

Fifteen-hundred years ago, the Old World fell, and the Pale first appeared.

Humanity fought their wars, and the Pale grew, expanding where fear and chaos reigned.

The people of the Earth fought themselves until they could no longer, the Pale having come to consume nearly all of the known world.

The year is 1512 After The Pale.

Mankind is fractured, confined to Isolas where the Pale hasn't yet reached. Only fragments of the Old World survive: nation-states that law and prioritize order over all and frontiersmen who brave the fringes of the Pale in search of freedom.

But there are those for whom the Pale is not the end of the world.

They are capable of many things: Guardsmen, Drivers, Hunters, Beast-Slayers.

Above all, however, they are the thin line that holds together the world. They are the forewarning of the Pale. They are the couriers that connect Earth's scattered isolas, forecasters of the Apocalypse.

They are Pale Riders.

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The Pale Rider is a horse; his eyes scan the late evening sky's horizon.

He sees no sun.

The Pale is due West, as the last forecast had predicted it would be.

Ordinarily, it would be of no concern, more of a reassurance than anything to know that the Pale was where it ought to have been. It hardly would even have been worth the recurring year's end forecasting.

But the Pale is due southeast of Carson, a city of 40 thousand. If the Pale has changed its course, then the city must know, and its people must flee. If there is nothing to be done and the city is lost, then it is the world that must know.

So, the Pale Rider is delivered orders from Albion, the capital of the Concord of Free States, and is dispatched from Ashdown nearer the frontier where the Pale still roams.

He travels by night when the first of the stars bright enough to be viewed past the Earth's pale corona begin to appear. He rides then to avoid the heat of day, and ventures into the lands contested by man and nature alike.

He follows the ruins of roads paved, lost to the Pale, and repaved again over the history of centuries. In his path are those traveling East opposite him: merchant caravaneers seeking old markets, homesteaders returning the iron and glass lands of civilization and what distant relations may house them, and even the tribals for whom the Pale is the end of the world.

But the Pale Rider does not flee the Pale. He follows it.

The Pale is a three days' ride away.

And yet, the Pale Rider is not one for whom the end of civilization is an obstacle.

Through the Gawland Plains he rides, across the Mosela over the bridge of the town "Middle-Mothers" where he rests throughout the day.

By evening and night he rides again, following the Mosela south and southwest as it becomes the Marthrun, and south from there now following the rail tracks that lead on there from Sennet, and further Albion too. The tracks reach to as far as the Concord dared to reach into where the Pale still reigned, and they too eventually end.

East he rides through the hour of the wolf with the Pale to his south shrouding the base of the Alphos, the lit beacons of the twelve fortresses still shining from their north-facing heights above, near indistinguishable from the faint stars of the heavens. There the fortresses sit in the gap between the Pales on the border of the Old World and the shattered earth that sits past. From the lands beyond, the Pale has never left, yet still the beacons of the Twelve Forts of the Alphos remain lit.

The Pale Rider mutters a prayer as he passes in hopes that those beacons will still shine on his return journey home.

Through pockets of Pale, their rider continues as night turns to day and still the rider carries on, resolute to maintain pace.

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It is noon of the Pale Rider's second day when he comes upon civilization in the Renmere Hollow, perhaps the only of its kind.

Into the town of Zureton, the Pale Rider continues. It is not a city he has ever chanced upon before, perhaps not even having existed when he last rode into the Hollow. Accordingly do the people of this settlement look upon the Pale Rider as though not of this world.

Perhaps he is not.

Adorned with plate and mail beneath a coat of leather, face hidden beneath a slouch hat and behind a mask of tubes connected to horse-tethered tanks, the Pale Rider is an alien to this world, looked upon with awe by the youths of Zureton and hesitation if not dismay from its elders.

He wonders if his visage is a familiar sight to them in contrast to their children, but does not stop to ask.

It cannot be a town of more than three-hundred, in its infancy if the prevalence of rising building foundations and workers pausing to gaze upon the rider is of any indication, yet it sits in the path of the Pale, and soon will be no more.

He wonders if the news has yet reached them. He sees no post office, and the nearest rail line passes fifty miles to the North.

