

INTRODUCTION

I use the expression ‘borderline fantasy’ to define this book, because it deals with ordinary people, rather than larger than life characters, placed in extraordinary settings and situations. Two ordinary modern young people cross over from the real to a fantasy world. Yet the real world is not quite real. It is South Australia, but the landscape is interpreted, rather than described in photographic fashion. As for the alternative world, it is parallel, but operating in its own time continuum. In this story two people travel, neither back nor forward in time, but sideways - though with temporary time dislocations so that not everything occurs in chronological order.

The principal characters however are matured by their contact with an alternative world, and thus enabled to know themselves better. This book adopts the practice of rendering a character’s thoughts in italics, and in the first person singular for the sake of immediacy, and like all fantasies, borderline or otherwise though, it deals with good and evil, because that is the ‘never ending story’.

Chapter 1 - The Fates, and The Covenant

The knot of bare, lifeless peaks was a lunar-like landscape devoid of vegetation, under a dark sky, where the sun had never shone unhindered - a place behind filters. Any creature living here would never know true light, only dark, neutered shadows, or, if they had known other places, memories of lost splendour. Perhaps the power controlling it was like a kind of demonic mediaeval school-man, never willing to let its inhabitants know light directly, but only as filtered by layers, like those of interpretation, allegory, or code.

It was neither on, nor off the earth - as far as space/time dimensions are concerned. It was a world between times, dimensions, levels of consciousness, though never precisely located at any one point. Its inhabitants likewise belonged nowhere because they were unclassifiable. Were they human, animal, vegetable, or mineral? None, and all of these, because to meet one would be a reminder of everything known, and nothing understood; here was a world in which defiance of category had become the ultimate hell of insecurity.

So they lacked potency and focus. Yet inside one bleak, slag-like hill at the centre of this twisted range, were three exceptions to this nightmare of undefinition... three exceptions living underground. This hill was, despite appearances to the contrary, honeycombed with passages. A stranger entering it would become inescapably lost in an incompletely dark, shadow taunted maze, to be led inevitably down into the heart of this world, far beyond the gloom of its lifeless surface. And in the centre, at the end of all hopeless passageways, the condemned one would find a cave, huge, high-roofed, and vaulted.

Neither sound, nor even the gloomiest suggestion of light ever penetrated from the upper world, but the dreadful passageways leading to it generated their own echoes, booming, rolling, sighs,

and groans, unpredictable but persistent. Yet in spite of everything, these three exceptions lived in this cave, cut off from all...They were the Three Fates. In the absence of natural light they had made their own, a large fire that never went out. Its flames were red, yellow, and white, generating light without smoke, and with very little heat - almost a cold fire. Not even the creator of this hell knew how The Fates had made their fire, or how they kept it burning. Neither had this Power any control over what they did.

It was a great source of frustration to the Power of Darkness that he had no power over these Fates. He did not even know how, or when they had got there, only that it was none of his doing. Here was an environment ideal for his purpose, because it existed in that state to which he desired to reduce all worlds, as he waged a relentless war against the True Light. Yet into this, as he – Amangans considered his approaching triumph had these three come suddenly, from beyond all knowledge.

The Fates, sitting beside their fire looked like old women, dressed and hooded alike in black, and always engaged in the same occupation. They were weaving a tapestry - a continuing, seemingly timeless process resulting in a vast carpet extending down an endless aisle. It lay, spread out across the cave floor, with its most recently woven panels catching the firelight, while the older ones stretched away into darkness. Continually it grew, as the fire-illuminated weavers plied their craft, and there appeared to be no reason why it should ever stop.

It was a history book in coloured threads, an endless sequence of panels telling the tale of the ‘Seven Grail Kingdoms’, their rise and fall. Did these Fates weave episodes after the events depicted had taken place, or was their weaving a form of prophecy... a foreshadowing, perhaps a creating of these events? Even Amangans did not know the answer. He only knew that it was beyond his ability to dictate what they should weave, try as he might. Threats, and displays of might and terror had no more effect upon them than waves beating against a rock face. Sometimes they

wove what suited his purpose, sometimes not, but he never gave up attempting to influence them. They were busy, as always when he made one of his periodic visits.

These were usually spectacular because Amangans was vain, with an incurable taste for showmanship, but if the Fates were impressed they gave no sign. So he came, announcing his approach with booming thunders, earth shakings, and fire. Their cavern was lit with red flames and lightning, its silence torn apart by unbearable noise, and when these manifestations had died, he spoke - a voice out of the darkness, which seemed all the darker for having been so violently disrupted. He began, as always with bluff –

“So, my Fates, still you weave the destiny of Hasta, as if it was not I who controlled it...” Then his eyes lit on the panels they were working, “Ha, what have we here... a mountain, a lake, an island, a spear?”

