

Elegy For The Living

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PART 1

CHAPTER 1: Nexus of *Ir-Orthis*

Dante stirred to the sounds of a train screeching into the tunnel below him. People rushed up the stairs to the main terminal, each one on their own personal journey. Businessmen in suits bustled through crowds of high-schoolers mingling in front of stores. Parents pushed strollers with one hand, pressing phones to their ears or holding bags of groceries with the other. The high tiled ceiling of the terminal bounced the sounds of thousands of people going about their business into Dante's recently awoken ears. It gave him a headache.

Dante scooped up on his makeshift bed, the cardboard thin and malleable in the damp tunnel. His thick wool blanket still covered his tattered pants and his only remaining pair of shoes. Dante scratched his head and stretched, exposing his midsection to the cold morning air. *Jeez! That's freezing*, he thought as he curled back beneath his blanket.

But one can only hold out against hunger for so long, so Dante climbed back out of his blanket and his box and put on his coat ready to search for food. The coat was patched in some places and still had holes where they weren't needed, but it was better than nothing.

"Hey sir, what time is it?" Dante asked a passing suited man with a large watch on his wrist.

"Sorry, I don't have any change." The man said as he walked away.

"Some people..." Dante scowled at the terse, and wholly irrelevant response. He looked to his left at a diminutive figure with no legs, John. The small legless man had been living in the subway station for as long as the other itinerant locals could remember and had an uncanny knack for "finding things" of value to sell or pawn. When Dante first moved into his current spot on the bridge a few days ago, John plopped himself down on the ground next to him and struck

up a conversation. Before Dante knew it, he had told John his whole life story. Starting with the fire...

Dante spent two years after the fire in city custody. The city of *Ir-Orthis* had a robust foster system. For Paladins. Modern facilities with amenities and heating. A wide network of foster families. Schools, camps, and even internship opportunities awaited the orphans of Paladin families of *Ir-Orthis*. Children of knights or officers received pensions and had their medical needs taken care of. Should they choose to enroll in the police or military academy, their tuition was covered by the Enclave; the presiding governmental body in *Ir-Orthis*. Or so Dante heard. If one had the misfortune of being born a Necromancer, they spent two years in a small foster facility named The *Ir-Orthis Protectory*. If the child was not adopted, fostered, or dead by the end of those two years they were given the option to attend a city-sponsored laborers college where they would learn handy life skills like operating factory machinery or how to drive a truck. If they chose not to attend, the *Protectory* would provide them with a large knapsack, a bundle of cash, and a pat on the back.

“Really?” John Davos, Dante’s newest temporary neighbor, asked in his peculiar high voice. The man’s head only came up to Dante’s midriff due to two malformed legs covered in bandages below the knee. Dante glanced at the small crude tattoo of a broken circle on his left temple that marked a Necromancer that had received emergency medical attention from a Paladin mission. The tattoos excluded the recipient from getting similar treatment in the future.

“Really,” Dante replied, “and the pat is mostly sarcastic.” Dante had been telling the truth, with a few embellishments. The maximum length any one child or teen was allowed to stay at the *Protectory* was thirty six months, but very few stayed for the entire duration. Dante had wanted to leave as soon as he got there, but the staff paid very close attention to new arrivals lest they

run away before the city approved funding. Once the *Protectory* got their money the rules lightened considerably. Drugs and alcohol were relatively common. Several of the older girls staying there got pregnant, as well as a few of the younger ones. The only activity that was expressly forbidden was the same as outside the *Protectory*; Necromancy. But very few children were ever caught practicing Necromancy, no matter how much they might feel the need.

“Necromancy” was something of a catch-all term for anything the Paladin Order considered unnatural. To be fair, many necromantic powers were unnatural. The ability to control biological substances, the manipulation of flame or clay, the manual spreading of illness, communication with the dead or nearly-dead, the creation of simulacrum of any kind be they dolls, effigies, Homunculi, or totems, and especially the creation of Relics. Relics were the object of fear of many a young Paladin, and the subject of many popular horror stories. Powerful magical objects fueled by the harnessing of souls, Relics commonly took the form of weapons crafted by Necromancers during the Bright Crusade. These many forms of forbidden magic were drilled into the heads of young Necromancers as tools of death and destruction punishable by death or imprisonment.

None of the Necromancer children knew how to do any Necromancy as it took practice to get any good at it. The Paladins acted on their fears anyway. There had been no incidents of children accidentally causing plagues or turning their beds into ash in the past fifty years, but whenever some poor Necromancer child was placed in too stressful a situation, their latent abilities would surface and “disaster” would strike.

Dante leaned over the railing and spit on the tracks below. The train station was filled with people that evening, but no one spared a glance at a beggar spitting over the rails. The bridge that went over the tracks was about ten feet wide and was packed with people trying to catch their

evening train. The sloping archway roof above their heads was a dull mosaic of grey and beige. The few signs not covered in graffiti contained posters for shows that had been released months if not years ago.

“Well, I don’t know ‘bout no Protect’ry, but I can tell ya, their hospitals are mighty nice,” John’s features melted into a blissful nostalgic smile, “Very soft beds, ‘n hot food too! Those were the days.” He stared wistfully at a train rumbling down the tracks beneath him. The train rolled to a stop and inhaled masses of well dressed passengers heading home for the day.

The train station was one of the few places in the city where Necromancers and Paladins could be found side by side. The nexus of trains that ran through the station took Paladins from their homes to offices and to castles or Enclave buildings in the city center. Those same trains took Necromancers from the slums on the eastern and northern edges of the city to the factories in the south and the docks to the west.

“Gettin hit by that truck was th’ best thing that ever happened t’ me.” John garbled out in his squeaky pitch, “B’sides o’ course findin’ this pretty penny!” He pulled out a shining pouch with a golden clasp at the top. The glistening pouch reflected harsh white lights from above into Dante’s eyes.

“Did someone give that to you?” Dante asked incredulously. He blinked the light out of his eyes and reached towards the pouch to take it out of the light. “Where did you get that?”

John whipped the pouch back into his dirty cloak. “Hands to yerself!” He eyed Dante with his hand beneath his cloak. “Don’t reach fer another man’s money.” The legless transient glanced at Dante up and down, taking in the younger man’s shabby, toeless shoes and patchwork clothing.

“You were shining the light in my eyes,” Dante responded flatly, his hands pulled up beside his head. “I’m not going to take your money. I have enough problems.” Dante noticed John

surveying eyes and withdrawn hand. Wary of getting stabbed by an unhinged thief in a crowd of uncaring bystanders, Dante took a step back. John's face softened.

"Ye seem like honest folk, so I'll make ye a deal," John extracted his hand from beneath his cloak and stretched it towards Dante. "I can't exactly go buy myself something to eat now, can I? But I'm starvin' and I'm flush." He shook the pouch beneath his cloak. "So, here's the deal. You go buy me something to eat, something hot, mind you, and I'll give you half of what's in this here pouch." He shook the pouch again. The coins inside jingled enticingly.

Dante looked at the pouch and felt his stomach rumble. Men his age didn't make much money busking. More often than not people would tell him to go get a job. "Where did you get the pouch?" He asked, certain of the answer but still in denial.

"Does it matter? Someone, a kind stranger... handed it to me." John said with a mad twinkle in his eye. "So, do we have a deal?" John put on his best approximation of a reassuring smile. The absentminded senility that Dante had found disarming before was becoming more sinister by the second. Dante looked around. The commuters passing by them didn't seem to notice the two bums on the side of the bridge, even when one pulled out a golden pouch of dubious origin. Dante's stomach rumbled again.

"You have a deal."

"Excellent. Turn around. Make sure nobody's watchin." Dante turned around and swept his eyes back and forth across the crowd. He could hear the sounds of coins clinking together behind him. The station was too loud for the noise to carry very far. He was still nervous and kept an eye out for any Paladin officers marching about. Patrols in this part of the station were infrequent, but not unheard of. If an officer saw a man looking like Dante with any amount of money in their hands, they were sure to stop him, search his pockets, and confiscate anything they found.

Dante didn't see any lawmen but he did see a number of hooded masked individuals skulking through the crowd. The men wore white masks with two deep eyeholes and streaks of red crying down their cheeks. While the men stuck out to Dante, no one around seemed to pay them any mind. The blood red hoods were pulled up and kept their faces from being too obvious to anyone walking beside them. From his position on the floor, Dante could see right into the face of one of the hooded figures. His eyes drifted to the deep eye sockets, two bloodshot eyes peered out at him from beneath the cowl. When he made eye contact the hooded man turned slightly toward him and lifted a single gloved finger to his mouth. A faint shimmer in the air, like a heatwave coming off of asphalt, surrounded the man's finger.

"Shhhh," came the low whisper, somehow piercing the din of the crowd around them. The hooded man fell back into lockstep with his brethren and melted into the crowd. Dante shivered and turned to John to try to back out of the deal. What the fuck was that? Were those Necromancers? He had lost his nerve. When he turned, John thrust out a fistful of coins into Dante's belly. Dante grunted from the blow.

"Alright, here's the cash. Don't fuck me on this and run off, or I'll report you for stealing this pouch from some poor Pally wench." John's high voice was a sharp hiss. His eyes were hungry, desperate, and Dante could feel that desperation within himself as well. He looked down at the coins and clenched his fist tight around them.

"Alright. I'll be back soon."

CHAPTER 2: Subway Chase

Dante walked down the terminal with a purposeful pace. Bright signs in warm colors shined from diners, salons, pharmacies, and bakeries. Dante stopped in front of one of the latter and looked down at the coins in his hand. He counted enough for at least a sandwich and a cup of

coffee. *John wouldn't mind if I bought myself a snack, would he?* The smells of cinnamon rolls and baked bread cut through the usual tunnel stench. Dante's stomach rumbled.

There will be other bakeries. Cheaper bakeries. Ones where I could get more than just a sandwich, he thought to himself. That was a lie. Dante had lived in *Ir-Orthis Central Terminal* long enough to know that every store with room to sit down would be too expensive for a "dirty kid-bum". Tables and chairs were for pants that had pockets, pockets that held wallets, and wallets that contain money. According to one cashier, and her very angry manager, Dante drove customers away. He glanced down at the coins in his fist.

