

Exploring the depths of dark fantasy within  
The Annihilation Enigma

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## **ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

## ABSTRACT

This exegesis will outline genre and development within the draft of the novel; *The Annihilation Enigma*. This novel has developed and evolved over ten months, influenced by novels, comic books, television shows and roleplaying games, in addition to taking feedback and guidance from a mentor. The novel sits with the dark fantasy and sword and sorcery subgenres of fantasy, illustrating the journey of multiple protagonists all trying to survive. All of these protagonists struggle through the metaphorical hell that is presented to them, mostly through combat and self-discovery.

The exegesis discusses the purpose of features within the genre in relation to the novel and the characters involved. These elements of genre include the high amount of combat and violence, and the extensive existence of magic. The novel was written similarly to the way a dungeons and dragons campaign is formed, as an organic and reactionary story with more of an outline and less of a plan. The aim of the novel is to provide a cathartic journey back from a metaphorical underworld, and subsequently and hopefully provide a similar catharsis to those who need a fight to win.

# EXEGESIS: DELVING INTO THE DEPTHS OF DARK FANTASY

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## Exegesis: Delving Into The Depths Of Dark Fantasy

### Motivation for writing *The Annihilation Enigma*.

Escapism has always been the reason why I write and delve into fantasy. Be it exploring the Silverwastes of *Guild Wars 2*'s (2012) Tyria, scouring the gothic spires at the entrance to *Diablo*'s (1996) hell, or writing the dark world of Avyn. Fantasy has always given me somewhere else to be when I wanted to disappear. During my teenage years, I created the world of Avyn as a canvas that I could use to escape. I wrote the stories of Katya's mother and father, the typical hero narrative of fantasy, in the same vein of Tanis and his companions in Hickman and Weiss' *Dragonlance Chronicles* (1984). Having found escapism in other outlets, such as roleplaying games and comic books – still fantasy, but science fiction also, eventually my time in Avyn faded.

I returned to the world of Avyn for *The Annihilation Enigma* because it is a fantasy world I have already created the history and foundations for, but also because after a troubled start to the year, I thought I could use it again. Not only as a form of escape, but as my own Orpheus-esque journey into the underworld to get back what I felt like I had lost. It was an attempt at catharsis, as if *The Annihilation Enigma* was my Cretan labyrinth and I could not leave until I had figured it out. Although the story and events are far different from what I experienced, it's still metaphorically and emotionally similar. Additionally, I wanted to write a story that would not show a true absolute victory over hardship, but rather show a struggle for it. I have found that not all battles are easy and not all of them can be won without a pyrrhic victory and most importantly they do not have to be fought alone. It's hard to judge the intention of other authors within the genre, however mine was to produce something that was akin to a war, or a hell, that seemed to continue without end if only to show that even horrible events, and terrible actions, can still be climbed out of. If someone else could find any solace, or any use, in this story then that is enough for me.

A fantasy is a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be a dangerous; *and it will change you*. (Le Guin, 1979.)

## **Synopsis.**

The world has fallen silent. Kingdoms have disappeared overnight. Wastelands or oceans are left in their wake. Vyl dhjarta, central Kingdom of Vyl dheim is suspected to be next. Katya, daughter of Kalen Arleth – The legendary Godslayer, has no intention of letting this happen again. Alongside adept sorceress, Elara Guinn, the two heroine prepare themselves right in the warpath of their elusive enemies. Demons from a realm unknown, forged from blackened ooze and the manifested sin of mankind. A single wound from their talons can turn a man mad, tainting and corrupting him until his soul is gone and all that remains is the demonic stain. Not even the gods are safe. As Elara is kidnapped, Katya’s mind begins to break and sets off on a warpath to rescue her friend. After diving into a man-made hell, Katya discovers that not all her father’s enemies were slain, as Vithnir – a god of death – stands in her way. Upon returning to Vyl dhjarta, Katya and Elara find it is not as they left it. The streets are lined with the damned.

