amusing internet meme, semi-current for the past few years, known as The Virgin vs. The Chad. In its visual form, it features two young men: the Virgin on the left is pall and skinny, dressed in dark colors, his unhappy face stares glumly at the ground in front of him as he walks. The Chad on the right is goofily muscular, with a mowhawk like Guile from *Street Fighter*. His clothes are bright and colorful and he is displaying himself with all the vulgarity of a silverback gorilla. The Virgin is introspective, thoughtful, educated, miserable, weak, and ineffective. The Chad is ridiculous, confident, unencumbered, and powerful. The joke is using this heuristic as an almost counter-cultural critique of history and pop culture. You can adjust the text and make minor image edits for each version. Reddit is replete with such displays, such as The Virgin Fascist vs. The Chad Monarchist in the r/monarchism subreddit.

As a Civil War buff (such a nicer word than "nerd") of ancient vintage, I found George Virgin McClellan vs. Ulysses S. Chad both hilarious and, in a meta sense, absolutely accurate. McClellan was a bit too enamored of his army, like a child with a bright shiny sword, to do what was necessary to defeat Robert E. Lee. He was kind of a nerd. Lincoln summed him up as lacking "the killer instinct". And while the real-life U.S. Grant was hardly Chad-like, in the sense of being hyper-masculine and brash in his personal relations, he had the killer instinct in spades, the will to go straight for the throat of his opponent, and the refusal to stop at anything short of total victory. Over-the-top humor can have the virtue of clarifying matters.

Now that *Game of Thrones* has run its course and ended on a note that rivals *How I Met Your Mother* for fan disappointment, I cannot help reaching for this meme to explain my own distaste for the finale. George R.R. Martin has been compared to J.R.R. Tolkein so many times that there are actors portraying both men dueling in Epic Rap Battles on YouTube, and of course, a Virgin Martin vs. Chad Tolkein version of the meme. So comparing the heroes of the two sagas feels terribly inevitable. I forgo the visual element of the meme, but here's my list (obviously, **SPOILERS** ensue):

The Virgin Jon Snow	The Chad Aragorn
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A foundling who killed his mother - His lineage is an embarrassing secret and causes all sorts of problems - Grew up in a castle in the shadow of the Stark kids - Gets a Valyrian blade only because his boss had no one else to give it to - Takes a vow of celibacy, breaks it for the first girl who smiles at him - Always begging for help - Stabbed by his underlings - Gives up his birthright to some BPD chick for some sexy time - Screwed over by everyone at the end and sent right back where he started 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Was his mama's pride and joy - Proud and open descendant of great heroes and the most ancient line of kings - Grew up hunting orcs with elf-lords - Reforges the Sword that was Broken, in fulfillment of the prophecy - Women fall at his feet, he stays true to his intended and focused on the task at hand - Always helping others - His rivals love him - An elf-Princess gives up her immortality to be with him - Unites the Realms of Men

How droll! But it cuts to the very real distinctions between *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Jon Snow is in a very real sense, the victim of his saga, while Aragorn is a hero of his. Jon Snow's courage and good-heartedness, even his reveal as the rightful heir to the Iron Throne, avail him nothing: he is cast aside by the Lords of the Seven Kingdoms in exchange for peace. Aragorn comes through his trials and becomes the Messiah that birth and prophecy intended for him. Jon Snow is a man needed for a moment; Aragorn is a World-Historical Figure.

The question is: why? The Virgin Vs. The Chad doesn't help us here: Jon Snow and Aragorn are what they are because that's what the respective authors intended. And whatever Martin's shortcomings are vis-a-vis Tolkein, they are both authors who have crafted believable and absorbing fantasy worlds that sold sufficiently well to be transmuted into popular entertainment. What is the real difference between them?