Dante's stomach rumbled again. Louder this time.

I guess it couldn't hurt to try... Dante hoped. He had only been beaten by a store owner once, briefly. He had shoplifted a lighter from the pay counter when he thought the burly man wasn't looking. Luckily, beating up homeless kids is about as bad for business as letting them sit down, so Dante got away mostly intact.

Dante took a deep breath before walking into the bakery. *I stink,* he thought, as he approached the display counter. The young woman behind the register gave him a look like she wanted to say something, but Dante ignored her. Inside the bakery the smells were overpowering. He could practically taste the pastries as he looked through the curved glass case.

There were racks of cinnamon rolls covered in a white glaze. There were donuts decorated with pink and blue swirls. There was a small pyramid of cookies; chocolate with chocolate chips, the chips were still melting. Off to one side there was a wire rack filled with what looked like cigars made of chocolate and fried dough. The sign read "Baker's Special: Fried Chocolate Twists."

The rumbling in Dante's stomach was painful at the sights of those twists. He glanced at the menu. *If I just buy a sandwich and coffee for John, I can buy myself a treat later with the money he gives me.*

"Excuse me, Ma'am." Dante said to the young woman behind the counter in the most polite and non-desperate tone he could manage. Her face was scrunched up in a way that made her lip rings stick out like tusks. Her arms were crossed in front of her apron.

"Can I help you? We don't have a bathroom you can use, if that's what you're wondering." She said, failing to hide the disgust in her voice. The woman's eyes slid from Dante's dirty hair, to his sagging backpack, to his threadbare coat, and finally back to his dark face with his small shy smile.

"No, thank you. I would like three fried chocolate twists, please." Dante said. *What the fuck are you doing?!* His stomach responded with an angry growl. He held out the coins and tried to keep his arm from shaking. He was sure that the woman could smell him, or hear his stomach, or both. That didn't matter to Dante as long as he got the pastries. The woman made a small grimace as she swept the coins off the counter from Dante's hand with her apron.

"These coins smell like feet." She remarked, holding them out as she opened the register and rang up his order.

"Weird," said Dante. He glanced around nervously as the woman slid open the display cabinet and pulled out the twists with a pair of tongs. She placed the twists in a sheet of wax paper and put the wax paper on a plate. Dante's mouth watered at the smell of the open cabinet. He felt the guilt and regret pile up in his stomach but he didn't care.

A large man with an apron and an annoyed look on his face stepped through a door behind the counter.

“Mal, Do we have any more yeast in the back? We’re on our last box in the kitchen. I swear, Ian never keeps track of these things when he’s supp-” His voice caught when he saw Dante swaying back and forth, eyes glued to the plate in Mal’s hands. The large man wiped his hands on his apron, leaving streaks of white powder. He gave Mal a sharp look and cleared his throat.

“Is there, uh, anything we can help you with, sir?” He said, eyes flicking between Dante’s shaking hands and his clothes.

“I’m helping him dad. He ordered some Chocolate Twists. He paid cash.” Mal said, indifferently placing the plate on the counter.

“Some twists, huh? For here? Or to go?” the large man said, looking down at the plate.

Mal turned back to Dante. “For here or to go?” She asked.

Dante shook out of his stupor. “Huh? Oh. Umm... I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.” he said, unable to pull his eyes away from the treats on the plate.

“To go, then.” said the large man. He placed the wax paper with the twists into a white paper bag he pulled from a stack on the counter. He stuffed a napkin into the bag and scrunched the top into something resembling a handle. He leaned over the counter and motioned for Dante to do the same. Dante hesitated before stepping towards the counter and leaning his head.

“Pal, you can’t- Whew! You stink something fierce!- You can’t come in here during rush hour. We get a lot of folks coming in to buy dinner and trying to relax with a cup of coffee, and they don’t want to eat next to someone who looks like they crawled off of the tracks. Ya catch my drift?” The man said with the sound of someone holding in a cough. He gave Dante a look that said ‘I’m sorry. My hands are tied,’ as well as ‘Get the fuck out of my store.’

Dante nodded mutely as the large man put the bag in his waiting hands. “And, uh, do you need help, kid? You’re shaking an awful lot. Do you want me to... call someone?” the man said.

“I’m... I’m hungry, that’s all.” Dante struggled to get the words out. It’s difficult to tell people that you haven’t eaten anything hot in a few months. Even more so when you are certain you might get stabbed later for it.

“Well, you enjoy that then.” The man looked uncomfortable. Guilty. A little frightened. He probably thought that Dante was high or crazy, but he couldn’t ignore the starving young man or kick him out once Dante had already paid. Necromancer or not.

Dante muttered a thank you and turned around. He walked with his head down, eyes on the bag.

He unwrapped the bag and opened up the wax paper to reach for one of the chocolate twists.

Dante’s mouth was watering. *These things better taste as good as they smell*, he thought. As he brought the treat to his nose some whisper of his past life found its way into his starving mind.

Reminds me of Mom’s cooking. The thought came, unbidden, from a place in Dante’s psyche rarely opened. He frowned, upset by the memory of his family. Dante didn’t notice until after the fact that he had been tapping out the rhythm to a song he used to know.

Then Dante walked face first into the chest of a very tall man. The shock of the impact loosened Dante’s grip on the bag of pastries, but the large hand that cuffed him on the back of the head made Dante release the bag entirely and knocked him to the floor. Dante looked up at the man he had bumped into. The man stood several feet taller than Dante; he seemed to dwarf even the large man behind the counter. He stood ramrod straight in a long coat the color of tombstone granite with gold buttons. He carried a long black case in one hand. Dante had seen many musicians come through the terminal with a variety of instruments, each with their own case. The man’s firm grip and grim expression told him that the case did not contain a guitar. *A Paladin Knight*, Dante thought, *that’s not good.*

Dante heard a hiss of air escaping but he could not locate the source. The patrons in the bakery didn't seem to notice; they were enthralled by the enormous man standing above Dante.

"You, Sir." said Dante's assailant to the large man behind the counter while pointing at Dante, "Is this vagrant bothering you?" His voice was deep and gravelly, as if his throat never properly healed from an old wound. The man had an air of command about him as though he was used to giving orders and used to ensuring they were carried out. His affect was not entirely unfriendly, as though he carried out executions with a wink and a smile. From behind the colossal man, a young woman, about his age with the lightest hair Dante had ever seen, emerged carrying a different case with a serious look on her face.

"Do we really have time for this, Hans? The council report placed the activity deeper underground." She looked around as if to make sure none of the patrons of the bakery were looking at them. They all were.

The hiss in Dante's ear grew louder. It sounded like whispers coming from a sewer grate, but there was no grate nearby. His cheeks flushed. Who was this man to just throw him around like that? He wanted to grab this man and shake him for ruining the one good thing he had gotten in a while. He looked down at his food. -----

"Nonsense, Angela. We have a responsibility to make sure that... Well, we shouldn't be bystanders if we can help it." The tall man said without turning to look at his junior partner or the young man he had knocked to the floor.

Dante was stunned. His food had spilled out over the floor. He reached for one of the twists in an attempt to save his meal, only to be stopped by a large boot that came between him and his food. The hiss grew to a shrill whistle piping out through the cracks between the floor tiles. No one seemed to hear it but Dante.

The large man tutted, “Ah ah. Not so fast.” He turned again to the baker behind the counter and the scared-looking Mal. “Is this... delinquent bothering you?”

“N-n-no-no... He just- He bought some...” The baker stammered, not taking his eyes off of the enormous man. Mal picked up the phone by the register and held it as if to make a call. She looked to the baker for permission. The baker shook his head at her and gestured for her to put the phone down.

“Ah well. One can never be too careful these days. There are unsavory elements about.” said the tall man, matter-of-factly. He gripped Dante by the wrist in one of his huge hands and carried him to the door of the bakery. “Off you go, young man. Stay out of trouble.” He let go of Dante’s wrist and turned to go back to the bakery.

Dante couldn’t hear him. For a moment, the whistle had become a shrieking wail in Dante’s ears. It sounded like someone was screaming at him from just beneath the ground. His stomach still ached from hunger and he couldn’t feel his fingertips from the man’s tight grip. He wanted to make the pain in his ears and his stomach and his hands go away. He slapped his hands against the floor, making them sting. Dark shapes filled the corners of Dante’s vision. As the noise subsided into a dull ache, Hans picked him up with one hand and looked him in the eye.

“That’s a lot of cash to spend on treats. Don’t you think you should buy more wholesome foods?” The concern in the man’s voice threw Dante for a loop. Head already spinning from the sourceless noise, he couldn’t understand why the Paladin seemed so genuinely concerned.

“I’m buying for a friend.” Dante replied, “He doesn’t have any legs.”

“Uh-huh. Sure,” Hans continued in his accommodating tone, his hands still wrapped around Dante’s arm. “Why don’t we go back to your friend so I can apologize for spilling his food?” His tone steeled slightly. Dante gulped.

What does he want from me? Dante thought as Hans tugged him along away from the bakery. Dante pointed down the corridor in the direction he had come from. Hans ushered him off into the sea of people. The Paladin woman followed closely behind.

CHAPTER 3: Human Waste

The shops in the terminal passed by in a haze of color and lights as Hans pushed Dante down the corridor. Angela, the Paladin woman, was flanking Dante on the other side and giving anyone who strayed too close a withering stare. The crowd of commuters gave them a wide berth. Dante noticed that both Angela and Hans had a slight glow surrounding them. Dante looked at their reflection in the darkened window of an abandoned shop as they passed by. The aura grew more pronounced when reflected in the murky glass. Dante also got a better look at the two Paladins' stiff coats. Pinned to Hans' lapel were two small golden stars and a thin, flat gold bar with three black stripes running through the middle. *Is that a Knight Commander's pin?* Dante wondered what was going on. It was rare enough for Paladins to patrol the train station, but a Knight Commander? Knight Commanders were in charge of a platoon of Paladin Knights. Dante wasn't sure of their exact place in the hierarchy, but he knew enough to feel frightened.