The Fates answered him not a word, as usual, and Amangans hated being ignored –

“Have you found the Spear?” he persisted, with arrogance overcoming desire, “Do you know where it is? Do you prophesy in your pretty threads that I shall find it?”

“Why should we tell you?” responded one of the Fates, in a voice like a raven’s croak, “It is to no power of yours that we answer.”

Amangans had been dealing with these entities for long enough to know that it was pointless losing his temper, so he tried guile –

“You may not be answerable to me, but there is much that I can do for you. Weave the destruction of Hasta and my recovery of the Spear as I direct, and you will be richly rewarded. I can bring you out of this place, giving you power and wealth beyond your wildest dreams...”

The answer of the Fates was laughter, cold, cackling, and croaking, from three old crones. Amangans raged inwardly, with a fury so intense that had he released it anything might have

happened. There was probably no one, on or off the mortal worlds beyond this hellhole, who would have dared to laugh at him thus. However, he did not release his anger, knowing that even destruction would achieve nothing. Neither knowledge nor power could break the strength of their refusal, so he decided to withdraw, but not suddenly, since to do so would be an admission of defeat involving loss of face. To cover his intentions he studied the panels on which they were working –

“Very pretty”, he said sarcastically, “I see that you have tied Earth and Hasta together somewhat... Ha, what’s this... an earthman and woman, on the borders of Hasta...? Well indeed, I wonder what made you weave those gates and crossing points between Earth, and the kingdoms of the Grail...”

“We weave what is, and is to be,” interrupted one of the Fates doggedly. Amangans looked at the figures of the young man and woman –

“Well, if they’re the worst I have to fear then victory is certain. I have dealt with creatures like these before...”

He lapsed into silence - eyes roving over the panels, but his mood changed when he spotted a white robed figure bending a bow towards the clouds –

“So, my old enemy... well, what is to be will be, you say...?”

“Yes, so we say,” interrupted the oldest of the Fates, “Your victory is not assured; light and darkness are still equal, but you have no certainty that they will so remain.”

Amangans was finished, his confidence diminishing as his anger increased –

“Weave what you will, Fates! I will destroy Hasta as I destroyed the other kingdoms! None shall withstand a hatred such as mine, withering all that it touches! And when I have desolated all mortal worlds, reducing them to bleak, sunless deserts such as this. When I have reduced reason, form, and meaning to nothingness.

When, as one of those insufferable humans wrote, ‘Paradise’ is well and truly ‘lost’, then I will deal with you!”

He turned his back on them, but could not resist a parting shot before leaving as he had come, with noise, shakings, and fires –

“I summon you, O Fates, to witness my triumph among the ashes and ruins of Hasta...!”

His last words were swallowed up by the noise of his going, and they had achieved nothing. The Fates continued weaving the destiny of Hasta, laughing from time to time.

In a hidden paradise behind the ice walls of Hyperborea, the Astari of Numenor met in council, at a secret chamber in the Temple of Wisdom that stood upon a low hill in the centre of Thule, the capital, heart, and soul of this ‘Land of the Ancestors’. A white stoned city of straight streets, Thule was set in the heart of a fertile green valley, warmed by hot springs, and surrounded by mountains of ice. Hyperborea was at the top of the globe, where the inner worlds opened to the stars - from which came the winged disks. Like its eastern counterparts, it was inaccessible except to the pure in heart, and not even to those unless they were called.

To reach it, pilgrims journeyed north across the Great Western Continent, through grassland and forest, to an impenetrable mountain range. Thereafter they traversed passages under the mountains, through the Haunted Caves, crossing the black ‘River of Death’ before resurfacing on the cold northern Tundra. And, as if that were not enough to unnerve the boldest, it was necessary to navigate a sea of huge floating icebergs to reach the shores of Hyperborea. Then there were the Walls of Ice to be negotiated under conditions of extreme cold, through which there was no clear path. Having endured these trials, and crossed a seemingly bottomless chasm by means of an extremely narrow bridge with no handrail, they might finally reach their ancestral home.

However the Hyperboreans had once been attacked by Amangans, who came with mutated monsters against them, but even he could not break through; yet it was because of him that the Astari were gathered together, under their Grand Master Belasius. Who were the Astari? They were originally the rulers of Numenor, an ancient planet that had hosted life long before it appeared on earth. As such they fought against the Darkness, which was active in the universe long before it discovered our world.

The Astari were defeated on Numenor, and their planet was destroyed, because its people, despite their best efforts, became corrupt. However, on account of their loyalty, and service to the 'Order of Heaven', they were freed from the chains of mortality, and given the choice of either returning to the 'Light', or taking charge of a remnant fleeing to Earth, and guiding them towards enlightenment. They chose the latter course, and founded Atlantis, whose story has been told many times. When Atlantis in turn became corrupt and brought about its own destruction, they withdrew, firstly to Avalon, and then to Hyperborea; from where they considered the destiny of Hasta. Having transcended the limitations of the flesh, they could overview any part of history with their united inner vision, much as we might scan a landscape from a high promontory.