A popular idea is that Martin's books are a "realistic deconstruction" of the tropes of high fantasy. This viewpoint has some merits, but it doesn't cut to the heart of the matter. For one thing, a judicious reading of Tolkien's works will show that they do not lack verisimilitude. Dwarves and Hobbits may have to pass through darkling woods on their way to the Lonely Mountain, but the Elf-King they meet on the way will be a fully-formed character, with likes and dislikes, virtues and flaws, rather than a bland reflection of a dualistic worldview. The sufferings and errors of Boromir, Denethor, Theoden, and Smeagol are rendered with an artist's polish, by someone who deeply understood the human condition. The language might seem stilted to post-modern ears, but the realities unmasked ring very true.

In the second place, so-called "deconstruction" can only go so far in a universe populated by dragons and ice monsters, wherein heroes ride horses and swing swords, and hidden lore can shift the course of a tale. Martin wanted to ground some of the tropes of high fantasy in the realities of medieval European history, true. But he didn't and doesn't want to destroy them. Just as it matters that Aragorn is the Heir of Elendil, it matters (in the sense that it affects the story) that Jon Snow is really a Targaryen. You don't spend decades on a series like *A Song of Ice and Fire* because you dislike high fantasy, but because you love it.

So we shall need a more fundamental explanation for the difference in mood and tone of the two series. I will argue that the difference is precisely *fundamental*: it is religious. *Lord of the Rings* was written by a passionate Catholic whose faith permeated every part of his art, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, on the other hand, creates a universe that can only be described as Pagan.

II. Eru on his Throne

There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Illuvatar, and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. And he spoke to them propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad.ⁱ

So begins *The Silmarillion*, the long prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, compiled after J.R.R. Tolkein's death by his son Christopher from the master's unpublished manuscripts and notes. *The Silmarillion* not only includes several tales great enough to be novels in their own right (in recent years, several of them have been), but contains the full and complete backstory of the world *Rings* inhabits. We discover the origin of Sauron, Gandalf, The Ring, and the line of Kings that brought forth Aragorn. Reading this prequel has the rare effect of enhancing the first-published work; the world built around the Quest of the One Ring, which one might read without fully grasping the first few times through, suddenly informs every action by every character. I would go so far as to say that anyone who enjoys *The Lord of the Rings* and has not read *The Silmarillion* has not truly appreciated Tolkein's accomplishment.

And at the heart of this universe is One God, who brings all things to being, and first among them beings of pure spirit. To say that this passage is Biblical is to say only that you have read it.

And of course, before this first tale of the *Silmarillion*, known as "Ainulindale", one of these Ainur will step into the Luciferian role and put his will against Eru's. This is Melkor, the Great Enemy, more commonly known as Morgoth, whose machinations and cruelties drive much of the plot of the various tales of the *Silmarillion*. Sauron, originally a member of a lesser angelic class known as Maiar (Gandalf and the other wizards are Maiar who walk Middle-Earth in the guise of old men) became his lieutenant, and succeeds to the position of Supreme Enemy of Good at the end of the First Age of Middle-Earth (*LOTR* takes place at the end of the Third Age), which is the time in which most of *The Silmarillion* takes place.

But Morgoth himself the Valar thrust through the Door of Night beyond the Walls of the World, into the Timeless Void; and a guard is set forever on those walls, and Earindil keeps watch upon the rampart of the sky. Yet the lies that Melkor, the mighty and accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, the Power of Terror and of Hate, sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a sed that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even until the latest days.ⁱⁱ

This does a fair job of summing up the history of both the Second and Third Ages of Middle Earth, and even beyond. Tolkein played around with a sequel to *LOTR*, called "The New Shadow", in which a weakened version of the Shadow begins to creep back in during the reign of Aragorn's son, but he abandoned it, because of course some men would forget the Light and embrace the Shadow, just as their forefathers had done. The Christian word for this is "concupiscence" the inclination towards sin. Human nature is what it is and cannot be altered,

because humans are not the products of their own making but the offspring of the Divine, the Children of Illuvatar.