"Hans, look-" Angela pointed at one of the banks of posters lining the wall. This particular spot was plastered with images of a white mask with red streaks coming from the eyes. Dante thought back to the men from the bridge. They had glided through the crowd with unnatural ease and they were wearing those masks. "From the briefing..."

"I noticed, Acolyte. I would remind you to refer to your superiors by rank while in the field."

Hans' voice was granite. Heavy and impenetrable.

"Yes, Commander Denhart." She grumbled, chastened. "They're growing more bold, sir."

“And more foolish,” Hans growled. Dante could see his aura clearly now. It pulsed gently in the dim corridor, almost as if warning people out of his way. After a few minutes of walking they had passed several clusters of the mask posters. And after each cluster, Hans’ aura brightened ever so slightly.

“You Necromancers really know how to ruin a wall, don’t you?” Hans asked Dante in his fake cheery voice. The question was accompanied by a tug on the arm. Dante’s entire body twitched after his arm.

“I suppose, Sir. I don’t really know what that’s about.” Dante had seen the signs before but hadn’t given them much thought before Angela pointed them out.

“They’re a gang of murderers and thieves, young man. The worst kind of people. Human waste, if we were to be so generous. We received a tip that they were operating in *Ir-Orthis Central Terminal*.” He stopped suddenly and looked down at Dante with practiced concern. “-I’m sorry. Where did you say your friend was? We still need to apologize to him before we get back to business.”

Dante numbly pointed down the corridor several yards away. “Only a few more terminals down, Sir.”

“Excellent. Lead on.” Hans said without moving his hand from Dante’s arm. The mismatched trio walked through the emptying corridor until they came before Dante’s home. Dante hadn’t noticed when he set out to buy food, but the doorway leading to his terminal had been covered from floor to ceiling by posters of the white mask with bleeding eyes.

Dante could feel the eyes of the two Paladins burning into the back of his skull. The light from Hans’ aura cast a harsh shadow on the ground before Dante.

“You are absolutely certain that you know nothing about them, young man?” Hans’ fingers were digging into Dante’s flesh.

“I- No, Sir,” Dante gulped. He heard the rumble of a train leaving the platform below. It unsettled his empty stomach and he let out a small retch.

“Well, let’s go in then,” said Hans and he started walking through the door, down the steps to the bridge landing.

CHAPTER 4: Like Air Through A Tunnel

The first thing Dante saw as he started descending the stairs was John passed out on his cardboard box in the middle of the bridge. The bridge was empty and only a handful of people were climbing the stairs up to the bridge. As the last few commuters left the terminal, Hans led Dante out onto the bridge.

“Your friend, I presume?” Hans said, looking down at John with disgust. Angela walked to the other side of the bridge past John, to make sure that no one entered from that side.

“Y-Yeah. He lent me the money.” Dante was shaking from hunger and fear. A pit was forming in his stomach and cramps wracked his sides.

“Stolen, no doubt.” Hans glared at John and put one heavy, tightly-laced boot on the sleeping man’s chest.

“He didn’t say...” Dante couldn’t get out more than a whisper. The situation was getting worse. Without any pedestrians around, the Paladins would feel no need to go easy on them for the sake of their public image. There was an extensive history of homeless people being injured by Paladin Knights, but there were never enough witnesses to prove it. Dante had heard the stories and seen the scars. Burn marks that you could only get from a Paladin’s smite. His thoughts turned again to the light emanating from Hans. *If ever there was a Paladin he could call down a*

smite... He cringed at the thought. The pit in his stomach expanded into his chest and he felt an overwhelming sense of dread.

“Wake up!” The command boomed through the tunnel, bouncing off the tile wall into oblivion. John awoke with a yelp and tried to sit up, but was stopped by the weight pressing down on his chest.

“Hey! What’s going on? Who’re you?!” John’s eyes widened in recognition of the Paladin garb and then squinted against the harsh light coming from Hans’ aura. “I didn’t do nothing! I’m innocent! I was framed!” John squealed, writhing under the Paladin’s boot. Dante looked on in horror as Hans pressed the boot down. John let out a cry of pain.

“Speak only when spoken to, worm.” Hans released the pressure on John’s chest. John whimpered.

Dante looked around for help, but the tunnel was empty. The glare coming off of Hans cast sinister shadows down both ends of the tunnel. His heart was pounding in his chest and his brain felt like it was buzzing in his skull. Dante’s vision darkened at the corners.

Dante felt as though he was about to pass out. But then, a soft, almost imperceptible presence reached into his mind from the shadows. *Let go, it said, Release yourself.*

“What do you know about the *Disir*?!” Hans demanded of a blubbering John. The entire scene slowed for Dante, as he saw spirits wink into existence around him. Visible despite the light pouring from Hans, the ethereal, gaseous-looking spirits floated in the shape of men and women with indistinct features.

Acting entirely on instinct, Dante sucked in a deep breath and the spirits rushed into his body. He blinked hard and his vision exploded with hazy, transparent shapes dispersed throughout the walls and ground beneath the bridge. At Dante’s beckoning, these shapes coalesced into a dark

chain of what looked like vertebrae. With a rumble the chain snaked its way up from the dirt beneath the railway tracks and coiled over the bridge.

“Hans! Look out!” Angela yelled, but it was too late. The skeletal chain whipped around Hans and pinned him to the floor on the opposite side of the bridge. Angela undid the clasp on her case and dashed across the bridge at Dante.

Dante’s vision was still highlighted in a corona of luminescent shapes. The spirits he inhaled were enabling him to see the world around him as a tool for his own devices. He blinked, and as quickly as the vision came, it left him with a splitting headache.

“Run, boy!” John yelled, helplessly flinging himself at Angela’s legs as she approached in an attempt to trip her. Hans’ aura made it difficult to see and the younger Paladin tripped over John’s flailing body.

Dante ran. As he threw himself down the stairs two at a time, he heard a pained shriek and the dull thud of John’s body being flung into the railing. The legless man teetered on the railing’s edge for a moment before slipping over the edge towards the tracks below. John managed to catch himself with one hand, dangling precariously. All the while, Hans was shouting oaths and spitting with rage, trying to free himself from the now-fused chain of bones.

Dante rushed down the stairs, Angela closing in behind him, and looked towards the dangling John. *I can’t let him fall, he’ll die!*

“Boy! Help! My fingers are slippin’!” John’s voice held a desperate tone Dante had never heard before.

“I’m coming!” Dante shouted back, “Hold on!” Dante sprinted for the tracks. As Dante got closer and closer to the platform edge, Angela took a quick step forward, and then another, and launched herself at Dante, shining axe in hand. Dante dove for the ground and slid to the yellow

stripe marking the end of safe standing space and the beginning of 'train territory'. Angela's axe soared through the air where Dante's head had been just moments before.

"Trying to escape won't be good for your health," She taunted, standing before the platform edge.

"I'll take my chances," said Dante, and he slid over the edge. Dante caught himself before he landed on the third rail. It would be such a shame to have evaded capture so long only to be electrocuted. He reached his hands above his head to catch John. John's hand gave out and he plummeted to the ground, into Dante's waiting hands. Dante collapsed to one knee with a grunt. It took all his strength to stand back up. John was gasping for breath and wrapped his arms around Dante's head.

"That was incredible! I've never, in all me days, seen somethin' like that!" John exclaimed.

Dante grunted, took a few steps across the rail ties, and heaved John's limp form to the other platform.

"You saved me, boy. Thank ye, now run!" John urged.

Dante nodded and sprinted down the tunnel.

"Are you serious?" Angela's voice came from the platform. Dante understood her surprise. A few years back a homeless man had killed himself by dropping onto the tracks. His name was Ellis. Dante had been panhandling from car to car when an announcement came over the PA. There had been a major malfunction and the trains would stop until the problem was solved. Dante learned upon exiting the car that Ellis had jumped onto the tracks, giggling madly, according to the bystanders. He had stood with hands outstretched towards the direction of oncoming trains. Before a train could hit him, however, he stumbled and brushed the third rail with one of his bare feet. His body had taken thirty minutes to remove.

All this information barely broke the surface of Dante's awareness as Angela leapt down onto the tracks. Her feet never touched the railway, her toes falling between the sleepers on every step.

"You must have some kind of death wish," she called after him, "Get back here before we both get killed!"

Dante ignored her. He scanned the tunnel ahead of him for a hole, a broken wall, a maintenance shaft, anything that would let him get away. The ringing in his ears had returned along with the headache. It was less shrill this time, but more insistent, as if it were hungry to rush free again.

His stomach also had begun to ache again. The initial adrenaline rush had worn off; Dante could feel his limbs growing heavy and his breaths becoming more ragged. He needed to really lose this Paladin soon or he wouldn't lose her at all. He felt ready to drop at any moment.

He was shaking. It was low at first, barely noticeable, but the shaking soon grew more violence. But it wasn't just his hands. His legs and his chest and his shoulders were all shaking. He could feel it in his ears. The vibrations were loud and getting louder behind the ringing.

The tunnel was shaking too. Dante wasn't certain if the walls were shaking because he was shaking or if the tunnel collapsed on them. He looked ahead and saw an alcove in the wall a short distance ahead of him. Maybe I can lose her in there, he thought. He looked behind him and was dismayed to see Angela closing in on him. She was almost close enough to grab him when Dante saw the headlights. A train was barreling down the tracks and shaking the entire tunnel around them.

"TRAIN!" Dante yelled. Angela kept charging at him with a look of grim determination on her face. Dante was almost at the alcove when Angela leapt at him in an attempt to grab him. The two collided and were knocked forward from the force of the impact. Angela was holding Dante's wrists down against the ground.

“I got you...” she said, tears pooling in her eyes. She was looking down at Dante with an expression of frustration and anguish.

“You idiot now we’ll both die!” he shouted over the sound of the rapidly approaching train. They were parallel with the alcove now. I was so close, Dante thought, the winds in his mind flowing around the words and filling them with purpose. The thoughts of fear and hunger and pain were replaced with a sensation of calm assurance. The ringing in his ears once again was replaced by the sound of river rapids and ghostly thanks. He looked at his tearful captor. Her eyes were closed in a graceful repose. Dante assumed she must be meditating in her final moments. Her head glowed gently, though that could have just been glare from the incoming headlights. She must have been around his age, a young adult. She had been ordered around by that tall man in the terminal, being used like a tool. She didn’t deserve to die. Dante didn’t want her to die.