Meanwhile, a man wakes up on a beach in the far south without any memory or identity. He is dragged away by slavers and strung up on a post with a group of abducted villagers. Surrounded by blood and violence, he feels his mind become not his own. A voice speaks in his mind, urging him to fight. Seeing no other choice, he listens, and leads the people to safety. They begin calling him The Stranger. The town that takes him in, provides for him, cares for him, falls under attack from Imperial troops. The voice in his mind instructs him to defend a girl, not quite in her teenage years, called Viveka. Listening to it, he takes to the fight. Battling alongside Steinnvorthurn warriors, against innumerable odds, they pull through. Viveka is badly wounded and more Imperials are on route. What remains of the Steinnvorthurn warriors travel north alongside The Stranger and Viveka to the only place that could heal her, Trolgaard, the tower of the Seers. Along the way, The Stranger wonders what part of fate he is playing with as he discovers that Viveka is to be the rebirth of the world.

As the world falls apart, Katya’s ancestors and The Stranger’s spiritual equals are pulling all the strings as part of Kalen’s enigma.

## **Overview.**

Within the world of *The Annihilation Enigma*, the balance between Creation, Avyn, and Destruction, Zahr, has been upset. The entity of Destruction has been fragmented into five parts, and as it weakens, a third entity has manifested to re-establish balance. This third entity, a demonic Consumption, operates as the antagonistic force throughout the novel. Creation and Destruction, as forces that back the protagonists, work

against and with each other. Each character, willingly or not, is aligned to one of these three factions. The Annihilation Enigma itself is the plan and action set in motion by Destruction to protect and preserve the world no matter the cost.

Although the triumvirate of the three divinities remain hidden and obscured throughout the novel, their agents are on the front lines throughout the demonic invasion. In the prologue there is a brief scene of a young Katya speaking with a celestial entity known as a Val, who is Athryn; god of war. As the story begins, Katya and Elara are quickly introduced, followed by the introduction of The Stranger and Viveka. Elements of fantasy are immediately introduced, as fantasy races such as elves, gods and magic are the first pieces of world-design seen. In addition, the forming of tone and atmosphere begin to form as characters are made aware that their world is under threat. This is not specific to the subgenre of dark fantasy or sword and sorcery, but rather something that is often seen in mythological fantasy. However, within the dark fantasy and sword and sorcery subgenres, I have found it easier to convey themes of love, loss, and morality through the existence of strife compared to an adventure narrative such as Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937).

*The Annihilation Enigma* is a multiple tandem narrative novel, which utilises a combination of omniscient narration, third person subjective, and first person. The two major protagonists, in terms of whose perspective is most often seen, Katya and The Stranger differ in their narrative styles. Katya is third-person subjective intertwined with omniscient. Whereas The Stranger is written in first person. This was done to make it clear that although their quest is ultimately the same, to protect and save Creation, they are very different entities. I intended Katya's story to be very human and very tangible, a narrative where the threat was very real all the way through. While it would make sense to have this written in first person, the amount of characters that Katya interacts with increased the difficulty of jumping between point of view in scenes with her. Katya's story was the physical issue, she tries to save the world with flesh and steel, fighting alongside mortals against demons and fallen gods. Whereas The Stranger was written in first person mostly for the interaction between him and the voice in his head. I also felt writing a male character in first person would be easier than writing a female character in first person. The Stranger's story was written in first person perspective because I wanted to place importance on him. As Katya's story is intended to be more human, The Stranger's is meant to contrast that to be the spiritual side of it as a major piece of the Annihilation Enigma.

I left the ending open to continue, because although this was intended as a cathartic experience, what relief it provided was only momentary and I knew I was going to want to go back within a few months.