The Pale Rider dismounts and hitches his horse in front of the public house. He disconnects the oxygen tubes of himself and his mare alike, and unmasks her as he makes promises of feed in his native tongue before following the wooden steps up into the saloon.

His entrance is acknowledged by the turn of heads and their prompt return to prior-held conversations, card games, drinks, and the like. One face remains set on him, however, that of the housekeeper, its expression becoming no softer as the Pale Rider approaches the bar and removes his mask.

His unmasking has brought with it a return in the attention of the house's patrons.

Paleborn, his kind are called, in memory to the fall of the Old World and those who survived, although not the same as they once were.

Anticipating, perhaps, a prompt removal of the premises, the Pale Rider produces from his coat the badge of his position, setting it flat on the bar for the curious onlooker to see and promptly dismiss him once again.

The housekeeper regards him with no less suspicion, yet nonetheless turns his back to him to produce a drink on the house in line with the hospitality, albeit forced, shown to those of his profession.

A draught concoction is a minute later presented to the Pale Rider, its color a faint purple that the rider finds in his now-ungloved hand to be a near match. He ponders for a moment the meaning behind it, if there even is one, but just as soon disregards it and takes his first swallow.

“Thank you,” The Pale Rider says.

The housekeeper responds with a soft grunt and turns his back to focus on his shelf of liquors, hoping for some task to divert his attention.

The Pale Rider remains set on a drink that tastes like a cheap imitation of what one would expect to find in Albion. Perhaps this is the drinkslinger's intention, having added to it a faint trace of a spice that the rider believes he recalls not to be legal deeper in the Concord. In spite of this, he still welcomes the refreshing change in pace from his morning sun's ride.

As he drinks, he afford the public house a second glance, finding most eyes having turned away from him, the atmosphere of the room still tense, however.

The housekeeper feels it too. His effort to have found a task to attend to has resulted in failure and so he now turns back to his current sole patron, knowing he cannot evade the topic at hand forever.

“So,” he asks. “What's a Pale Rider doing here?”

The rider sets down his drink and finds some small comfort in knowing that what brings him to the frontier isn't a subject he need be silent about, at least not yet. Were this a town of a few thousand where the difference in who he spoke to could mean the difference between orderly evacuation and anarchical self-preservation, his response would have been more measured.

But this is Zureton, a town of three-hundred, where the closest thing to centralized leadership is the man the Pale Rider is already speaking to, his public house the heart and soul of this town.

"The Pale is presently due north of your town, anticipated to be overrun in approximately a week. Were you aware of this?"

"Mhm," the housekeeper mutters. "Got last year's forecast by courier, same as everyone. We've been keeping our calendars."

That surprises the Pale Rider. Zureton certainly does not bear the look of a town anticipating what is to come.

"Yet the people are still here."

"They have time. Most'll leave the day before, some the day of even, but there's still work to do."

The Pale Rider considers his response. Most are aware of the generalities of what the Pale does when it envelops an area, but few have seen the extremes that the Pale Riders have, how cities of thousands will be wiped from the map, the very earth their foundations were laid into shattered and desolate.

"There may be nothing to return to when the Pale has passed."

"Forecast says we'll just get the edge. Means there should still be a good bit to return to when it does."

"There is no guarantee of that."

"They've all taken bigger gambles," the housekeeper says, his expression hardening.

The Pale Rider is slow to respond, opting instead to finish his drink as the housekeeper grows frustrated with the silence.

"So is that why you're here?" he asks, deliberately vague in his question as to whether he refers to the lecture or drinking up his stock.

The Pale Rider's mind, having wandered for a time, now finishes his drink in full and returns to the moment at hand.

"I will be riding into the Pale tomorrow," he says. I would ask for lodging, two meals, and feed for my horse."

"Why go into the Pale?" the housekeep asks, retrieving the rider's glass to clean it. "Annual forecast isn't due for another three months."

"The Concord wants assurance that Carson won't be hit."

The housekeeper scoffs, and smiles, some hidden validation behind the rider's words. "Of course," he says. "So you're here to make sure it's still on course to hit us, and not them."

There is no need to mince words.

"Yes," The Pale Rider says. "Can you offer me what I am asking for?"

"Is it not a crime to decline?"