The train was almost upon them.

Dante’s vision blurred and his limbs felt as though streams of fire had replaced his blood. He blinked away the blur and spirits once again filled the air around him. Without thinking, he grabbed Angela by the wrists, reversing her grip, and swung her towards the alcove with an inhuman strength. As if responding to his command, bones emerged from the earth within the alcove and pulled Angela back, away from the tracks. At the same time a human skeleton wriggled between the train tracks from beneath Dante and wrapped him in a protective embrace. He could sense some presence within the bones that encased him; almost as if the spirit that had once resided within those bones had returned to enact his will. The train was deafening as it passed over him; an avalanche of machinery and wiring. Dante could scarcely tell what was going on from the violent shaking even within his cage of bones. It seemed like it took an eternity for the train to pass over him. Dante found it strange that despite being mere inches from

certain death, he felt no fear. Instead his thoughts were calm and serene. For the briefest moment he thought he imagined his mother's face. But it passed and all thoughts of his parents returned to the aether of his mind. The train finally passed him completely, seemingly leaving quicker than it had come. Dante tried to move but the skeleton around his body didn't budge. His eyes fluttered as a wave of exhaustion washed over him. The fire in his veins stopped burning and his sight re-focused on the ceiling of the tunnel above him.

"Holy shit," he heard from beside him, as Angela rose from where the arm of bones had dragged her into the alcove. The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was Angela looming over him with a shocked expression.

CHAPTER 5: Kidnapped

Dante came to in a dank cave behind several thick steel bars. Dante's cave was in a dimly lit corner of a larger, danker cave. Inside the cave there was a long wooden table lined with benches. There were iron braziers in the corners of the room and banners hanging from the walls. The banners depicted a grimacing white mask with wings protruding from the sides; blood pouring from the left eye of the mask stained the rest of the banner a dark crimson. Dante looked around and saw that there were two men in robes and hoods sitting at the long table, speaking quietly to one another. Within his cell there was a dirty mattress, a short metal bench, and a rusty metal bucket that had long abandoned its original color. In the cell next to him Dante saw a short, pale teenager with dirty blonde hair. He was clutching something in his arms and rocking back and forth while cooing gently.

Dante's head was pounding. The last thing he remembered before blacking out was willing that girl to be saved from the train.

That was stupid, he thought to himself, she was trying to kill you. Or at least kidnap you. And look how that turned out. Now we're in some creepy prison cell. How did we save her, anyways? That train was right behind us. The memory surfaced as the two men at the table looked up at Dante's moving form. *That's right. More bones.*

The two men stood up. One made his way to Dante's cell and the other left the room through a door on the far wall. As the man approached, Dante could see that the man wore a metallic mask similar to the ones on the banners decorating the cavern. The man came to a stop outside Dante's cell. Dante moved off of the dirty mattress and onto the metal bench against the back wall of the cell, as far from the man as possible.

"Don't worry. We don't bite, well, at least I don't," the man called. Beneath the mask his mouth twisted into what was surely intended to be a reassuring smile.

"Who are you people? Where am I? Are you with those Paladins?"

"Ooh. So many questions that I am not allowed to answer. You're going to have to wait for our master to get here. I'm sure Monmouth would be happy to answer any and all questions you must have." The man leaned down and parted his robes to remove a keyring from his belt. Now that the man was so close, Dante could see that he was at least seven feet tall, if not more. When the man removed his keyring, Dante also saw what looked like a long curved knife hanging from the man's belt.

The man took a moment to search for the correct key and inserted it into the lock on Dante's cell. He opened the door and beckoned for Dante to follow him to the table. Dante didn't budge. The man shrugged and sat back down on the long bench. It was at this point that Dante noticed what was on the table. Stretching from one end of the table to the other were plates and plates of food. It was more food than Dante had eaten in the past ten years of his life. There were baskets of

rolls, trays of meat, piles of whole fruit spilling out from the center. But most enticing of all were the cakes. There were cakes of every shape and size on a line of cake stands on one section of the table. Dante's mouth began to water and he realized how much his stomach was aching. He still hadn't eaten yet that day, but he didn't want to go near the hooded man with the knife. The hooded man selected a chicken leg from a roasted chicken on a platter in front of him and began tearing into its flesh with loud, slurping bites.

The boy in the cell next to Dante's looked up at the feast with a bitter expression on his face. He stopped rocking briefly and looked Dante in the eye. He slowly shook his head and started rocking again this time cooing louder as if to drown out the sounds of eating coming from the table. Dante couldn't ignore his aching stomach any longer. He stumbled as he stood up, leaning against the open cage door. The first few steps Dante took towards the table were shaky, but as Dante got closer the aromas of food wafting through the damp air gave him strength. There were cautious whispers in his head, warning him not to trust such a decadent display. Dante ignored them. His hunger was the only voice he could hear.

"That's it," said the hooded man through a mouthful of food, "what kind of fool turns down such a fantastic meal? I bet you're starving, kid. Here, start with something light." The man placed an apple and a small heaping of rice on a golden plate and set it down next to him. He patted the bench, beckoning Dante to sit next to him. Dante happily obliged.

The food was incredible. The rolls were still warm in their basket, the fruit crisp and juicy. The meats were a new sensation for Dante as the only meat he had ever had were hotdogs and hamburgers from cheap fast-food places. Dante took a thin slab of something the man called 'sirloin steak' and bit into it like a wild animal. He tore a piece of meat free and chewed it slowly, relishing the sensation of butter and sauce dripping down his chin. The hooded man

looked on in amusement. They ate in silence, accompanied only by the sounds of chewing and the gentle cooing coming from the cell.

Just as Dante was about to speak up again, the door that the other cloaked man had gone through opened. Through it came the second cloaked man, and a third man dressed in a tight leather shirt with blue scales studded throughout, and an intricate series of Celtic knots carved into the leather. This third man also wore a short cape that was attached to his shoulders by a furry collar. He wore a mask like the others but his was both more beautiful and more frightening; dark iron circles surrounded the eyes and thick bands of red ran down the cheeks of the mask. The mask also had wings protruding from the side but the silver feathers seemed to sway as the man walked, occasionally ruffling as if alive. He walked down the length of the room towards where Dante was sitting. When he reached the blonde boy in the cell, he stopped and placed a hand on the bars. The boy froze, trying to avoid looking at the man with the cape, trying to avoid looking at anything at all. The man tutted gently and kept walking towards the head of the table.

“I’m glad to see that you’re enjoying yourself, young man,” he said as he and the cloaked man sat down. Upon closer inspection, the studs on the man’s armor seemed to contain swirling smoky shapes. They looked like skulls to Dante. Screaming skulls moaning for... something. Looking at the gem-like studs, Dante could swear that he heard pleading voices crying out from the man’s direction, but it could have just been the wind passing through the caves, or even just Dante’s own ghosts crying out in his head. “When we first found you in that tunnel I was concerned that you might starve to death before we got you here,” the man said. His voice was gentle, soothing even. It reminded Dante of the voices of the priests that would run homeless aid campaigns during the springtime. Homeless Necromancers would gather in parks and large contingents of knights would escort a few frail-looking priests. The priests pushed carts filled

with food, clothing, and other essentials. The priests were always cordial but Dante found it difficult to believe their kind words with the heavily armed Paladin Knights looming over their shoulders.

“The tall guy wouldn’t answer my questions,” Dante said. Dante reached for a cluster of grapes and popped one in his mouth.

“I’m glad. I told him not to.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to introduce myself first. Before we explain who we are and what we do.”

“You guys look like a cult.” The words were out of Dante’s mouth before he could stop himself.

The man with the cape sighed and reached up to take off his mask. He placed the mask beside himself on the table and it folded in its wings. Dante couldn’t tell how old the man was from looking at him. He could have been thirty five or he could have been sixty. His long hair shifted between tones of charcoal and steel grey. His skin was deathly pale and graceful, almost feminine. He was beautiful, Dante decided, but in a haunting way. His eyes were the only thing that disturbed his almost angelic visage. The man’s eyes were bloodshot and raw, with streaks of red pooling in the corners. His irises were ragged and grey and almost pale. Dante shivered. It felt wrong to look him in the eyes, like staring at a corpse.

“I... can see why you might think that. Our decor is rather... antiquated. But I like to think it adds a degree of charm, wouldn’t you agree?” The man spoke in a slow, deliberate tone, measuring every word.

“I suppose,” said Dante. Dante looked down at his grapes, intent to focus on anything but the man’s eyes.

“While ‘cult’ has a certain appeal, I think ‘freedom fighter’ might be a more accurate descriptor. Allow me to make proper introductions. You may call me Monmouth. My helpers here are Tratosk,” he gestured to the one he had arrived with, “and Imir,” he waved a lazy hand at the tall cloaked man who had invited Dante to eat. “They are two of my most trusted associates. Excellent at being discreet. We are *Disir*.” The *Disir* of legend were a legion of female avenging spirits that brought rebellious souls into the land of the dead.

“We *Disir* are a group of individuals with unrealized power like yourself. I help young men and women who seek to control their abilities and put them to good use realize their potential. I help them find meaning in a world that would otherwise reject them.”

“You mean Necromancy You practice Necromancy.” Dante said. He put down the grape he had been preparing to eat. The boy in the cell had resumed his cooing now that all of Monmouth’s attention was on Dante, albeit quieter than before. The noise sounded like a warning to Dante. Monmouth sat for a moment, considering Dante.

“Yes. You are a young man with extraordinary gifts... ah, I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name. Mr... ?”

“I didn’t say it.” Dante answered.

“Well I don’t mean to be rude, but I introduced myself, and it would be quite difficult to continue to answer your questions if I don’t know your name, so I must insist, Mr...?” Monmouth’s entire body stood surprisingly still while he spoke, only his jaw moved.

“...Dante. My name is Dante,” he said.