Thus, whether we are talking of Elves or of Men, the capacity for corruption, for pride and envy and all the remaining vices is present at the beginning. As Elves age, they grow into wisdom and gain somewhat the power to see their sins coming (as Galadriel demonstrates). But the cost of this age is a weariness with the world that prevents this wisdom coming to any fruit. The passionate Noldor of the First Age are the benevolent-but-scattered Elves of the Third Age, who cannot rebuild their great kingdoms of yore. It falls to men - sickly, corruptible, dying men - to restore Lost Realms. Either way, there is a terrible cost to living in Middle Earth, and contending with the shadow. This struggle mirrors the long history of the Jews of the Old Testament, and their persistent failure to meet God's demands. No one - other than Melkor - is quite a perfect analogue to a biblical character, but there is something of Solomon or Rehoboam in Feanor, something of Job in Hurin, and a semblance of Samson to his son Turin Turambar.

More to the point, the broad pattern of hubris and collapse and lamentation that makes up the Hebrew Scriptures finds an echo here. It's perhaps simplistic to say that the Davidic Kingdom equates to Numenor, the northern Kingdom of the Ten Tribes to Arnor, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah to Gondor, but it matches up too well to ignore it. Men (and Elves, and Dwarves) are weak and full of error, so the wicked angelic being destroys their work and fills their lives with sorrow and death. Feanor was the greatest of Elves, a king and a craftsman, and his lust to retrieve his work from Morgoth's grasp not only causes him to kill other elves, but leaves him dead, and lays a curse (in the form of an Oath) that warps the souls of his sons, and wrecks the realms they and other Elves build in the land of Beleriand. Ar-Pharazon the Golden, mighty King of Numenor, forces Sauron to submit to him without battle, but is corrupted by him, and provoking divine wrath, brings about the utter destruction of his land. And so it goes with every mighty hero, from Isildur to Earnur, each of them trapped by evil, and why?

Because they cannot undo the evil in their own hearts. They all crave to be master of the World enough so that the darkness finds a place in them. And this is where the Rings come in.

*Three rings for Elven-Kings under the sky
Seven for Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone
Nine for mortal men doomed to die
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the land of Mordor where the shadows lie
One ring to rule them all,
One ring to find them,
One ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the land of Mordor where the shadows lie.*

There is a host of lore attached to the Three Rings of the Elves, which have names and known bearers. As the Three were made by Elves, for Elves, they resisted Sauron's attempt to

control them. Of the Seven Rings of the Dwarves, it is stated that a Ring was the gift to the Seven clans of Dwarves, which do have names, but the rings do not. The Seven gave with one hand and took away with the other. Each became the foundation of treasure hordes and gave long life and skill to the bearer, but also greed, which made dwarves dig until they unleashed Balrogs and drew the attention of dragons. At the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, four of the Seven are destroyed by dragons, and three have been recaptured by Sauron. The Nine Rings have no names, and neither do their bearers. They were captains and princes of men, and they became powerful, but the long life granted them by the rings ate their souls, and they became Wring-Wraiths, the Nazgul, ghosts in black robes bearing death, servants of Sauron.

So, we have here rings untouched by evil, rings of greed, and rings of pride, and connected to them, Sauron's own One Ring, The Ring. This is the Maguffin of Maguffins, and destroyed not by an act of heroic strength or battle-worthiness, but by an act of suffering, of patiently, gently, through superhuman endurance bearing it through danger and hunger and smoke and ash to the place of its origin, and dropping it in. And the person who does this is neither Man, nor Dwarf-Lord, nor Elven-King, nor anyone of importance at all. Frodo Baggins is by definition a nobody in Middle-Earth, and yet he, and seemingly, only he, has the capability to bear this horrid, soul-twisting, thing of Evil to where it must be taken. No one else has the firmness of purpose and the lack of pretense to see it through.

"And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!"

She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illumined her along and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad.

"I pass the test," she said, "I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel"ⁱⁱⁱ

For Galadriel, as for almost everyone of note in the story, the Ring presents itself as a Temptation: to seize and use and take for himself the power of Sauron. Everyone understands that such an act will be folly, yet the temptation remains, beyond reason. For his part, Frodo is so terrified of the Ring (and nearly everything else) that he can think of nothing else but to destroy it. This becomes a burden greater than he can bear, which sickens his body and nearly breaks his mind. Even after all is said and done, Frodo cannot return to his previous normality. Something really has died within him, and he cannot name it. He feels as the Elves do, weary from life. So

he receives the grace to depart to the Blessed Realm, even though hobbits are the descendants of Men and so should be unable to go there.