It is not, more a social taboo than anything, but still the rider responds, "I wasn't under the impression that stopped you here."

"It doesn't," the housekeeper affirmed, turning and walking towards a wall from which hung a small collection of keys. "There's a room upstairs you can take. You already missed lunch; dinner is at 5. I'll talk to the stablemaster, get your horse room and board.

"I appreciate it."

"You shouldn't thank me yet," the housekeeper says as he places the Pale Rider's key on the bar. "Not everyone here is delighted by your presence."

"By skin or by profession?" The rider asks, his hand over the key.

"Yes," is the housekeeper's response.

The Pale Rider understands the meaning behind his answer's ambiguity.

He is not in an advantaged position.

'Touched by the Pale' they say in reference to those of his kind. They are not wrong in entirety, but it is not these apprehensions that bother him so much as the accusations.

They are a small minority, but one that exists all the same, viewing the Pale Riders, rather than as forecasters of the Pale, as its harbingers.

The Pale Rider grabs his key, the question of where Zureton might be in a few weeks' time still fresh on his mind, and how many of its 300 will survive the exodus.

“Pack animals are more susceptible to the Pale,” the Pale Rider says as he stands up from the bar. “They should leave first, earlier than the first day, with your town’s children and infirm too.”

The housekeeper’s look is not one of frustration anymore, perhaps knowing the absence of malice behind the rider’s words, but still is resolute in his response. “They’ll be fine,” he says. “They’ll leave when the time comes.”

And again, the Pale Rider notices that word-’we.’

“And you?” he asks.

The housekeeper smiles. “This isn’t my first Pale. It won’t be my last.”

The Pale Rider departs Zureton the following morning, affording himself the night of sleep.

Before long, the heat of the sun will no longer be a factor, and so he rides.

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Many think of the Pale as a storm.

The statement is not an accurate one, but the facade of clarity it offers the masses often outweighs the necessity of understanding its true nature.

For them the Pale is a torrent of absence that works to wipe the world clean where it passes. In its wake, the earth is torn apart, its nature twisted to new unrecognizable forms. Civilizations are brought to ruin leaving only carcasses of

once mighty empires the likes of which from where the Pale first emerged. And in the wake of the Pale too, thousands will lay dead, and the few who survive will find only an echo of their mind and souls still left with them, and with few exceptions.

Like a storm too, the Pale is something that can be prepared for. To a degree.

Like a storm, one can feel its approach, the change in the air, the fading of the sun, the emergence of a mist which shrouds the horizon, the margin of the understood world decreasing with each one taken closer to the Pale, and each pace the Pale comes closer in kind.

So the Pale Rider knows when the Pale is to come upon him.

He wears his mask again, as does his mount. Deep enough into the Pale, no measure of protection, mask, coat, armor or otherwise will make a difference, but on the fringes of reality and Pale, there are key tenets of reality that still apply.

The Pale Rider breathes in from tanks of compressed oxygen, and shutters at the thought of the first Pale Riders who would make these journeys without.

The Pale Rider turns to take a final look at his world, and turning back, he rides into the Pale.

It is not like stepping into a different plane as the Scholars, Priests, and Paleweavers used to believe the Pale to be. The ground beneath his feet will still the same sand he rode upon moments ago, the withered tree will soon pass likely just as dead then as it was before the Pale came.

The Pale does not possess a doorway either, a strict contrast as though night and day similar to one stepping into a waterfall. The Pale has no sensation to be felt. It is achromatic, odorless, and featureless, measured not by the matter within, but the matter without that touches its indefinite borders.

Here is where the Pale is not a storm. The Pale is not like anything in the world. It is the enemy of matter and life, the transition state of being into nothingness, but accordingly so, the exit from everything.

The edge of the Pale is most closely described as a projection, a reflection of the world that surrounds it, an uproar of the matter caught between reality and its absence, able to be likened, perhaps, to a rainbow if the air's water vapor was the wall of the Pale, and the light that shone through was the world.

Such is the case that it is the world in its whole that is experienced when entering the Pale—the “Great Vision” of reality in its unadulterated truth. Paleseers

agree that in the Great Vision, one whose mind was strong enough could see the whole of the world, from one isola of matter to the next, even across the impassable seas that man used to cross before the Pale from one continent to the other.