“Mr. Dante, you are a young man with extraordinary gifts. I believe that display in the train terminal proved that if nothing else. Restraining a full Paladin Knight with no training? Nothing short of astounding.” His expression remained stuck in a face of slight amusement.

“That was an accident. I can’t do stuff like that, I don’t know what happened up there.”

“‘Can’t,’ or ‘won’t?’ You don’t sound convinced. And that outburst in the subway tunnel. Very powerful. You must have obliterated the Paladin Acolyte chasing you. We couldn’t find her body anywhere. Although I suppose it could have been carried away by the train...”

This guy must have been following me in the terminal... But I didn’t kill the girl. Did I? It was such a blur... Dante thought to himself. *Any piece of information this guy doesn’t know might be valuable, considering he seemed to know so much already.* “I... I don’t know what any of that stuff was. I’m just homeless, alright? I-” Dante started to say, but the man cut him off.

“You are hardly ‘just’ anything. You are a Necromancer. And one of immense power.”

Monmouth’s mild amusement seemed to fade, but it was hard to tell with his emotionless face.

If these guys let me go, the Paladins are going to be after me. thought Dante. “Yeah, I’m a Necromancer,” he gasped, “But, I don’t do any of that stuff, Okay? I have enough problems without having Paladins breathing down my neck.”

Monmouth pushed out his chair and stood up. He picked up his mask and held it out in front of his face.

“A Necromancer,” Monmouth paused, letting the word sit in the air for a moment before continuing, “is a man or woman in touch with the world of the dead. Necromancers have power over fallen souls and may call upon them to enact their will. You know this, but you don’t accept it. You deny your heritage. Your birthright.”

For the first time since he had walked into the room, Monmouth gave Dante a wide grin. Dante could barely contain a shudder. “We Necromancers are masters over the living body and the various earthly mediums within: blood, bone, flesh, and dust. The mediums are conduits to the soul. When one seizes hold of the various mediums, they may wield the souls of the dead as their

tools, and vice versa. With control over the dead comes control over the living. Through the power of a Necromancer, spirits are able to affect the realm of the living.”

“Uh huh.” Dante was familiar with the mediums from stories his parents had told him in hushed tones as a child. “But I-”

Monmouth cut him off, "Dante, you have lived your whole life under the lies of the Paladin Order. You need a demonstration. Some people can't learn through words alone and faith is such a... weak motivator." Monmouth gingerly placed his mask back down on the table. He gestured for Tratosk to come forward. "Your hand, Tratosk." The cloaked man, who had been silent until now, shot his brother a glance.

Tratosk hesitated for a brief moment before rising from the table and standing next to Monmouth. Imir glanced from Tratosk to Monmouth, fear visible on his face. Imir stammered as he spoke up, “Master... perhaps the whelp- would not the one with the bird... make for a better demonstration?”

Monmouth didn't take his eyes off of Dante as he replied, “The boy must remain whole, Imir, so as to retain his usefulness to me. Your half-brother, and you for that matter, have more, shall we say, ‘spare parts,’” Monmouth's voice adopted an icy chill, “but I shall keep your hesitation in mind for the future. Tratosk. Your hand.”

Imir, not overly flush to begin with, blanched and stooped his head low over the table in a deep bow. “Of- of course, milord.” Monmouth began quietly speaking words that Dante couldn't make out to someone who wasn't there.

Tratosk gulped, he pushed back his right-hand sleeve and revealed a heavily tattooed arm. The tattoos looked like none Dante had ever seen. The design was of a lattice of arteries and veins running down Tratosk's exposed arm. They shimmered and pulsed in time with Tratosk's

nervous heartbeat. As Monmouth reached his down to grab Tratosk's wrist, the ink seemed to pool and twist around where Monmouth's hand touched skin. Monmouth left his fingertips resting on the tattoos for a few moments as he closed his eyes and whispered something in a raspy voice. Tratosk grimaced in pain and gripped his right shoulder with his left hand. His right hand shrank and shriveled up, as if a blight had drained the hand of all its moisture. When Monmouth finally opened his eyes and lifted his hand from Tratosk's wrist, his fingertips were dripping with blood. The place where he had touched was raw and blood pooled on the surface of Tratosk's skin. Monmouth continued his gravelly muttering and the blood poured upwards in gobs and streams as if gravity had released its grip. The boy in the cell whimpered at the sight of Monmouth's armored hand. No one noticed.

Dante was frozen in his seat. Voices like the ones from the train terminal bounced around inside of his skull relaying mixed feelings of fear and anger. Dante looked on at the display and, for some reason he could not explain, felt it was an abomination even beyond the act of horrific cruelty. Despite these strong feelings there was no ringing in Dante's head, no buildup of power in Dante's body. After the two outbursts earlier in the day, he felt drained in some deep part of his soul, and sleepy from his full stomach.

The blood enshrouded Monmouth's arm and formed into a solid sanguine gauntlet. Monmouth reached down with his other hand and drew a wicked-looking curved dagger from Tratosk's belt. He raised the dagger above his head and held the gloved palm out in front of him. Dante looked on in horror as Monmouth plunged the dagger straight down into his open hand. Dante jumped as Tratosk yelled out and gripped his desiccated hand in pain. A deep gash had formed in his hand precisely where Monmouth had stabbed through his own. Monmouth casually pulled the dagger out of his palm, wiped it on the inside of his cape, the bloody stain disappeared into the

fabric, and he returned the dagger to its sheath. Monmouth whispered a harsh quick phrase in the indecipherable language he had been speaking and the blood gathered around his hand melted back into Tratosk's arm through his tattoos, now dull. His hand regained some of its previous health but still looked drained and weak. Blood started to seep from the hole in his hand. Imir rushed to Tratosk's side with a bandage and began wrapping the wound. Monmouth straightened out his cape and wiped some blood from a scratch on his hand where he had stuck the dagger. He regarded Tratosk and Imir with a look of bored satisfaction. He returned his gaze to the paralyzed Dante.

“That is what Necromancy can do. That is your heritage.”

CHAPTER 6: Henry, The Birdboy

Dante sat on the metal bench in his cell, shivering. The cave was cold and wet. Imir had put out several of the braziers after locking Dante back in his cage. Dante thought back on his conversation with Monmouth following the gruesome display of Necromancy.

“What do you want with me?” he had asked Monmouth. There was no curiosity in Dante's voice, only fear.

Ever since Dante could remember in his life on the streets he had always avoided conflict and violence. He was a tall teenager, and he looked healthy despite years of hunger and malnutrition. It was rare for other homeless people to pick fights with him, but when they did, Dante had always preferred to run away rather than actually hit another person. The way he saw it, using violence to solve problems usually only ever resulted in more problems. Monmouth didn't subscribe to that philosophy.

“There is a war coming, young Dante. You probably know better than any of our kind the dangers Paladins pose to Necromancers. The large man who knocked you down earlier today?

The girl that hunted you into a subway tunnel? Paladin fanatics. The man's name is Hans Denhart. Also known as 'The Zealot,' he hunts down Necromancers and slaughters them without remorse. He thinks that The Bright Crusade should never have ended. He thinks that his people, in their towers and parapets, are still in danger of extinction from a scattered diaspora of tribes and families. My goal is to prove him right."

Dante was unsure of how much to believe, but after seeing Monmouth pull the blood out of a man's bare hand, he was inclined to let Monmouth feel trusted. "So he knew I was a Necromancer? I didn't even know. How could he have known?" Dante asked.

"The craftiness of the Paladins is not to be underestimated, they have their own abilities and powers, after all. I think that your run-in with one of the most dangerous men in the Paladin order may have been a sign of the Paladins expanding their patrols, seeking out and exterminating Necromancers caught unawares."

"The girl. When she confronted me before the subway tunnel mentioned capturing me instead of killing me..." Dante recalled.

Monmouth considered this information briefly. "That could mean that they were going to interrogate you. Torture you to make you reveal the whereabouts of other Necromancers."

"But I didn't know anything! I still don't even know where I am." Dante insisted.

"And now you see the reason for my precaution," Monmouth said, haltingly, "I needed to be certain that you would join us before putting my brethren in danger. Hence your imprisonment."

Dante noticed that Imir looked up from tending Tratosk's wounds and gave Monmouth a deathly glare. Dante looked back at his cell and the adjoining cells. The boy was sitting still now, staring back at Dante from behind metal bars. Dante grew curious.

“What did he do?” said Dante, pointing at the boy in the cell. “Why hasn’t he been let out? Is he a Necromancer too?”

Monmouth licked his lips before answering. “That child is none of your concern. His imprisonment is for his own... safety.”

“You said he was being kept for your own purposes. Why do you need to keep him in a cage?”

Dante asked. He was feeling a bit more brave, the shock of seeing Monmouth’s Necromancy had worn off slightly. Monmouth clearly didn’t want to tell him anything about the boy. But Monmouth also wanted Dante to join him, so perhaps he could leverage that for some information.

“I believe I told you already, his own safety-” Monmouth started, his voice more on edge than before.

“I didn’t want to work for him anymore!” cried the boy in the cage. He sounded older than he looked, perhaps in his early teens. “He makes kids like us fight for him! He makes us hurt people he doesn’t like! Regular people!” The boy yelled with surprising strength.

He must have been building up the courage to say that since Monmouth entered the room, Dante thought. Despite his burst of courage, the boy’s eyes were full of fear and his legs were quivering.

Monmouth closed his eyes and took a deep breath before walking over to the boy’s cell. With every step that Monmouth took, the boy retreated further into the cell, clutching something close to his chest.

“Imir,” Monmouth called.

“Yes, milord?” Imir stood at attention at his master’s beckoning.

“I think Henry doesn’t need food tonight. He seems to have more than enough strength and we wouldn’t want to overfeed him.”

“Yes, milord.” Imir gave a quick bow.

“Make certain that he doesn’t die.”

“Of course, milord,” said Imir, with a vindictive glint in his eye.

That was two days ago.

Dante had refused Monmouth’s offer to join him in his war against the Paladins. Monmouth told Dante to think it over in his cell and left. Monmouth hadn’t returned to the cavern but Imir and Tratosk had remained to watch over Dante and the boy. They hadn’t brought the boy any food since the meeting with Monmouth. They brought Dante plates of scraps from the table. The food had gone stale and the fruit had started to rot.