The pattern that emerges is of a largely Spiritual Struggle. Aragorn may be the Davidic Messiah to the Realms of Men, the great restorer, but it is not he that defeats Sauron. Sauron cannot be defeated by arms. There's only one way to defeat him, and only one kind of person able to do that. Frodo is this kind of person not because he is a hobbit, as Smeagol, a very Hobbit-like creature, demonstrates to all who see him the corruptive power of the Ring. Rather, Frodo has the right spirit, the readiness to suffer in order to destroy wickedness.

*He was oppressed and afflicted
Yet he did not open his mouth
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter
And as a sheep before her shearers is silent
So he did not open his mouth
By oppression and judgment he was taken away
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living
For the transgression of my people he was stricken
He was assigned a grave with the wicked
And with the rich in his death
Though he had done no violence
Nor was there any deceit in his mouth
Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer
And though the Lord makes of his life a guilt offering
He will see his offspring and prolong his days
And the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand
After the suffering of his soul
He will see the light of life and be satisfied.^{iv}*

This passage from Isaiah 53 describes a being known as the Suffering Servant. Christianity has always identified this person as Jesus of Nazareth, and it takes very little stretching to make of it a map of the story of Frodo Baggins. Certainly we see the paradox of both "cut off from the land of the living" and "will see the light of life and be satisfied" in Frodo's journey across the ocean to the Undying Lands. Ascension is always a journey where beloved friends and companions cannot immediately follow.

In short, Tolkein imbues his narrative with two Messianic figures: a traditional warrior and descendant of kings, who restores and builds up the kingdoms of old, and a suffering servant who by his virtue and innocence overthrows evil on a quantum level. These are very strongly Biblical themes, as I will presently argue by contrast to Martin's work.

III. The Call of R'hllor

*Zeus has led us on to know,
The helmsman lays it down as law
That we must suffer, suffer unto truth.^v*

It has been remarked that *Lord of the Rings* is not without its pagan elements as well. Certainly the Ring itself bears resemblance to Germanic myth as presented in Wagner's Ring Cycle. The "one ring to rule them all" poem may even have been drawn from the wedding band of a medieval Welsh Prince, Llewellen the Great. One doesn't have to look hard to find other elements of Norse, Celtic, and Saxon mythology. The very idea of Elves is entirely un-Biblical.^{vi}

And if I wish to say that Frodo Baggins is a Suffering Servant, then why not Jon Snow? Surely a man who labors ceaselessly for the good of all humanity, who does his duty while other men spit in his face, who *dies* and is *resurrected*, surely he qualifies?

And if we were to find him in *Lord of the Rings*, he might. But it's not merely the individual plot lines of Tolkein's work that are Christian, it's the worldview of all the individual characters, the moral universe they inhabit, and how that universe resolves itself according to their actions. Middle-Earth has the *eucatastrophe*; Westeros does not.

The word is one of Tolkein's rare Greek neologisms, a portmanteau of the word for "good" with the word for "downturning", which in literary criticism means the unraveling or resolving of the plot. Tolkein's eucatastrophe is the destruction of Sauron by the casting of the One Ring into the fires that made it. This is a reversal of the fate of the story; Sauron, although briefly checked in front of Minas Tirith, has the manpower to crush the army led by Aragorn until the Ring is destroyed. Then the Nazgul and the orcs and even Sauron himself are cast down. The spiritual goodness of the heroes defeats the Great Enemy^{vii}. Thus, a "good downturning".

In pagan tragedy, catastrophe refer to the unraveling of the hero's persona, the *peripeteia* of his status and self-understanding. The hero of *Oedipus Rex* undergoes such, moving from honored king and hero of the people, to a benighted exile and curse of the world. At the end, Oedipus takes on the punishment of the gods, to save one last time the city he has ruled. And he does this because of his crimes, which he and his birth parents and his adopted parents did everything possible to avoid.