### **Fantasy as a melting pot of magic and madness.**

Growing up with fantasy, be it books, comics, movies, or roleplaying games, there have always been tropes which are similar between them. Magic, non-human races, artefacts of great power, the inclusion of gods or spirits, or even alternative worlds – be it an alternate reality of the 1950's or fantasy worlds beyond an everyday wardrobe door. The monomyth within Campbell's (1990) hero's journey; a ubiquitous structure for a quest or adventure, creates an archetype which fantasy has a tendency to follow. As well as archetypal characters presented by Vogler within *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers* (2007).

However, it is much easier to identify typical elements of fantasy, than it is to understand the category of fantasy itself. There can be little doubt that, in practice, the genre is pretty well defined, concretely manifesting itself in the shelves reserved for it in video shops and bookstores. But stating why a work belongs on these shelves, rather than those in the near vicinity, such as horror and science fiction, or those more remote, like plain old fiction, presents a real challenge. (Laetz, & Johnston. 2008.)

From my perspective, fantasy is selection of repeating tropes rather than a genre defined by plot. Through the use of mythological symbolism, such as magic or mysticism, it's easier to show the scale of things metaphorically. For example, I suffer from eosinophilia, a blood disorder, and when writing the demons within the novel it was what I was thinking of. As if my eosinophilia was the immune system of Avyn and it was going to rip it apart. Compared to a horror movie, one without a strong base in the intention to cause fear or dramatic terror is not a horror. A romance novel is only considered a romance if the main element is romance and it has expectations that the audience expect to meet. However, a fantasy novel could be a romance about two gnomes falling in love. While still romance, gnomes are a fantasy element, which would place it in the genre. Although fantasy is a broad place, I believe it sits within the dark fantasy and sword and sorcery subgenres.

A work is dark fantasy if it deals with any elements of fantasy and/or the paranormal in a way that studies the dark and frightening side of our nature, psychology and the weird, sublime and uncanny. If it doesn't shy away from the

gore and horror of its own darkness, yet doesn't primarily aim to spook. If it has heroes that are not knights in shining armour, but people that sometimes have to do unsavoury things. If it has villains that aren't necessarily all bad as well as villains that really are all bad. If it's dark and twisted and delves into the depths of speculative fiction, without primarily aiming to scare or gross out its readers, then it's dark fantasy. (Baxter, 2009).

Although some scenes in *The Annihilation Enigma* may come across as frightening, gross or excessively gory, my intention was to darken the world rather than to scare or to gross out the audience, even if that may happen. From the name, sword and sorcery implies a heavy use of swords and sorcery. Both of these are driving elements within the novel.

Melancholy heroic adventures set in a secondary fantasy world where magic and monsters exist. (Hopewell, 2014.)

In addition to the aspects of swords and magic, there is the overarching feel of doomed atmosphere. In *The Annihilation Enigma* there is not a Dark Lord Sauron that is going to take over the world and enslave the populace, if the legions of Avyn fail to defend it then they all die. I believe this creates a melancholic atmosphere and adventure which is present in a sword and sorcery stories. In the same vein as *Xena, The Warrior Princess* (1995), and *Red Sonja* (2006), Katya and Elara are female protagonists in the sword and sorcery genre. Like Xena and Red Sonja, Katya is a sword-toting protagonist, much like the fantasy equivalent of Rambo. All of these characters have some sort of darkness to them. Xena had a terrible past avenging the death of her brother and spiralling down a path to evil, rampaging, pillaging and murdering. Sonja was raped after her family were killed when she was 17. Katya is not much different. After her mother died, fuelled by the insatiable bloodlust passed down her from father, she travelled the world, hunting and killing men. While their backstory does not necessarily place them within the genre, their actions which stem from their background does. Katya spends most of her time within the novel hunting something down to slay with her blades. Elara serves more as the Gabrielle of Xena to Katya, as a driving force for good intentions. Similarly, Viveka operates in the same way to The Stranger. She is his reason to direct his ferocity. Elara and Viveka, like Gabrielle, are characters designed to make their respective protagonists feel a little more human as if they actually care about something.

Following the dark atmosphere and extensive slew of combat within *The Annihilation Enigma*, placing it within dark fantasy and sword and sorcery makes sense.