But no such man exists, not even among the Pale Riders or the Paleseers, though they try. Most who even draw near to the Pale are advised not to dare looking upon the Great Vision of the crossing, but the Pale Rider has seen its spectacle before, and can not bring himself to close his eyes or his mind to it after seeing it once before.

He understands none of it, but perhaps likes to believe he can see the Old World in the Vision.

It is said that the echoes of time, past; present; and future, are left on the matter and energy of the world, precisely that which the Great Vision is said to unveil. Perhaps it does, but man was not made to see past their subjective understanding of time. They do not see what the Pale sees.

They see what the Pale allows them to see.

The Pale Rider wonders what his mare sees.

She is calm, all things considered. This is not her first crossing into the Pale either. She has been subjected to it before, bred, born, and raised for such a thing. She retains oxygen, water, and energy greater and more efficiently than other beasts of her kind do, but still, she is a mind and a soul beneath hide, flesh, and bone, and through his saddle, the Pale Rider can feel her shivers.

But the Pale Rider presses on.

It is a straight shot to Concord through this finger of the Pale, and he is not in so deep into its formless existence that the laws of position and travel have shifted. Of the same accord, he is too far on the fringe of the Pale now to conduct a proper forecasting, and so he must go deeper.

So the Pale Rider does.

In what the Pale allows him to see, the Pale Rider witnesses trees that are petrified, bent away from what must be the center of the Pale and stuck there as though locked in time. The Pale Rider sees a group of men pass him by, their robes those of one of the Concord's many holy orders. He does not know if it is in fealty or penitence that they walk, their sentence to the Pale a pilgrimage or exile.

But it is with measured steps and measured breaths that they march past the Pale Rider, a hint of order and discipline in a world without. Just as the Pale is

believed to gravitate towards that in the world which is violence and chaos since the day of its emergence in the world, so too is it believed that it is similar strife and conflict within the Pale that draws in the worst of what it offers.

And so though the Pale Rider is armed and armored, his breaths are measured, the footsteps of his mare a steady beat that he hums a childhood song in his native tongue in rhythm to.

The properties of light are said to be one of the first worldly properties lost to the Pale. Where too long of an exposure to the Renmere Hollow sun would have meant begging for death, it is now meaningless. Now, though light still exists to a certain degree, it is not what it once was. It has no energy, no heat. Long enough in the Pale, and one would surely freeze in due time.

So too does color begin to be lost to the world as the Pale Rider ventures deeper, the lingering matter of the old world losing that which allows it to absorb or reflect light. Deeper into the Pale, so too might light uncast itself resulting in the dulling or absence of shadows. It may lag behind itself, said shadows or reflections drifting behind that which casts them. And in time, so too would it disappear in its entirety, the Pale not simply a sheet between the world and the sun, a light beneath which may still be lit, but the refusal for such a thing to exist any longer.

But the light boundary of the Pale is one that has been reached, similar to those of direction, gravity, and time all to different degrees of success, but contrary to so many others which mankind has not yet dared to encroach upon—the boundaries where physics, math, and the essentials thought the truth of the world no longer apply.

The Pale Rider does not venture here. The finger he travels through is no more than a day's ride across its width, but even here, the world is not his to understand any longer.

He feels the pull of the Pale, upwards into the sky rather than into the ground for the briefest of moments, but enough for his mare to misstep and trip, recovering her footing quick enough, but with a whine of pain as she rises.

The Pale Rider puts his hand through her mane.

“*Itsa, Vera,*” he whispers in the old words as she rises again, and presses forward.

In the absence of light, there is no telling the time of the day. So too does the machinery such as pocket watches that one might carry cease to function often in the Pale, and so the rider does not bother with such contraptions. It is when he feels

the passage of hours and the weariness of his own mind that the Pale Rider knows the time has come to end his day.

He hitches his mare to a stake he plants into the ground, and increases her oxygen to lull her to sleep. It is better anyway, for fewer minds and souls to be exposed to what he is to do anyway.