Dante got the sense that this was another tactic to convince him to give in. It wasn’t going to work. Dante had slept in his fair share of alleyways and dumpsters. The garbage produced by fast food restaurants often decomposed into an unrecognizable sludge before it was taken away. A few rotten apples and decomposing chickens didn’t scare Dante. The boy wasn’t doing as well. All of the courage that he showed when he screamed at Monmouth had evaporated, replaced by a paranoid tension. He jumped at even the quietest noises and whimpered when the wind howling into the cavern grew too loud.

Dante looked at the boy wasting away and his stomach twisted into knots. There was a nagging itch in the back of Dante’s mind; the boy was dying, or close to death anyway. Dante tried to give the boy some of his food when they were alone, but the boy never responded to Dante’s actions directly. The food was always gone by the morning so he must have been eating it.

It was probably due to these small acts of kindness that prompted the boy to eventually speak up. He stirred Dante from his somber thoughts with a violent coughing fit. Dante jumped up at the sound and rushed to the bars shared between his cell and the boy's. The boy convulsed on the ground and spat up an enormous glob of phlegm onto the floor. Dante stood mute, panicking. He couldn't call for their captors. They were more likely to spit on the boy than help him. Dante felt the itch in the back of his mind turn into a sharp whine. Barely audible whispers of concern and sympathy bounced through his head. The whine droned under his thoughts, impotent. This time he could feel the energy building in his hands and his joints, but it felt stuck. There was nowhere for it to go.

As the boy kept coughing, a dull black vapor evaporated from the spittle and collected over his head. The storm cloud of gas lethargically swirled around the boy's head like a fog descending into a valley. The cloud stood still for a moment before condensing on the boy's skin and slowly seeping into his body. During this process, the boy's coughing relaxed and softened until it was shallow and light. He let out a few dry hacking coughs before falling back against the wall of his cell. His breathing slowed and he covered his face with his hands.

"Are you alright?" Dante asked.

"I think so. I don't feel anything in my chest anymore." The boy rubbed a spot on his chest beneath his collarbone. "Thank you, by the way." said the boy. He lifted his head to look at Dante. His eyes were puffy and red, but happy.

"I don't think I did anything..." Dante said slowly.

"For the food. I don't think I would have made it if it weren't for you."

"You also probably wouldn't have yelled at the creep." Dante pointed out.

"The boy gave a nervous laugh, "Yeah, you're probably right. I didn't want to see someone make the mistake I made."

"You agreed to join him?" Dante asked, "Then why are you in a cage?"

"I got cold feet," the boy said, looking at the floor, "I saw what he needed me for and I couldn't... I couldn't do that." The boy's gaze didn't stop at his feet. He was looking through himself, through the ground, down into the bowels of whatever lay below.

Dante wanted to ask for more details but it didn't feel like the right time. Post violent, magical coughing-fit is not the most appropriate time to pry, he decided. A few moments passed. Neither person felt ready to speak. Dante went and sat on the bench. He looked out at the banquet table covered in spoiled food. He grimaced; more food had just gone to waste than he had eaten in the past five years. It felt like an insult to every person Dante had seen starving in the cold outside of a soup kitchen before they opened. Some kitchens only opened for a few hours a day and fed hundreds of people the only meal they would eat all day and it still wasn't enough. People slipped through the cracks. Men would wallow so deeply in their self pity that going out didn't seem like an option, women would be scared to show up, and some children wouldn't even know where to go, and . The idea that someone so evidently wealthy as Monmouth would take a fortune and throw it away to torture two kids seemed so ludicrously cruel that Dante could barely process it. Dante looked at the boy breathing ragged breaths on the floor next to him. He knew what it was like to feel powerless and alone. Dante couldn't let him slip through the cracks too.

"My name is Dante. What's yours?" he said, more confidently than he felt.

"Henry."

"Okay, Henry. You don't have to tell me anything you don't want. But I want you to know that I'm here to help you, and we're going to get out of this, okay?"

"...Okay." He looked thankful, if a little skeptical. Dante could understand that; he didn't know how they were going to get out of their situation either.

"So how long have you been here?"

"I don't really know. I think around two months, but it felt like a year." Henry said solemnly. That explains why he looks so weak, he hasn't seen the sun or had fresh air for two months, Dante thought to himself.

"You look good considering you've been in a hole for two months," Dante lied.

The boy gave a wan chuckle and looked up at Dante. "I don't think I've ever heard someone say I look 'good' before, even before..." Henry trailed off.

"Before what?"

"I... Before I ran away from home." Henry said, his shoulders hunched forward. Dante didn't respond, he could feel that Henry was working up the strength to speak. Henry took a few moments before taking a deep breath and starting to speak.

"I was living with my step-mom and my dad. My mom died of an overdose when I was six years old. Meth, I think. A few years later my dad married the girl he used to pay to watch me when he'd get high. She was always around and I guess he could be charming sometimes, I don't know why. They got along fine for the first few years. She was always really good to me. She would go out her way to make sure I never saw dad high or drunk. She would send me to her friend's place whenever she and my dad argued, I think she realized that he wasn't the most stable person and that I was in danger. A couple years later, I was turning fourteen and she wanted to get me a present for becoming a teenager. She had been fourteen when she met me, I think. We were always poor and she couldn't afford to get me anything fancy so," Henry let out a sad little

laugh, “Ya know what she did? She paid a crackhead in our building 25\$ to catch a pigeon. She took a raccoon trap from behind our building and took out the spring to make a birdcage and she gave me a bird for my birthday. ‘It’ll teach you to take care of others and it’ll be like your little friend, Henry,’ she said.”

Henry turned to his side and reached for his filthy mattress. From beneath the rough wool blanket he produced a very battered, very grey, and very still pigeon. He held it gingerly in his hands, like it was made of twigs and would crumble if handled incorrectly. Dante wasn’t sure why Henry kept a dead pigeon in his bed, but he was more than slightly concerned.

Henry continued, “I named him Feathers. It’s dumb, but I didn’t know what else to call him. When my dad got home that night he saw the cage and the bird and how happy I was and didn’t say anything about it. He and my step-mom argued a lot more after that. He didn’t think that she should have wasted money to bring a stupid smelly animal into the house. She said that we already had one stupid smelly animal, what difference did another one make, and he wasn’t to happy about that. He stomped out and went to go get drunk. We didn’t see him the day after that. My step-mom got nervous and started calling his dealers, asking if they had seen him. No one had. We thought maybe he had gone to get high somewhere and lost his keys so he was too embarrassed to come back or that he had overdosed under a bridge or something. I wish that had been it.”

“He came back in the middle of the night the next week. He looked like he had been high since he left. He was rambling about how my step-mom had come into his life, stolen his money, stolen his son, stolen his drugs. He clearly wasn’t thinking straight. My step-mom tried to tell him to calm down but that only got him more angry. She told me to hide in the bedroom. I wanted to take Feathers with me, but he was in his cage and I couldn’t get to him past my dad. I

locked the door and sat in the closet trying to drown out the noise coming from the living room. The whole time all I could think of how I wish my dad would just go away and stay gone. Eventually, my dad left to go get drunk again and my step-mom knocked on the the door to the bedroom and I came out. The entire left side of her face was purple and swollen and she was crying and saying she was sorry. I didn't get it until I went to the freezer to get her some ice and I saw Feathers' birdcage. It looked like it had been hit by a car. The sides were completely bent inwards and the entire shape was wrong. But raccoon cages are really tough, so none of the wire was broken. Instead of the cage breaking open, maybe letting Feathers escape and fly away, he had been rattled around and smacked against the sides of the cage. The kitchen table had cracked and split in half where my dad slammed the cage into it. There was blood on the cage, and on the floor, and on the table, and there were feathers everywhere. I took Feathers out of the cage and wrapped him up in gauze and put him in a shoebox." Henry had started shedding tears at some point. The tears were dripping off of his chin but he made no move to wipe them off.

"You don't have to keep going, if you don't want to." Dante said. He didn't want to make Henry feel so sad just after meeting him.

"No it's okay. It feels good to finally talk about it. I haven't told anyone about this, except Monmouth." Henry took a deep, shaky breath and kept going, "My stepmom didn't know what to do. She was afraid that if she told the police that I would be taken away or that my dad would hurt me. I wasn't afraid of that. I knew my dad would hurt me. I was afraid of him killing my step-mom, or hurting her more. When he got back that night I couldn't get the image of him leaving forever, or getting hurt, or getting sick out of my head. I thought about my mom, and how she looked when we found her in our old apartment: mouth open, arms stiff, eyes wide open

staring into nothingness.” Dante recognized the signs Henry was describing; he had seen a few overdoses before, they weren’t pretty.

Henry’s voice dropped lower and his tone shifted from sadness to confusion, “I just kept thinking about that over and over again. I felt like I could hear my mom in my head describing her death report. It was as if she wanted my dad to die as much as I did. I remember that I couldn’t fall asleep and so I went out into the living room where my dad had passed out on the couch. He had a pipe next to him that still had smoke trailing from it and the room smelled like burning plastic. I stood there for a long time. After a while I got this nagging feeling in my head like I was starting to get a headache. At first I thought it was from the smoke but the windows were open and there wasn’t much smoke in the room anymore. Despite the headache I could still picture my mom and the signs of her overdose perfectly. That’s when my chest started to hurt and I started coughing like I did a minute ago. I was afraid that I would wake him up but I couldn’t stop coughing. Just as my throat started to really hurt, I noticed that my mucus looked black and that the smoke in the room had turned black too. The smoke started to drift down onto my dad, clinging to him and beading up on his skin. Then he started to shake. Softly at first, but then harder and harder. His eyes opened and he looked right at me with this furious expression. Then his eyes went wide and lost focus. And I’m not sure because it was dark in the room, but I think his pupils did that thing where they get really big. What’s it called?”

“Dilated.” Dante said quietly, not wanting to disrupt Henry’s retelling.