### **The heroes and their journey.**

The three major protagonists that stand against the antagonistic force of demons; Katya Arleth, Elara Guinn and The Stranger, each stand upon the duality that's reflected in the natural strife of Creation and Destruction. The Stranger as a piece of Zahr himself, Elara as an envoy of the Avynnic Seers and Katya torn between the two deities. In terms of Jungian thought (1947), they represent the self, anima, and the shadow respectively. This was not intentional. When writing The Stranger, I tried to write it as if I were in his shoes if only to make it an easier writing experience. It was like a roleplaying game and I had to control the characters actions and emotions while still keeping them a work of fiction. It also functioned as a method of escape. In comparison, Elara, the anima, is the helper and the reassuring voice of reason over the shoulder of other characters. The genuinely good person that I have tried to be. Contrasted to the shadow, Katya, who is a character that when I was writing her, I believed her to be a despicable character and someone I would never want to be. As continued to reread what I had written, I saw that there is good in her, however she expressed it in the wrong ways.

Campbell (1990) and Vogler (2007) both viewed tropes of the fantasy genre and the journey that the heroes and protagonists take. This monomythic structure has often been referred to as the Heroes Journey.

A Hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others, like a shepherd who will sacrifice to protect and serve his flock. At the root the idea of Hero is connected with self-sacrifice. (Vogler, & Montez. 2007.)

Furthering Vogler's definition of heroes, he defines them as either willing or unwilling. Whether or not they want to undertake their journey or not. However, he also states he uses the term hero to describe a central character or protagonist. Although villains, or antagonists, could be considered the hero of their own story, it is unlikely that they have the want to self-sacrifice for a greater cause. The Stranger will do anything as long as he believes it is right. Katya would sacrifice her own life to protect someone she cares about and Elara would do the same for the greater good.

“Evil isn't really evil in any absolute sense. It is simply a *different* value rather than an intrinsically *negative* value.” (Heit, 2011.)

With Heit's claim, it can be seen that villains would also go through their own journey, similar to Campbell's and Vogler's design. While looking through my own work,

within the tandem narrative – two stories running parallel without direct interaction – only The Stranger’s had elements similar to the monomyth. Katya’s story lacked a hero. According to Vogler, heroes within fantasy are main character or protagonists. I disagree, because Katya Arleth is not a hero.

When creating Katya, I consulted the Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) player’s handbook (2014.) to help understand her psyche. Within D&D’s character creation there is a mechanic called alignment.

Alignment is a combination of two factors: one identifies morality (good, evil, or neutral), and the other describes attitudes toward society and order (lawful, chaotic, or neutral). Thus, nine distinct alignments define the possible combinations. (Crawford, Wyatt, Schwalb, & Cordell, B. 2014.)

Alignment is a mechanic to keep roleplaying and group composition interesting and varied from game to game. In light of this understanding how other characters work within their alignment can be as much of a guideline as the monomyth is, in terms of archetypes, but for characters emotions and activities. Using this system designed for roleplaying games, Katya was designed as Chaotic with never having a solid stand in neutral or evil. Robichaud (2014) on the topic of morality provide the idea that if the action that occurred brought happiness to the world, then it is a good action and vice versa. Katya is in the mind that her actions are allowing the world, and Elara, to continue existing. Despite Katya not being rooted in traditional fantasy monomythic structure, she is definitely still designed with tools used in designing fantasy characters.

Good and bad come from the effects of your actions, not your intentions. Sure, there might be some actions that tend to make everyone miserable, and you can try to do those as much as possible, but the DM (dungeon master) decides what actually happens. (Robichaud, 2014.)

While this refers to actions within a game, the idea of the characters being the players and myself as the dungeon master can stick as I choose what ultimately happens. However, there is disparity between the affect the actions characters have and the way the action is done.