There are different ways in which the Pale is forecasted. Some read the Pale from within as though inside the page of a book, the marks left by each splotch of ink to predict where the next will fall. Some have created machines that can perform the function, and some rely on methods lost to time. All, in essence, are reliant upon the same essential theory—that if the Pale can only be measured by the matter that surrounds the Pale, and if time within the Pale is not limited to the same subjective dimensions as they are for men in the material realm, then there is, if not a way of knowing the future of the world, then at least to know the immediate future of the Pale.

For all of the methods that exist to forecast the Pale, the Pale Rider favors the old ways. Lost mostly to time and the empires of the Old World, their practitioners can still be found, some more learned than others, but the art of them not yet gone from the world. The ritual is a simple, though timely one, and in its preparation, the Pale Rider passes into what he is confident should be night outside of the Pale.

The last core component of its preparation, however, is the mind and soul of the Pale Rider himself, who now subjects himself to the trance through which, if only for a single moment, for the briefest glimpse of time, he may see the Pale as it is, as it was, and as it is to be.

It is not matter alone that the Pale touches, but the mind as well, many of the arguments among circles of Paleseers still questioning if it is matter itself that changes within the Pale, or merely man's understanding of it. While no conclusion has been reached, most agree that the two are not mutually exclusive, and what the Pale Rider now sees stands testament to this.

It is the same as what most others who have entered the Pale and returned report as well.

When the Pale Rider wakes from his trance to the whimpering whines and neighs of his waking mare, he wonders if it is what she sees as well—an indescribably sorrow to which the dreamer is attributed all blame as responsibility within the Pale.

It is what he feels too upon waking, but the sensation is a fleeting one, his sorrow drifting by along with images of an old world he never knew, but in their stead replaced by a revelation, the fruits of a successful forecasting, dire though its message may be.

The Pale has changed its course.

Carson is to be struck.

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The Pale Rider is not subjected to the same scrutiny as the majority of those who attempt to enter cities of the Concord.

He is not made to surrender his weapons, to part with his mount, to be observed for the week it takes the city to decide if one is a malevolent entity or otherwise.

His arrival is expected, and his words are not the kind to be transmitted by courier. He is the courier, and so it is that just a mere few hours after exiting the Pale, he is riding through streets of paved stone and asphalt, past packed streetcars he averts his eyes from, storefronts delivering false news of an outdated forecast, holy order chapters calling for donations for the expected refugees from Zureton and elsewhere.

It is just hours after exiting the Pale that the Pale Rider is seated in the office of Carson's warden, caretaker of 40,000 souls, delivering the news to him that Carson is to be wiped from the face of the earth.

“You are certain?” the warden asks him.

The Pale Rider nods.

“But the last forecast. It said it was to pass by us to the southeast, leave us unscathed. .Could you be wrong?”

“The forecasts are never wrong,” The Pale Rider says. And he speaks the truth. No Pale Rider’s forecast has ever been inaccurate. Where one has seen the immediate future of the Pale’s course, the Pale will always travel. From there, likely courses may be charted, nearly all having pointed towards Carson’s survival, but another forecast takes precedence over all, and the warden understands this.

He knows this immutable fact of the world no different from the inevitability of the Pale.

He looks at his desk, drawing in his mind a map of the world in relation to his city, and the endless abyss that awaits at the gates.

“How much time is there?” he asks.

“A day,” the Pale Rider says. “2 perhaps.”

“So what am I to do?”

“There are procedures for such a thing,” the Pale Rider reminds him.

But the man scoffs, turning his eyes back up to the rider now, seeing past skin and profession alike, looking only at someone he believes in that moment to be no more than a naive fool.

“What?” the warden laughs. “To send a telegraph that in a Pale like this likely will never reach Albion, and, if it does, with a different message entirely?”

“I will also be delivering a message to the Concord,” the Pale Rider says. “There are measures in place for Carson’s evacuation.”

“Measures I’ll see in a week,” the warden retorts.

“Limited exposure to the Pale is not without its risks,” the Pale Rider says, already remembering his apprehensions to the close-calls of Zureton’s three hundred. But Zureton had time that Carson does not, and in a city of forty thousand, a single misstep is the difference between a 10% fatalities and a hundred. So he will say what he needs to say, what he has said before when this has happened in the past. “But it is not always a death sentence.”

