

Empire's Ghost

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The primary root of "mainstream" fantasy as we know it today was the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, a professor of Germanic linguistics who turned his deep knowledge of Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature, as well as his expertise in the principles of philology, to the creation of a mythos which revived the elements of early Germanic legend and recast them in a new form. Following Tolkien's example, Stephan Grundy has created his own mediaeval/fantasy world.

Human society in the home continent of *Empire's Ghost*, the Middle Land, is largely dominated by three branches of the Imperial culture, all descended in some manner from the long-Fallen Empire of the West. These are Kantar, a conservative feudal empire (though it is titled a kingdom), created from the colonies which broke from the Empire in its decadence by the last survivor of the Imperial family; Martag – ruled by an Undead lord of great power who fled the Empire after his attempt to assassinate and succeed the Empire failed; a feudal empire in form, but actually functioning according to a sort of strict social Darwinism that promotes ruthlessness and efficiency; and Tharandrost – an independent principality, originally the last of the Empire's loyal military outposts in the Middle Land. Feudal in form, but fascist/socialist in function, for many generations, Tharandrost has selectively bred its citizens of pure Imperial blood for psychic talents. Kantar and Martag have been at war – openly or covertly – since Kantar's founding. In order to survive, Tharandrost allied itself with Kantar just after the Empire's Fall; but Kantar has never trusted the smaller nation, and openly abhors many of its practices (slavery, selective breeding including a good deal of inbreeding, and the regular use of mental examination and adjustment, for instance).

The three Imperial cultures are, to varying degrees, intermingled with and/or imposed upon three primary native cultures: the Horsetribes (the nomadic people from which the Imperial culture and language had derived several thousand years previously), the Plainsmen (an

agricultural/herding society organized roughly by clans; the primary enemies, then subjects, of the Imperials during the conquest of the Middle Land. Most of the Plainsman population has lost its native culture entirely; the groups that retain it continue, now and again, to be a threat to Kantar), and the Northmen (an agricultural society in the northern part of the Middle Land, originally organized into small kingdoms with lords of varying degrees; partially conquered by the Imperials, but never as thoroughly subjugated as the Plainsmen, and often intermarrying with the conquerors).

The Western continent – which no one from the Middle Lands has visited since the Empire's Fall – is now inhabited largely by the descendants of the Empire's slaves, who remember the Imperial race as demons. The city-states of the West operate according to a near-absolute ideal of capitalism. Charity, oaths of loyalty, and so forth are all considered chains of slavery: human relationships outside the family are defined solely by financial contract. After the gods withdrew their favour from the Empire, nearly all magic was lost in the West: only very subtle ritual magic, based on the attenuated power drawn from the stars, is still effective there.

Empire's Ghost is the story of a sheltered youth coming to heroic manhood in the course of a unique quest. The protagonist, Arudal, is a brilliant young philologist of noble birth from Tharandrost, studying in a Kantarean university. Drafted for his linguistic skills by an elite unit of Kantarean knights on a secret mission to find the ancient documents which will prevent a civil war in one of Kantar's major principalities, he accompanies them to the Western continent, where no one from their lands has set foot in the seventeen hundred years since the gods destroyed the Empire.

Isolated from the rest of the company by his nationality and unusual psychic gifts, Arudal must learn to overcome the deep-seated prejudices of his own upbringing and deal with those of his companions in order to survive the physical and spiritual hardships of the mission and see it

succeed. To the Kantareans, Arudal embodies the worst possible faults of Tharandrost: not only is he descended from a particularly inbred line and betrothed to his own first cousin, but his line was bred for the mental gifts of mediumism and psychic necromancy (the power to read and control the minds of the Undead), qualities ranging in the Kantarean mind from an unfortunate curse to deep-dyed evil. As a result of this, and of his unusual upbringing in a family dedicated to preserving and practicing the necromantic arts, Arudal's life is endangered more than once by his companions' deeply rooted mistrust.

As well as his problems with the fundamental conflict of cultures, Arudal's inclusion on the Kantarean mission can only be made legal by one of the knights taking him as a squire – a role combining elements of servant and military trainee which Arudal is not overly eager to fulfill, especially as Sir Thoron, who takes him on, is a rough-spoken man whose only concern is fighting and who disciplines and trains his squires sternly. Sir Thoron's senior squire Finvar – from the north of Kantar, where attitudes are less firmly fixed – proves welcoming and helpful, as does the commander's squire Lostren. However, another squire in the group, Rhys, is of the Plainsman race: the one race that Tharandrostans consider inferior to the point of inhumanity, fit only for slavery or extermination. Meanwhile, Dame Karsil, the only Elf (and only female) among Kantar's knights, intimates a certain willingness to kill Arudal if he refuses to change certain of his beliefs...or perhaps if he uses his necromantic mind-gifts too freely.

In addition to their internal dissent, the company's journey is threatened in a number of ways: an effort at sabotage by Martag nearly destroys their ship; they must disguise themselves in the West so as not to be recognised as members of the hated and feared Imperial race; and, as they continue away from civilization and towards their goal, they must fight against both mundane and supernatural dangers. At last they come to the shadow that lingers in the Fallen Imperial Seat – the heart of the evil that brought down the Empire of the West, held in balance for nearly seventeen hundred years, but still strong and hungry – and discover that the price for the

information they have come to get is that they must take sides in the endless battle of Undead in the Fallen Seat, with the possible result that the ruler of the winning side may, unchecked, be able to extend his rule through the West. At the culmination of the quest, Arudal finds the truth at the root of his psychic inheritance, and is presented with a temptation which he can resist only with the greatest risk to his own life and soul.