Her other hand, burning hot, reaches around his throat. Clawing through his neck. She inhales the sweet scent of iron and blood. Katya’s lips lay upon his reddening skin, caressing. Devouring. Tongue lapping through the wounds. Her fingers dig deeper, tearing through his oesophagus. The delicate kiss turns wild, uncontrolled. Teeth scraping and pecking. Shredding flesh. She sinks in. Rending chunks of

flesh. Spitting fragments of man to the ground, Katya smiles. The corpse falls to the ground. Wiping the life from her maw, her tongue runs over her thumb. (Kinghan, 2016.)

Katya was required to kill the man to further the survival of the world of Avyn, however it was not required for her to mutilate and consume him. That was done solely for her pleasure. According to Robichaud, as her actions were required for the good of the world, she would be considered good. Her intentions differ from this and cast a dissonant feel over her character. This distances me from the idea that she is a traditional hero. According to Vogler, she would be considered a shapeshifter.

Its very nature is to be shifting and unstable. (Vogler, 2007.)

Additionally, her goal changes throughout the novel. She begins on the heroes' journey to save the world, which she is willing to do. Then devolves into her enraged crusade to protect Elara, her ally, and her gaze fades from protecting the world. This also veers her away from the tradition heroes' journey, as she is no longer on a journey, but rather she is under siege. In this state her actions are erratic, negligent and apathetic to everyone else, to the point where I had difficulty empathising with her. I would consider her chaotic evil, a shadow, until the very end when it no longer mattered if Vithnir lived or died, Vylthjarta would have been destroyed regardless.

Shadows can be all the things we don't like about ourselves, all the dark secrets we can't admit, even to ourselves. The qualities we have renounced and tried to root out still lurk within, operating in the Shadow world of the unconscious. The Shadow can also shelter positive qualities that are in hiding or that we have rejected for some reason. (Vogler, 2007.)

Vogler also states that the shadow exists to be in conflict with the protagonist. However, as Katya is the protagonist and is in conflict with the antagonist, it could be seen as her being the villain's opposite. In addition to this, it was my intention to create Katya, not only as the opposite to the villain, Vithnir, but as his equal, as two monsters in combat with each other. The villain for the villain.

Killing the embodiment of death was symbolic of her finishing her father's journey, surviving was finishing her mother's. Ideally I wanted to infer that this was the deepest part of her underworld. Similar to the battle against the Archdemon in Bioware's *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009.) where it no longer mattered how long or hard the journey was, because in that moment the only thing that was necessary was winning.

The term "redemption" is rooted in the concept of repairing or restoring what is damaged. Something or someone is freed from a situation of harm and changed for the better. ... The concept of redemption entails: 1) an original innocence or goodness; 2) a subsequent fall, struggle, or separation; and 3) a rescue, recovery, or transformation. (Rambo, 2008.)

Using this, it could be argued that Katya's narrative is one of redemption. Whether she redeems herself or becomes a different kind of monster is left unclear, which could ground her as a shapeshifter. Katya's journey to rescue Elara from the Thells was intentionally metaphorically similar to Orpheus' and Hercules' journey into the underworld. Diving into a hell, and coming out with something that symbolises their soul. In Katya's case, Elara. However, it could be seen that Katya lost herself in that battle and that Elara was never meant to make it out as she does not survive the trip home. With the most central protagonist lacking in heroic qualities, but rather indulging in a shapeshifting shadow, the genre in which *The Annihilation Enigma* is placed shifts away from heroic fantasy and leans towards dark fantasy.

Following the other narrative within the tandem design, The Stranger is a hero and follows most of Campbell's heroes' journey. He is not necessarily unwilling, he is however unknowing for most of the journey, until the end when it is all explained to him. By then, he does not have a choice. Joined by two catalyst heroes, characters designed to bring change to the protagonist, with the intention to show both sides of his character. The end of his story, in his final act of heroism, he sacrifices himself and gives justification for Katya's insanity, attempting to redeem her in the eyes of the reader, but not in the eyes of anyone else. In addition to Katya being Vithnir's villain, she is also The Stranger's shadow.