The Temple of Wisdom was a white-marble faced, stepped pyramid, with a colonnaded temple on its summit. Their chamber was on the Temple's flat roof. On a day of blue sky and bright sun, the City below them shone with dazzling brilliance. The great plain was a circle, with the Temple, on its low central hill, as the hub of a wheel, from which roads radiated like spokes, with the perimeter marked by a ring road. Beyond the city limits was spread a patchwork of varied greens, gold, and brown... wood, pasture, tilled land, and crops, threaded through by silver streams. Fountains burst skywards, transforming the light into rainbow coloured veils of mist. And on the edge of sight, around the rim of the valley could be

seen the glint of ice from the unforgiving mountains that were both their defense, and a shelter from the merciless polar winds.

When the Astari paused briefly in their deliberations, Belasius stepped out onto the Temple roof to view the unspoiled beauty. He never tired of gazing at the perfectly blended colours, the silver waters, and the rainbow-like geysers. Yet there was work to be done, decisions to be made, and with the ingenuity and determination of their enemy seemingly inexhaustible, these could not be delayed. With a sigh he re-entered the chamber, briefly considering his companions in this androgynous Order. There was not one of them that looked old, or young; all appeared to be ageless.

The chamber's walls were painted light blue, and hung with tapestries depicting scenes from the histories of both Atlantis, and Hyperborea. The roof was speckled with gold stars, and the floor covered with pale gold matting. In the centre stood a circular wooden table, upon which reposed a large block of polished rock crystal on a black stand, surrounded by twelve seats, on which Belasius' companions were seated. There should have been thirteen, but since Merlin the youngest was absent, fulfilling his own self-appointed destiny, the number was reduced below the 'balance of perfection'.

Mannanon Llyr spoke first, his voice ringing with impatience –

“Seven Grail kingdoms have we set up since the fall of Atlantis. Six have followed it to destruction. Now Hasta, the seventh, seems set to do likewise! Yet still you say we must not intervene in power, to save these miserable mortals from the results of their folly!”

“I notice Brother,” said Belasius with tolerant good humor, “that time has not softened your temper.”

Llyr snorted irritably – “That is true, and I ask your pardon, but we must have some small weakness to anchor us to these bodies.”

He paused, looking round the table –

“Nonetheless I stand by my words. You have seen for yourselves, and the crystal does not lie. These people are likely to go the way of their forebears.”

“Yet they were Heaven’s choice for the unfolding of its ‘Order’”, said Niniane the wife of Belasius - “and by that choice we must abide.”

“Which means” continued Belasius, “that we must continue to accept the divine prohibition on the use of force...”

Silence followed, but he had not finished –

“Nonetheless we still have powers of influence and persuasion; and so that these may be exercised wisely, let us return to the crystal.”

Because of their ability to link minds as one, so that each saw and reacted to what the others saw, it was not necessary for all to look into the crystal at once. Instead, they joined hands and began a special breathing rhythm, while allowing Belasius to look, and transmit the pictures - mind to mind. Hangings were drawn across the windows to induce the effect of twilight. They stood for a few moments in meditation, before each felt a slight jerk as the rhythm detached spirit from body, lifting their inner selves to a higher plane, from which they saw...

... a large banqueting hall, with a raised dais at its east end. The lower courses of its grey stonewalls were hung with tapestries depicting scenes from the daily life, and history of Hasta. Pictures of hunting, farming, and fishing were interspersed with pictures showing the building of this hall at the Royal Palace in Sangreal, the capital. There were also occasional, widely spaced battle scenes in which the King appeared, holding a spear - not as a weapon, but as a talisman.

Above the tapestries, the upper courses were hung with the coats-of-arms of those knights responsible for the defence of Hasta, and the guardianship of the ‘Spear’. From its topmost course the great, dark oak hammer-beams of the roof sprang up into semi-

darkness, above the reach of torches and lamps. The gaze of the Astari swung back to ground level, to a banquet in progress. The High Table was on a dais, with three tables below it, extending the length of the hall and making the overall shape that of a large 'E'. However, eating, drinking, music, and revelry are much alike from hall to hall. Their attention was not concerned with these, but with the King in his chair of state. The Queen was not with him, but his young sister sat opposite, facing him. They could not fail to observe the looks that passed between them, and were appalled at what they saw, as the vision faded...