“There are thousands of children, elderly, and infirm here. Can you say that for them?”

The Pale Rider cannot, but he can speak for the rest. “The losses will be greater than them if we do not tread cautiously. The Concord cannot allow for risks that may only serve to strengthen the Pale.”

“Because thousands of souls surrendered to it won’t?” the warden asks.

A different school of thought about the Pale, but not one wholly dismissed, and certainly none the Pale Rider can speak to.

The Warden shakes his head. “I can’t keep this from them.” He stands from his desk. “They need to know, be given a chance to get out while they still can, for the sake of those who otherwise would not stand a chance”

“You only hasten the inevitable,” the Pale Rider says. “You understand this truth of the Pale as I do. You invite a storm greater than that which you would face otherwise. Will you invite a chance at saving a single life at the cost of potentially dooming forty?”

And the warden stops in his steps—a man chosen by his people to lead with the full understanding that at any moment in time, all connection to the whole of the Concord may be lost, and he would be the highest voice in the world just beneath that of the Pale. Such are the people this warden is responsible for, that he now weighs the lives of, and ultimately makes his choice.

“I do not wager with lives,” he says. “I will not stake a thousand lives on a promise from the Concord that they will save the rest.” He turns back to the Pale Rider now. “We will send our telegraphs, and you may deliver your message to Albion if so you please, but we will not stake our future on the promises of a deafened court.”

And from there, the Pale Rider is dismissed.

He does not linger in Carson to hear the announcement from the warden’s office, or what is to come. He stays only long enough for his oxygen tanks to be refilled and for him to take into possession enough food and water to see him back to Zureton. He knows what is to come from Carson, and knows that there is nothing to be done.

The Pale is known to spread by two primary means. The first is its outwards spread and travel, gravitating towards that which is unordered in the world, assimilating it into its fold, but the second is that by which the Pale first made itself known fifteen-hundred years ago.

The Pale has no definite border, no definite boundaries of where it can and cannot be. The Pale is, an essence of immaterial always within the material, antimatter within matter, atrophy within order, awaiting escape.

As the Pale first emerged in the Old World in its greatest time of crisis, so too does it emerge from new points of origin in the world amidst war, revolution, plague, or exodus.

The Pale Rider is a horse; he turns his head, and his eyes scan the late evening sky's horizon.

He sees no sun.

In only half a day, Carson has fallen, and so the Pale has emerged anew, a point of origin in the world far greater in strength than that which Carson would otherwise have been subjected to, far greater than that which the world would otherwise have faced.

The Pale Rider feels its approach from behind, its outwards growth from its new point of origin, racing to join the end of the world, and feels it ahead of it too, the mass of the Pale rushing to incorporate its spawn.

The Pale has grown today to cover more of the world than it did yesterday.

The Pale Rider crosses into the Pale yet again. He sees its great vision, and before long, he is not in a mere finger of the Pale, but finds himself riding deeper into that which few dare travel through.

What the Pale now is is unlike that which he rode through before. The Pale Rider travels through where what protection one dons is more a comfort to the mind than to the matter of their material being.

One's survival now is not a matter of protective measures, of plans best laid, but of chance. And so, the Pale Rider removes his mask; he looks upon the Pale with his eyes, and allows himself to breathe.

If the Pale is to claim his life, then it will. If it is not, then it will not. The Pale Rider cannot see the future as the Pale itself can, but still he wonders, and hopes for just a moment to see through the barrier of time that still constrains mankind in the material. He wishes to know if anything could have been done, if there is a future where Carson still lives, and if it was by his own hand's that Carson's fate was decided, or yet may still be decided.

The Pale Rider turns again, and wonders what is yet to come for Carson's people, and if it is there he should return.

But that is not what he is.

He is not a blade in the dark that silences the voice of those who threaten the order of mankind, he is not a rescuer who pulls man out from the rubble of their own making, a savior.

He shifts his course, and rides into the Pale, his course set for Albion now to deliver the message of Carson and its people.

He is a forecaster of the world's end, a courier of the last words of those lost to the Pale, the weight of the diminishing world placed upon his shoulders as he is marked the harbinger of its death.

He is a Pale Rider.