The Stranger's story is heavily inspired by almost every fantasy novel with a quest that I have read or experienced. Channeling Kentaro Miura's *Berserk* (1990.) a dark fantasy manga, a Japanese comic, it laid heavy inspiration on The Stranger's journey. In *Berserk*, the protagonist, Guts, is a powerful wandering warrior who becomes a part of a warband. As Archdemons attack the world in which it takes place, Guts and his new found lover, a warrior called Casca, attempt to escape. Casca is unfortunately captured by the demons and raped. Guts goes berserk and rescues her. His journey forms as he takes her with him throughout the world, fighting off demons and trying to heal her mental wounds. *Berserk* is not as traditional of most fantasy; such as *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954.) or *Dragonlance* (Hickman & Weis. 1984). These novels and stories have order, the heroes' journey, ensemble cast of heroes, and a light-hearted push for adventure. *Berserk* epitomizes what I strived to create. When I read the scene of Casca's rape, I was disgusted

and disturbed. I kept reading as much as I could of the manga epic before the continued state and hopelessness of Casca began to dwell on me, as much as I wanted to finish reading, I couldn't. It was a dark fantasy that was darker and deeper than I wanted to go. Creating The Stranger as a more heroic and less tragic version of Guts is an extension of the version of the story I wanted to enjoy, but not the one I read. With the trauma of Viveka as a far lighter version of Casca's fate.

The Stranger is the hero that's meant to bring hope, the light in the dark. I attempted to stagger the chapters between The Stranger and Katya as well as I could to maintain a narrative flow between each, but also to give time for myself and the reader to have a rest from Katya's darkness. He's not fighting because he's willing following a grand ideal. He's fighting because he believes it is right. This is similar to a character which inspired the creation of The Stranger, Geralt of Rivia - the Witcher, who is a man who hunts monsters for a living. He does not care what, he will hunt it. It does not matter if the monster is human or not, anything else does not matter. This is similar to The Stranger as his only goal, initially, is to protect Viveka and nothing else to him matters.

“Evil is evil, lesser, greater, middling, it makes no difference. If I am to choose between one evil and another, I'd rather not choose at all.” – Geralt of Rivia (CD Projekt RED, 2013.)

Due to his proficiency with a blade and supernatural capability, alongside his almost Book of Genesis toned story, he as a hero could place *The Annihilation Enigma* within the Sword and Sorcery genre. Ultimately, although The Stranger is perceived as human, he is not and this was something I wanted to allude to by not giving The Stranger a name to make it more difficult for him to be humanised. As a real world example, K2, the mountain with the second highest elevation, has not been properly named because Italian climber Fosco Maraini suggested that the mountain be not be given a name due to the mountain being “... just the bare bones of a name, all rock and ice and storm and abyss. It makes no attempt to sound human. It is atoms and stars. It has the nakedness of the world before the first man – or of the cindered planet after the last.” (Maraini, 1961). This is the dehumanized capacity in which The Stranger is presented. Leaving his identity to not be questioned, nor inherently developed but shown through his difference to everyone else.

### **Magic and Deities.**

Aside from the heroes and protagonists creating a sphere for *The Annihilation Enigma* to rest within the fantasy genre and sub-genres within that, the strong presence of magic, foreign races and humanoid species – such as Tielings, Elves, and Dwarves - and the very clear existence of divinities create a place for the novel within fantasy.

Magic has always been an element of fantasy that I have loved. My first Dungeons and Dragons character was an Elven wizard who began throwing fireballs and lightning bolts, and eventually conjuring his own weapons. The idea of being able to draw upon otherworldly powers, be it at a cost or from a learned skill, was intriguing. Everything does it differently. Brent Week's *Night Angel Trilogy* (2008.) is one of the most influential, to me, from literature. It has three types of magic; natural talent, a sentient parasite-like magic called Vir, and artefacts. The talent and Vir were limited to select amount of people. Having this exclusivity of power paves the way for the capacities of heroes and villains. For instance, if a power fire-throwing demon appears in a story, the hero is going to have to be strong enough to stop it otherwise they are just someone who gets caught in the crossfire. Within my own writing, I wanted to have a world filled to brim with magic, so I understood that my protagonists were going to be supernatural in nature, if only so that they could last against their enemy.