When Oedipus was in utero, the seer said the boy would grow up to murder his father and marry his mother. In casting him aside, his birth parents made sure that the boy would grow up not knowing who they were, which is the only way the crime becomes possible.

Oedipus learns this. Oedipus suffers this. There is no escape for him. He takes the blame and leaves the city. The gods have willed it so, for reasons of their own.

And this brings us to Martin, and the world he has built, and the gods and heroes that populate it.

George R.R. Martin, no less a fan of Tolkein than many of us, refers to his published supplementary material as "The GRRMarillion". There are several such works, but the most comprehensive is *The World of Ice and Fire*. Purporting to be a world history composed by a

Maester of the Citadel in the time of Martin's novels, it describes Westeros and the other continents^{viii}, their histories, and their cultures and religions.

In true pagan fashion, each realm has its own distinct religion: Westeros has the Faith of the Seven (an analogue to Medieval Catholicism, except with a Septune Deity rather than a Triune); The Rhoynar worship Mother Rhoyne; the Dothraki have the Great Stallion, etc. Religion is a powerful thing in Martin's universe largely for its social and institutional role, not for its claims to universal truth. Indeed, a world where men worship The Black Goat, Akkalon the Red Bull, The Great Shepherd, etc., can have very few universal truths.

The dizzying array of deities and modes of worship has a way of preventing any one faith from being taken too seriously, even by its adherents: the common view on Planetos,^{ix} like that of the pagan ancients, was that one worshiped the gods that one was raised to worship, and the rest are to be ignored. Thus, the Faith of the Seven takes a very tolerant view of the worship of the Old Gods of the North, the Drowned God of the Iron Islands, and the Rhoynish worship found in Dorne. Though it can have militant orders, the Faith of the Seven is not a crusading creed. There are no crusading creeds on Planetos.

Except one.

For the Night is Dark, and Full of Terrors.

R'hllor is the Red God, the good god of flame who is the bringer of light and life, opposed to the Great Other, the god of darkness, ice, and death.^x Originating, it seems, in Asshai, the shadow city at the edge of the known world, red priests and red temples can be found everywhere. Alone among the faiths of Martin's world, they are totalizing, insisting that all men can and must serve R'hllor, or the Great Other will triumph. They will preach against other gods, desecrate their statuary, and burn humans in sacrifice. They practice terrifying arts, as evidenced by Melisandre of Asshai birthing a shadow assassin to kill Renly Baratheon. The political impact of this was to win forces to the banner of Stannis Baratheon, Renly's older brother. Stannis has embraced R'hllor, or at any rate, embraced Melisandre, who sees him as the embodiment of Azor Ahai, the ancient hero who defeated the Great Other in the Dawn Age.

A messianic prophecy, from a religion of sorcerers who burn children alive. One could be forgiven for thinking that Martin is telling us something about religion.

R'hllor is a dark god indeed, and he is not the only one. *The World of Ice and Fire* alludes to other ancient and terrifying mysteries. Witness this description of the only known city on the mainland of Sothyros:

Maesters and other scholars alike have puzzled over the greatest enigmas of Sothyros, the ancient city of Teen. A ruin older than time, built of oily black stone, in massive blocks so heavy that it would require a dozen elephants to move them, Yeen has remained a desolation for many thousands of years, yet the jungle that surrounds it on every side has scarce touched it ("A city so evil that even the jungle will not enter," Nymeria is

supposed to have said when she laid eyes on it, if the tales are true). Every attempt to rebuild or resettle Yeen has ended in disaster.^{xi}

This minor image of an ancient ruin that stands contrary to man and nature borrows from the Cthulhu Mythos of H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, especially the latter. The same page tells us that the Brindled Men on Sothyros "worship dark gods with obscene rites". Yeen would make an excellent setting for a Conan story.