“Yeah, that. So he was shaking all over the place, spitting, and staring into space. It was really scary at first but then I just felt calm. I can’t explain it. It was like I knew exactly what was happening in each part of his body and I knew he was dying but it didn’t feel wrong, it just felt... like, ‘yeah, obviously that’s happening right now.’ He died a little while later. I couldn’t really

tell how much time had passed. Once he stopped moving, I must have passed out on the floor, because I don't remember anything after that. My step-mom woke up the next morning to find me asleep on the floor in front of my dead dad. The funeral was a couple days after that. One of the neighbors must have called Child-Protective-Services, because they came the day after the funeral and told my step-mom that they were going to have to take me away. Apparently, I wasn't safe with the only person who ever loved me. She argued, and yelled, and cried, and eventually the police were called and they told my mother to calm down or she would be arrested. She sat on the couch crying. I was sitting next to her. I was crying too. The shoebox with Feathers' body was on the couch next to me. I had taken to carrying it around with me wherever I went. Feathers hadn't decomposed for some reason and didn't seem to smell. Before the CPS agents took me to the group home, my step-mom told me what to expect from the group home. She had spent a couple years in one when her father went to prison for a robbery. She told me that they were hell. And she was right. I stayed at home for a week before I just took my shoebox and ran. I tried to find my step-mom but I couldn't find my way back to my old apartment. It was only a day or two before Monmouth picked me up. I was tired and weak and I just wanted to go home. He had explanations for what had happened to my dad. He told me he could help me find my step-mom." Henry shuddered and took a moment to catch his breath. Dante nodded silently, predators looked for kids in Henry's position. They're easy to trick and desperate for help. He thought back to his first years of being homeless. There were a lot of close calls.

"What did Monmouth ask you to do?" asked Dante. Henry was hesitant and didn't say anything for several minutes.

Henry looked ready to continue. He closed his eyes and seemed to shake some doubt from his mind before speaking, “He wanted me to use my magic. I told him that I don’t really know how but that just made him angry. He brought a kid into the room. He must have been five or six, really young. Monmouth stabbed him in the back, told me to fix him, and left the room. I was so scared. I guess it worked because before long the kid wasn’t bleeding out on the floor and he was breathing normally. Monmouth was holding the knife when he came back. I think it was glowing but I don’t really know. I just know that he needs people like you and me, Necromancers, I guess.”

“So what did he do once you said you wouldn’t help?” Dante asked. He was leaning forward against the bars.

“He was really angry. He killed the kid. I- I don’t-” Henry broke down and started crying. Dante reached his hands out through the bars. trying to console his new friend.

CHAPTER 7: Dante’s Fire

Dante dreamt of home that night for the first time in many years.

Dante was sweating through his sheets. The air conditioning was on as high as his father would allow, but Dante still couldn’t get cool in his bed. Dante looked around for a water bottle. He picked up a bottle and shook it. Empty. And he was thirsty. His mouth was that special kind of dry where you can taste saliva and your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth.

Every wall in his apartment building had absorbed enough heat during the day to remain heated through the night. The small buzzing box in his window did nothing to mitigate the crushing heat surrounding him on all sides.

“Mom!” He called.

“Can I have a glass of water?” Dante shouted out to the dining room.

His bedtime had passed at least an hour ago so Dante didn't dare walk out to ask. He figured it was safer to yell from his bed than to risk the wrath of his mother. The posters on his wall reflected the ribbon of light showing through the crack under the door.

Dante called out again, "Mom?"

"I heard you sweetie. Just stay in your room alright? I'm getting you some water." his mom replied from the other side of the door. Dante listened as her chair squeaked against the wooden floor and her footfalls took her to the kitchen. There was an inaudible exchange of words between his parents. Dante slowed his breathing to try to listen closer but still couldn't make out what they were saying. His father sounded amused, and a little exhausted.

A few moments passed before Dante's mother leaned the door open. "Here you go, honey. Now try to go to sleep."

"It's too hot, Mom. I can't sleep. Can I come out into the living room for a little bit? The fan works there." Dante asked. It had been a few days since he had last tried to stay up this late past his bedtime, but he was hopeful that he would get another late night up with his parents. Last time his dad had been watching a movie about cowboys and had let Dante stay up to watch with him. Dante's father had fallen asleep before the movie was over but Dante watched until the end. "No, Dante. It's too late and you need to get some sleep. We're going to Mam's tomorrow." Mam was Dante's grandmother. She always smelled of sage and stews, smells that reminded Dante of when he was a small child. Before Dante started school, Mam used to watch him every day while his parents were at work. She would tell stories about gods and devils, about the spirit world. In Mam's world every plant and animal had a story and she knew every story. What Dante remembered most were the songs. Mam would sing songs for him to calm him down when he got upset, to encourage him to try new things, and to help him learn about the world. When

Dante was old enough, his mother told him that he would have to learn these songs because they were important to his family.

Miffed, Dante rolled over away from the door. His mother put the glass of water on his bedside table and sat down on the bed.

“Dante, how have you been feeling lately?”

“Fine.” He said, unsure of where this question was going. “Normal, I guess.”

“That’s good. Have you been practicing your songs?” Her voice was calm.

“Yeah. Except ‘Bones in the River,’” Dante admitted. He turned around and looked at his mother. He couldn’t see her pursed lips, her gently furrowed brow, or the look of concern in her eyes, but he could feel it. She was about to tell him the importance of his heritage. That strength comes from his blood. That he needs to appreciate his roots and that tomorrow he had better start practicing ‘Bones in the River’ or he was going to get it.

“That’s alright, Dante. ‘Bones’ is a hard one to learn. Mama will help you with it tomorrow, okay?” Dante’s mother said quietly. She stroked his short, curly, black hair before standing up and walking towards the door. “Oh, and Dante?”

“Yes, Mom?” Now it would come, the tough love. The strict words. The lecture was about history and lineage. He’d heard it before. He didn’t particularly want to hear it again. He loved his family, and enjoyed spending time with Mam and Pop. He enjoyed hearing their stories. But there was something about the way he shuddered every time he sang the first few words of “Bones in the River” that gave him pause.

“I love you.” Dante’s mom said softly.

“I love you too, Mom. G’nite.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart.” She opened the door and stepped out of Dante’s room. Dante heard her say a few things to his father, just mumbling again, nothing distinct. He reached for the glass of water and took a sip, staring at his wall in the dark room. He thought about Mam and her songs and her stories before drifting off to sleep. Parched trees and wide golden savannas rolled through his dreams.

Dante woke up to a loud crack. Something must have fallen in the dining room. The light flickered beneath the doorway more wildly than before. Dante looked down at the bottom of his door. “Maybe one of the lights went out? And Mom lit a candle?” He thought. It had happened before. Power outages in large housing complexes like the one he lived in were common during heatwaves

A lot of candles.

The heat was unbearable.

CHAPTER 8: The Good, The Bad, and the Lifeless

A month passed. Monmouth returned once a week to torture Henry. He would take Henry out of his cell and the two wouldn’t return for several hours. When Henry finally came back, he was alone. He’d walk mindlessly to the cell and lock himself in without a word. When Dante asked him about it he refused to give up any details and tried to change the subject. Dante worried. What could Monmouth have done to Henry that would have made him walk back to his cell alone? Why was Monmouth so confident? Eventually Dante stopped asking Henry about it. He didn’t want to pry.

Dante and Henry were sleeping when the attack came. Dante woke up to sounds of commotion coming from behind one of the doors to the cavern. Imir’s muffled yells could be heard behind calling for his brother to run before the two burst through the door and barricaded it with chairs.

He had gotten used to the whispers in his head growing louder whenever he was in danger or when Imir or Tratosk came to abuse them. Now the whispers were excited, vengeful. Henry woke up and Dante indicated for him to stay down. Henry put Feathers' body in its box and curled into a ball in the corner of his cell.

Dante was tempted to join him but he couldn't sit down; his limbs were brimming with energy. Dante could feel the presence of several people behind the door. It was as if he saw a ghost of a flame flickering through the walls. The flames were bright. There were three figures; one enormous, one slender, and one average by comparison. The large and slim figures contained bright flames that were connected to the center figure's inferno blazing in his chest. When he looked at Tratosk and Imir, and even at Henry, their flames were weak, as if a light breeze could extinguish them. Looking closer at Tratosk, Dante noticed that his injured hand hung limp at his side while his other hand clutched his side where his cloak was soaked red. Imir was in a similar condition; limping and bleeding from a deep cut on his forehead.

When Monmouth wounded Tratosk, he must have assumed that it wouldn't have any negative effect. After all, he was the aggressor, seeking to build up an arsenal capable of fighting the Paladins. He never assumed that someone would attack him.

"What is going on?!" Tratosk snapped at his brother, "How did they get in?" His breathing was fast and ragged.

"They aren't triggering any of the runes. Either they disarmed them or they avoided them somehow." Imir whined in between cries over his wounds.

The door shook from a mighty blow. The two minions looked up, their eyes wide with fear.

"Grab the boy." Tratosk growled to his brother.

"But Monmouth hasn't had the chance to-" Imir complained.

Tratosk cut him off, “We don’t have time! We can’t let the boy tell anyone what Monmouth plans to do!” Imir blanched and hurried towards Henry’s cell, fumbling for his keys. As the gangly minion shook the key in the lock of Henry’s cell the door shook again. Dust and rubble fell from the ceiling of the cavern. Cracks spread around the door into the surrounding rock. Tratosk ran to Imir as the latter flung open the door to Henry’s cell and dragged the terrified boy from his cot. Tratosk pulled a glowing purple knife from an ancient-looking sheath in his waistband.

A wave of cold spread through Dante’s body at the sight of the knife. The whispers in his skull were panicked and rushed chatter. The knife was dripping with a malevolent violet energy that congealed and beaded up as if it were liquid. The flames burning in the centers of the men shied away from the cold vacuum enveloping the knife. Dante looked on in fear as Tratosk lifted the knife to the back of Henry’s throat. Henry looked up at Dante, tears pooling in the corners of his eyes, his withering flame flickered.

Why can’t I move?! I need to help him... but I don’t know how! Dante thought, his knuckles whitened as he gripped the bars of his cell. Where is that damned Necromancy when I need it?! What kind of useless power is this?!