In a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), such as *Guild Wars 2* (ArenaNet, 2012.) every player character has access to a type of magic. An Elementalist will be a wizard who can control the classical elements, whereas a Guardian can augment their greatsword with a holy fire, and archers can conjure spirits to aid them in combat. I wanted to follow suit, and put gods on the ground and legendary warriors beside them. Inspired by the Old Norse songs from the *Poetic Edda* (n.d.) and old Nordic myths of Thor wielding Mjölner, gripping Jörmungandr's tongue and bring lightning down upon the beast. I realised it did not matter the power of the characters, as long as their struggle could be understood.

### **Combat and victory within the genre.**

In Sword and Sorcery (S&S) fantasy, as the name suggests, combat plays a large role. It does not function only as plot, but additionally a method of character development.

S&S is most often a genre of action, of fever-pitched excitement which usually leaves the background and characters less well defined. High fantasy, which takes its inspiration from the English writers: Tolkien, Lewis, MacDonald, Morris, etc. has a more leisurely pace, filled with description and depth. Traditional S&S very

often begins with a fight and doesn't stop until the bad guys are lying in a heap of their own entrails. (Thomas, 2015.)

While it could be argued that excessive combat there is no more than a visceral display of violence, Miyamoto Musashi (1974) produced ideas within five books in the *Go Rin No Sho (A book of five rings)*, which dictate attitudes that a swordsman must achieve. The Book of Water discusses religion, spiritual matters and the ever flowing and changing nature of life. As a master swordsman, Miyamoto achieved a title of "Unrivalled Under Heaven," and effectively destroyed the population of Kyoto dojo. Yet, he is also a Buddhist and his writings understand a great deal of tranquillity and serenity. While reading *Go Rin No Sho*, I began to understand that it was not the combat, excessive or not, that defined the violence, it is how the combat is constructed. If Katya, Elara and The Stranger were to enter the same area each would approach it various ways. Katya would walk in and kill everything, brutally and bloodily. The Stranger would walk in and do only what is necessary, wounding but possibly not killing, unless Viveka was harmed, then he could kill everything in vengeance or to protect her further. Elara would try her best not to kill anyone at all, perhaps magically sleeping a sentry or watchmen if absolutely necessary. In this way, I have found that combat is another way for deeper character development.

Dagger in hand, she rips forward. Piercing through Craite's heart from behind and she slits his throat with Mikharen fingernails. The venom inside him burns as her dagger is torn from the wound. His body writhes and shakes, his eyes fade to a noxious glow. Death claims him. Nel and the Maelsk' turn to her, jaws agape. (Kinghan, 2016)

Killing Craite, from everyone's perspective, was a necessity that had to happen. Elara knew what was going to happen when that demonic venom took hold of Craite, and she did nothing. Katya killed him because that's what she does, quick decisions in the heat of combat.

However, when characters become too powerful, such as Silver Age Superman where he was more or less a god, without a strong enough enemy, the stories become trivial. Although some of the characters within *The Annihilation Enigma* are exceptionally powerful, it is not much when even the gods of the world are made mortal by the demon threat. When their enemies' contingency plan is to self-detonate and raze kingdoms to the ground, one would hope that a Superman-like entity would be there. I grew up watching *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993.) and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987.) where the good guys always won. Even at the end of *Dragon Age:*

*Origins* (2007.), a strong contender within the dark fantasy genre, regardless of whether the protagonist dies there is still victory found when the Blight and the Archdemon are nullified. At the end of *Diablo* (1996; 2000; 2012.), each time Diablo is defeated the audience knows it's not the end, it's just the end for now, Diablo will resurface in time. However, there was peace because that battle ended. Through my motivation of writing this novel, I understand that victory is not something we get individually. Battles can be won, mental or physical, and we find victory and peace of mind in that. In reflection, this was reassurance that I needed.