There is a similar echo to this description of the island of Leng:

There are queer ruins in the depth's of the island's [Leng's] jungle: massive buildings, long fallen, and so overgrown that rubble remains above the surface... but underground, we are told, endless labyrinths of tunnels lead to vast chambers, and carved steps descend hundreds of feet into the earth. No man can say who might have build these cities, or when. They remain perhaps the only remnant of some vanished people.^{xii}

These are two of numerous examples of structures existing in the World of Ice and Fire without their present inhabitants knowing how or why they exist. The Wall holds such mystery: Northern legend attributes it to Brandon the Builder, and we have no more than that, other than the intuition that one does not build a magic wall of ice to keep out wildlings. Martin's universe is one of mystery, of ancient knowledge that present characters are unlikely to understand. The Master's voice in The World of Ice and Fire constantly discounts the ancient legends, seeking evidence-based understanding of the world, assuming that the ancient past was like the present, and so shall be the future. Given Martin's storytelling habits, this seems to have been set up to be subverted. The Others are real; the dragons are real; Melisandre's blood-magic is real - why not the gods?

And what Gods they are...

It was mariners from the Golden Empire who opened up Leng to trade, yet even then the island remained a perilous place for outsiders, for the Empress of Long was known to have congress with the Old Ones, gods who lived deep below the ruins of subterranean cities, and from time to time the Old Ones told her to put all the strangers on the island to death. This is known to have happened at least four times in the island's history if Colloqo Votar's Jade Compendium can be believed.^{xiii}

This is another obvious Lovecraft/Cthulhu Mythos reference, and not the only one. Some fans have speculated that the Drowned God of the Ironborn is directly Cthulhu-like, given his watery domain, but there are more direct allusions.

Today Yin is once more the capital of Yi Ti. There the seventeenth azure emperor Bu Gai sits in splendor in a palace larger than King's Landing. Yet far to the east, well beyond

the borders of the Golden Empire proper, past the legendary Mountains of the Morn, in the city of Carcosa on the Hidden Sea, dwells in exile a sorcerer lord who blames to be the sixty-ninth yellow emperor, from a dynasty fallen for a thousand years.^{xiv}

"Carcosa" is of course a callback to *The King in Yellow* the 1895 collection of short stories by Robert Chambers, featuring a lost city called Carcosa and an otherworldly, monstrous King in Yellow who rules there (the "sixty-ninth yellow emperor" is thus also an allusion). Elements of Chambers' stories were borrowed by Lovecraft for his stories^{xv}. Chambers' King in Yellow became the Hastur the Unspeakable of Lovecraft and other Mythos writers. In these stories, the revelation of the divine beings, or Old Ones, brings forth not Beatific Vision of the Christian heaven, but horror and madness. R'hllor, might be one such God, especially if Melisandre of Asshai is his servant.

We have not discussed Asshai-by-the-Shadow, by all accounts an unpleasant place:

Few places in the known world are as remote as Asshai, and fewer as forbidding. Travelers tell us that the city is build entirely of black stone: halls, hovels, temples, palaces, streets, walls, bazaars, all. Some say as well that the stone of Asshai has a greasy, unpleasant feel to it, that it seems to drink the light, dimming tapers and torches and hearth fires alike. The nights are very black in Asshai, all agree, and eve the brightest days of summer are somehow grey and gloomy.

Asshai is a large city, sprawling out for leagues on both banks of the black river Ash. Behind its enormous land walls is ground enough for Volantis, Qarth, and King's Landing to stand side by side and still have room for Oldtown.

Yet the population of Asshai is no greater than that of a good-sized market town. By night the streets are deserted, and only one building in ten shows a light. Even at the height of day, there are no crowds to be seen, no tradesmen shouting their wares in noisy markets, no women gossiping at a well. Those who walk the streets of Asshai are masked and veiled, and have a furtive air about them. Oft as not, they walk alone, or ride in palanquins of ebony and iron, hidden behind dark curtains and borne through the dark streets upon the backs of slaves.

And there are no children in Asshai.^{xvi}

This city literally has Here be Demons on the maps beyond it (and a corpse-city called Stygai, another Robert Howard reference). It is the edge of the world and the edge of madness and it may be where the worship of red R'hllor began.