... only to reappear, but in a scene so startlingly different that they initially had some difficulty in grasping its significance. A stretch of mountain road curved towards the right, before merging with the landscape; it was a neutral grey dirt track. In bright sunlight it would have looked pale, but under an overcast sky it was drably grey/brown. They were watching like hovering kestrels. Rank upon rank of dark pine trees marched along its right side up to the middle ground of the scene, where they crossed over to the left, before marching northwards into the distance. The sun struggled from time to time to pierce the overcast, and when it succeeded these solemn ranks cast long, dark shadows.

On the edge of sight, at the top of the picture, a range of hills reared, with one dark peak higher than the rest. It was towards this that they presumed the road would lead. Belasius however did not direct them to it, but centered them where the pines crossed the track. Here, native bush took over, a feral tangle of sinuous, skeletal trunks and branches; a wilderness of subtly, but extensively varied grey/greens, unlike anything in Hyperborea. Yet why did Belasius hold them thus, where nothing appeared to be happening?

The answer, when it came left them thunderstruck. Along the empty dirt road a blue car drove into view, then stopped...

... The angle of vision changed, closing in on the vehicle, out of which stepped a tall young man with ginger hair, wearing blue jeans, white sneakers, and a cream coloured jumper. But before

they could make sense of it the scene faded, replaced by a forest clearing. They were facing two tall pillars of rock at its western edge, framing a wide blue sky with patches of white cloud. In the centre stood a tall man robed in white, holding a bow, with an arrow fitted to the string. They felt a collective sense of relief. The Astari knew the Archer at the Gates of Sunset, but before they could grasp his significance, he drew his bow and fired an arrow through the pillars - into a wide sky panorama. And as the arrow took flight the horizon blazed red, as if on fire. Then the scene faded, and they were back in their chamber.

They stood in silence, letting the dregs of vision drain away. With a sigh, Belasius covered the crystal with a black cloth, pulled back the window hangings, and returned to his seat –

“Our brother was right, we see history repeating itself.”

The speaker’s voice was edged with scorn. It was Thoth, Messenger and Healer of the Astari, tutor to Merlin in his youth, and confidant of Belasius –

“First Numenor, then Atlantis, then six Grail kingdoms one after the other, all of which were given the ‘Order of Heaven’ under a covenant. All were promised prosperity, security, enlightenment, and the opportunity to be the means of enlightening others, but what has happened? Each one in turn fell to the Powers of Darkness... Now Hasta is set to follow suit. It is not as if their rulers could plead ignorance...”

He had risen to his feet, pacing across to the windows and back, the gold-bordered swirl of his blue robe catching the light -

“Would you not think that a grail king would know better than to commit incest? I am tempted to wonder why Heaven troubles itself with these mortals, instead of wiping the universe clean and starting again.”

“Come Thoth,” said Niniane reasonably, “We have not seen all. We have seen a man tempted, but the deed may not have been done.”

“And we must remember,” added Belasius, “that, strange though it may seem, the Celestial Ones have chosen to work through these people. Therefore we must aid them.”

“Nonetheless,” said Llyr soberly, “we should prepare for the worst. Distressing though it may be, I think we must look again, to ascertain what... if anything, has happened, and how dangerous the situation truly is.”

“I fear you are right old friend,” said Belasius sadly, as he removed the cloth once more from the crystal, “Come, let us see again... Perhaps though,” he mused, the cloth still in his hand, “we have also observed in vision one of those who will be the means of saving them.”

Thoth laughed shortly, “If the Celestials are reduced to using a red-headed man scarcely out of boyhood from another world, in a covered, horse-less chariot; one who, moreover knows nothing of Hasta, then the evil ones must be laughing!”

Belasius drew back the hangings over the windows, “Perhaps, or perhaps not. Let us see for ourselves...”

... but the Fates were laughing in their fire-lit chamber as the Astari deliberated. Separated by worlds, and by a gulf of time, amused in their cackling, cacophonous fashion, they continued working the final threads of the present panel - sealing fates, and unsealing destinies. Flames danced across the dark, echoing spaces of their chamber, as they threaded the ‘Prophecy’, reckless now in their disregard for the potentialities of change...

*‘In no time shall he come
with the arrow’s flight
and a sounding bell
when black turns to white,
and the Swan’s death knell*

*is a song in the night
as shadows move to quell
the source of light...'*

“Stop...!” The eldest sister upheld a claw-like hand, still clutching her needle, “Weave not the last two lines of the Prophecy. This is a fate beyond our determining. The voices of the inner and outer worlds, of Heaven, and the Father of Time have spoken. Those who fulfill, and they alone shall complete the Prophecy.”

The echoes of her voice chased dancing patterns of light and shadow accumulating in the cavernous spaces, while the Fates found themselves, unmoving, at the centre of a vortex of light and noise... Until the whirling pattern was broken by the tolling of a bell, and far above, on the lifeless surface of their world between worlds, the sky fell...