“This was never about winning, this is just about surviving” – Root. *Person of Interest, Season 3: Ep.23 Deus Ex Machina.* (2014.)

In Katya's final 'heroic' speech to the last remaining men and woman of Vylthjarta, before the final battle begins, she acknowledges that defeat is a strong possibility. The battle ended with great losses on both sides, neither side won but both survived. If victory had been won, I could argue that *The Annihilation Enigma* sits within Heroic fantasy and boast the wars won as symbol of heroism. Without this, there's a hopelessness to battle, the characters only continuing to fight because stopping means death. This metaphorical darkness and devolution of hope is something that I believe to be crucial to the genre of dark fantasy.

### **Coming out of the dungeon.**

On completion of this draft of *The Annihilation Enigma*, my views of structure and genre have changed drastically. I have learnt to appreciate the role of the mythological structure of fantasy storytelling, the heroes' journey and the monomyth. Although it was largely unused in Katya's narrative, it did provide the foundation for it, and also helped shape The Stranger's journey. Initially I had wanted to avoid the monomyth and write as if it was a Dungeons and Dragons campaign, to start with an idea and see where it goes. I had little idea what was going to happen in the middle sections, only how it was going to start and how it was going to end. An author of *Forgotten Realms*, a Dungeons and Dragons setting, R.A. Salvatore has a similar idea of his work.

As for story, I'm looking for an adventure that will give them the personal growth I desire for the book. I outline, then by Chapter 3, I throw the outline away and let the story and the characters take me on a grand adventure. (Salvatore, 2015.)

By the time Katya had reached the Thells, I had given the reins to the characters. However, due to time constraints and the amount I could write for the Master of Creative Writing, I kept a hold of what *The Stranger* was doing. Whether I wanted to or not, *The Stranger* conformed to the monomyth and there was nothing I could do about that. I realise that it is an archetypal structure for a reason.

Additionally, within the subgenre of dark fantasy and especially within the doomed world of Avyn, the concept of good and evil is blurred. There is not a defined line, but rather a separation between those trying to destroy the world and those trying not to be destroyed. It is definitely possible for someone trying not to be destroyed to be evil and that's part of what makes it dark fantasy. It is something I enjoy because it allows the characters to have a little more life to them and be able to fulfil their desires. However, as Avyn falls at the end of the novel, the world is in a state that is unhealthy and as kingdoms are falling apart, those who survive will eventually need to do whatever it is they need to do to continue to survive. This can provide an interesting facet of moral conflict as survivors will most likely need to start killing for food and supplies.

*The Annihilation Enigma* as dark fantasy and sword and sorcery novel, I find differs from both and adds something new to the genres in terms of their mythological scope. Red Sonja, and Geralt fight against men and monsters, Xena against men, monsters and occasionally gods. The heroes of Avyn only briefly fight against men, and they fight alongside gods and descendants of creation and destruction against the bringers of the end times. It is not just the hero of the day, or the everyday man rising to the challenge, who are fighting to save the world. It is everyone and any one that can manage.

To conclude, *The Annihilation Enigma* is a dark fantasy, sword and sorcery novel that illustrates the damnation of the world and the sparking incidents of the apocalypse. The characters aren't good people, the world is not perfect, the gods are flawed and the man trying his hardest to save everything is Destruction himself. It is a novel that I wrote to escape from our own world and to find emotional purchase to overcome my own mental state as a cathartic experience. If this novel ever becomes public, I hope somehow someone finds a way for the struggles and eventual, but difficult, victory of the heroes to make them feel something, even if it's just a slight grin. In the future, when I return to Avyn, I would like to make the world far bleaker so that when hope gets the opportunity to shine, it will shine bright. However, my main goal for the world is just to return to it again.



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