With all this cultural and theological context, let us consider the story of Jon Snow.^{xvii}

We will die, but not without some honor from the Gods.^{xviii}

He was born of the illicit union of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark, which was either an elopement or an abduction, depending on who you ask. In any case, this union provoked a rebellion that destroyed the Targaryen dynasty, killing Rhaegar, his father King Aerys, and all of the rest of them save Viserys and the infant Danerys. Lyanna died giving birth to him, after giving him to her brother Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell. To keep the boy safe from the new dynasty, Eddard pretends that he is his own bastard son, and gives him the name Jon Snow (Snow being the name that all bastards are given in the north). He grows up believing he is an ill-gotten bastard, and endures a bastard's treatment at the hands of Eddard's wife Catelyn (and to a lesser degree, their daughter Sansa).

He grows up without prospect, and casts his lot with the Night's Watch at the beginning of the story, because in the Night's Watch, he thinks, a man can make his own name and his own contribution. He accepts that he must swear to take no wife and own no lands and father no children and die at his post at the Wall, guarding the realms of man from wildlings (and the Others, demonic beings of ice-magic who can raise and enslave the dead, whom no one believes in anymore but who are, of course, completely real). He goes and does this, enduring contempt from those who dislike his father or think him guilty of lording it over his fellows. He serves through disappointment and hardship, but he takes his oath.

Elsewhere, Eddard Stark is killed by the machinations of the Lannister family, and his son and heir Robb goes forth to avenge him. War breaks out from one end of the continent to another, and still Jon Snow sits at his post, dreaming of being a ranger. Ironborn attack winterfell and capture Bran and Rickon Stark, the youngest of the family, and still Jon does his duty, forgoing his kinship and the home of his childhood. He does try to run away, but is stopped by his comrades before a punishment is merited. He is, in the vicious vendettas of Westeros' morally empty ruling class, a man fully noble.

He goes on a mission for the Night's Watch, to infiltrate the wildlings and learn of their new King-Beyond-the-Wall. Jon does as he is bidden. He even pretends to betray the Watch, but holds back at the last minute and returns to the Wall, in time to fight against the Wildling attack.

In the election for a new Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, Jon wins, largely by the support of his friends. He did not seek the position, but bears its duties as best he may. Perceiving that the Others are real and the wildlings were merely trying to escape them, he offers to settle them at the Wall, under Night's Watch governance, to unite against the threat. He leads an expedition to Hardhome beyond the Wall to rescue some more wildlings, and confronts the Others, led by the fearsome Night King, for the first time. Horrified, he presses ahead with his plans, and for his trouble, is assassinated by his fellows, who each say "for the Watch" as they stab him.

He lays dead for a day, until Melisandre, by calling on R'hllor or some other magic, revives him. He executes the traitors but then leaves the Watch behind (the oath was for life, and he died). Here his half-sister Sansa re-enters his life, having escaped Lannister captivity and a forced marriage to the wicked Ramsay Bolton, who holds Winterfell and his half-brother Rickon Stark hostage. Jon gathers an army as best he is able, and with help from allies, defeats Ramsay

(although Rickon is killed). The grateful Lords of the North, who followed his doomed brother Robb before Robb was murdered at the Red Wedding, proclaim Jon Snow the King in the North.

Uninterested in the honor, Jon again takes up the duty, to protect his home and the realms of men from the Others. He needs dragon glass, which can stop the Others and their horde of undead zombies. To get it he goes to Dragonstone, where he meets Danaerys Targaryen, the last of her family, who has hatched dragons from fossilized eggs, who has build an army by force and fraud, who has sacked the cities of Slaver's Bay and brought new justice to the downtrodden, and who has come home to Westeros to claim her father's throne. He is young and unmarried, as is she. He is comfortable with her dragons and able to hold his own with her. They become enamored of each other. He convinces her that the Others are real, that they are a matter of much greater importance than who sits the Iron Throne. She and He become the new power couple.

Not everyone is pleased with this. Sansa Stark distrusts the dragon queen, and Bran Stark - a crippled boy who has become a mystic seer - discovers by traveling into the past Jon's true identity, and identity which gives him a better claim to the throne than Danaerys. The tension between them, thus started, holds for the fight against the Others, but when Danaerys heads south to claim King's Landing from the Lannisters, her ability to tell friend from foe collapses, and at her moment of triumph, she burns the city, reducing it to rubble.

Jon has remained loyal to his dragon queen throughout this, forgoing his better claim, although the reality that he has fallen in love with his aunt does complicate his feelings. He has been loyal, because loyalty is honor, and without his honor Jon Snow is no one. But now, discovering that Danaerys is a threat to the peace of the world, does what no one else can, and slays her on the steps of the Iron Throne. Danaerys' captains capture him, and from the Lords of Westeros, demand justice.

In a surprise move, the Lords of Westeros decide to elect crippled Bran Stark as King. Sansa sees her opportunity and declares the independence of the North. And Jon Snow, who is really Aegon Targaryen, is sent back to the Wall as punishment for regicide. He is last seen riding with the wildlings north of the Wall, to escort them to their homes.

What do we see? This simplified version of the plot (Martin was a soap-opera writer for a time) tells us a few things about Jon Snow, and many of those things are admirable. But these admirable qualities were the product of his upbringing at Eddard Stark's hands, and his own natural gifts. He does not, like Frodo Baggins, have a wizard (who's an angelic being in disguise), guiding and protecting him. He does not, like Aragorn, gain from his contributions to the Great Battle. He is a servant of the Realms of Men, and when he is no longer needed, the powers that be discard of him, however regrettably. This is, quite frankly, the best that he could ever have hoped for, true born prince of the realm or no.

And this is because the story he lives in is given over to pagan fury, pagan horror, and pagan sorrow. Westeros, and Essos, and the rest, are realms of chaos, with blood feuds and eternal hatreds briefly cooled by the dominance of a powerful ruler. It took the dragon lord Aegon Targaryen I to unite the Seven Kingdoms with Fire and Blood, and in the absence of strong rulership the Great Houses fall upon each other in an orgy of hatred and betrayal. Nothing

in *Lord of the Rings*, not even the distrust of Denethor towards Aragorn, comes close to the cruelty with which Stark and Lannister and Tyrell and Martell and the rest play the game of thrones. Even that phrase implies a shallowness, an amoral reality where only actions and emotions are real. When you play, says Cersei Lannister, you win or you die. Jon Snow escaped death, but his finale fate is bereft of any kind of victory. The powers that be have slightly different names when its all over, and an old throne was melted, but apart from that and the thousands of deaths nothing has really changed. They survived the Ice and Fire, for a time, and that is all. **UJ**

Endnotes

- i. J.R.R. Tolkein, The Silmarilliion, Ballantine Books, 1981, pg. 3
- ii. *ibid*, pg. 324-325.
- iii. J.R.R. Tolkein, The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1994, pgs. 356-7
- iv. Isaiah 53:7-11
- v. Aeschylus, Agamemnon
- vi. Unless you count the myth of the Nephilim in Genesis 5, and that's really a stretch.
- vii. The most powerful detail in the end is Frodo's final corruption by the Ring. Arriving at Mount Doom, he declares that he will claim the Ring for himself, alerting Sauron to his presence. Frodo is undone by Smeagol, who in his lust to have the ring, bites it from Frodo's hands, and exulting over the return of his Precious, falls into the fires, taking the Ring with him. Thus, even Evil's corruption turns against itself.
- viii. Essos, where Danaerys Targaryen spends most of the story, Sothyros, a dangerous jungle continent, and the mysterious Ulthos.
- ix. A fan-created name for the world of Westeros, but a useful one.
- x. This dualism and the faiths penchant for fire suggest a nod to Zorastrianism.
- xi. George R.R. Martin, Elio M. Garcia, Jr, and Linda Antonsson, The World of Ice and Fire, Bantam Books, 2014, pg. 286
- xii. *ibid*, pg. 306
- xiii. *ibid*, pg. 307
- xiv. *Ibid*, pg. 303
- xv. Chambers himself borrowed the name "Carcosa" from a short story by Ambrose Bierce.
- xvi. The World of Ice and Fire, pg. 308
- xvii. Because the show is finished, I have relied largely on its version of events.
- xviii. Aeschylus, Agamemnon