As Dante struggled against his cell, the door caved in and a wave of dust blasted through the room. Dante spun away from the door to shield his eyes from the dust. Imir and Tratosk were knocked down from the force of the blast. The glowing knife clattered to the floor with a hiss. As the dust cleared, three silhouettes entered the room. The largest silhouette took up most of the space that used to be occupied by a large set of double doors. The hulking mass climbed over the table and picked Tratosk and Imir up in its two colossal hands. The man was large but Imir’s feet still dragged along the floor when the silhouette carried the two henchmen to one side of the cavern and deposited them unceremoniously on the floor in a heap.

One of the other silhouettes, this one slim and lanky with feminine features, loped over to Dante's cell and began fiddling with the lock. It was difficult to make out the woman's features through the dust. She didn't seem to have any hair. When she got closer Dante was shocked to find that she had no facial features. Where her eyes should have been there were shallow divots with crude drawings of eyes in them. In place of a mouth and nose, she had two small horizontal bumps beneath another, larger vertical bump. Between the two horizontal bumps there was a smile drawn onto her face. Dante reeled back but the woman showed no reaction; she just kept handling the lock until Dante heard a loud crack and she dropped the pieces of the now demolished lock onto the ground. The third silhouette had knelt next to Henry's fallen body and hadn't moved since entering the room.

The slim, faceless woman opened Dante's cell door and walked to the side of her kneeling ally. The large man, who Dante could see also had no face and had similarly childish features drawn on in their stead, stood facing the fallen bodies of Tratosk and Imir. Both the large man and the slender woman had no clothes on top of their smooth, beige skin. They looked like large mannequins made out of clay but moved with an almost liquid grace.

Dante took a few tentative steps out of his cell, unsure of how the mysterious invaders would react. Now that the dust had settled, Dante could see that the man kneeling next to Henry was significantly more normal than his companions. The man's muscles bulged beneath an old-fashioned, silvery blue, high-collared, military coat. Dust covered his steel-grey hair. He had, Dante noticed with relief, a face adorned with the usual trimmings; eyes, mouth, nose, and hair in the form of a magnificent mustache that stretched from one cheekbone to the other. His eyes, extant as they were, were closed and twitching as the man whispered rapid words under his breath.

“You’re a Necromancer.” Dante exclaimed, matter-of-factly, as shocked by the certainty in his voice as by the fact he was able to speak at all. The man kept chanting in a low whisper until he stood with a satisfied breath. He wiped some dust off of his shoulder and straightened his collar.

“And you, young man, are being quite presumptuous.” His voice was deep and scratchy and he spoke with an accent Dante didn’t recognize. The man appraised Dante with a long glare. The whispers in Dante’s head had calmed significantly and bubbled under the man’s gaze.

Excitement played across Dante’s mind, He might help us get out of here, he thought. Henry stirred and surveyed his surroundings.

“You are, however, correct,” the man said, his tone lightening at the sight of Henry’s recovery,

“My name is Johann of Ess and I am a friend. Or, at least, I’m not your enemy. Anyone Monmouth chooses to lock up must be a decent sort. You’re lucky I came when I did. Those men were rather unfriendly, weren’t they?” Dante looked at the crumpled forms of Tratosk and Imir on the far side of the cavern. The two were in rough shape. Tratosk’s arm’s looked completely limp and his face was twisted in a rictus of pain. Imir’s legs stuck out at odd angles, his head lolled about around his neck. The flames burning in their chests had tapered down to barely the size of a lit match. They were dying. Dante pulled his eyes away from his fading torturers.

“Are you here to rescue us?” Dante asked.

“...In a way, yes. I’m here to rescue all of us.” Johann said. While he was talking, Henry picked up the glowing knife from the floor and pocketed it. The knife’s strange glow and dripping energy diminished in Henry’s pocket but Dante could still see the cold aura it projected, siphoning heat from the flame at Henry’s core. Johann gave Henry an odd look.

“A souvenir.” Henry explained. Johann’s eyes narrowed but he said nothing. Henry avoided his suspicious stare by returning to his cell to retrieve Feathers. Henry clutched the battered shoebox to his chest.

Dante had no possessions. His backpack had never been returned to him. He didn’t even know who took it, or where he might have lost it. It doesn't matter anymore, he supposed, that stuff can be replaced. Maybe this guy will help. He stood in front of the well-dressed Johann in his raggedy clothes and ripped jacket. Dante kept his eyes glued to the floor. His hands were shaking and he felt a damp chill run down his back. He hadn't realized how much he had been sweating. The whole scene happened so fast. One second Henry was an inch from death, and the next he was safe. It felt surreal, but the surreal seemed to happen more often these days.

“I know you two have no reason to trust me, but if you come with me I will make sure you have a roof over your heads, food in your stomachs, and clothes to wear.” There was a subtle pained waver in Johann’s voice. Dante looked up and saw that Johann had extended his hand out and was looking at Dante with sympathy, not judgement. What do I have to lose? Dante thought. He took Johann’s hand. Henry tried to run over to them to take Johann’s hand as well, but he stumbled and collapsed on the floor from exhaustion.

“Ox!” Johann called to the enormous man guarding the far wall, “Carry the boy. He is too weak to walk out on his own.” The lumbering creature loped over to Henry, who was struggling to get up, and picked him up with one hand. Ox cradled Henry in his arms and stood by Johann, awaiting further instructions. The thin stream of flame connecting Ox and Johann get brighter as Ox got closer.

“Quickly now, let us depart. Monmouth will surely have noticed our little intrusion, and I would very much like to be gone by the time he gets here.” The man twirled around towards the

demolished entrance and marched out. “Monkey!” he called, “We’re leaving. Seal the door behind us. I don’t want these two getting any ideas.” He gave Imir and Tratosk one final disdainful look before marching through the open doorway. Dante followed quickly behind.

Reflection

My time at Yeshiva University has been filled with courses on, among other things, the development of literary trends, the finer points of creative writing, and the insertion of meaning into text. The texts I found most meaningful in those courses often addressed changes in the world at the time of their writing. Texts such as *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, by Jesmyn Ward, *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, and “*Master Harold*” ...and the Boys, by Athol Fugard, express the authors’ thoughts on the changing world around them through storytelling. My years at YU also increased my awareness of societal ills as well my willingness to fight them. As I took creative writing courses, I developed the tools to express my beliefs in ways similar to those authors I admired. While I had never before considered social activism as a part of my future, I had always been sensitive to the suffering of others. My writing became an outlet for my beliefs. Expressing my support for those victimized by systemic denial of opportunity became especially important to me. I found that I enjoyed writing about individuals struggling against the weight of their personal circumstances, which were in turn representative of greater forces at play in the individual’s life. My own personal reading tastes influenced my style as well. I have always been fond of epic fantasy, and as I read more in college, themes of advocacy and societal change became easier to spot. Brandon Sanderson’s *Rhythm of War* contains some of the most poignant messages about mental health that I have ever read. His magical flying knights, called Radiants,

struggle with and overcome Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, and addiction exacerbated by the epic conflict present in the story. Writing fiction, and then fantasy, became a favored tool of mine. Supernatural story elements came more naturally to me when I needed to draw comparisons between smaller, personal struggles and larger, societal ones. Ward, Adeyemi, and Fugard use stories to grant meaning to personal experiences. Growing up Black in a White-dominated society can be a difficult journey. These authors utilized storytelling to channel their experiences and hardships into meaningful guidance for later generations. By reading their work, I have in turn looked to my own experiences and personal truths as a source for creative inspiration and meaning in my writing. My thesis takes the lessons I've learned about religious intolerance, and molds those lessons into characters and plot.

My thesis, which is part of a larger book project I'm working on, tackles some struggles and experiences that I find very personally meaningful. I started writing *Elegy For The Living* as Black Lives Matter protests erupted throughout the United States in the wake of the death of George Floyd. The cultural zeitgeist was one of advocacy, outrage, and a strong desire for justice. My story took shape as the news covered injustices occurring throughout the country, and as the protests turned into a decisive point of conflict for the American people. The events inspired me to emphasize justice as one of the story's themes. I felt for the protesters holding signs demanding justice from a system that had oppressed them for far too long. I also looked at the police officers who felt attacked simply because they were part of the institution that had perpetrated the outrage. The "thin blue line" concept played into an image of a police force that felt alienated from the people they were meant to serve. I was uncomfortable incorporating many specific elements of the real-world conflict for fear of misrepresenting the issues. My thesis does not try to provide a model solution to the specific real-world conflict. Such a statement would

overstep the goals I had set for the project. That said, I incorporated the general emotional core of the conflict into *Elegy For The Living* so that the message might suggest a resolution to all similar conflicts. More specifically, I wanted to grant an ethos derived from real-world conflict to *Elegy For The Living*'s message of reaching out to one's enemies. My hope is that reading *Elegy For The Living* might inspire someone to achieve reconciliation through greater interpersonal understanding.

To support intercultural conflict as a literary device I utilize two modern depictions of medieval, and even ancient legendary figures. The term "necromancer" traces its origin to the *Odyssey* when Odysseus delves into the realm of the dead. There are even references to the idea of shamans who interact with the souls of the dead in the Bible: "Or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you" (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). Here we can see that the act of necromancy is reviled by the god of Abrahamic religion. That hatred has carried on to the modern day; necromancers are often depicted as villains or antagonists throughout the ages as practitioners of demonic arts and other forbidden rituals. Paladins, by contrast, are fictional knights of legend in Charlamagne's court, similar in ideology to the Knights of The Round Table of Arthurian Legend. The Paladins have been popularized by their presence in the roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons*, in which they are depicted as knights-errant who heal and protect the innocent in the name of their god. Necromancers are present as well in *Dungeons & Dragons*, and in keeping with the trend of the past 1,700 years they are evil wizards bent on resurrecting the dead for their own nefarious goals. I expanded these two tropes into two separate cultures for my story.

A summary of my story: Many years ago, Paladins defeated a unified Necromancer collective and banned the practice of Necromancy, effectively destroying an ancient culture. Dante Ashewood grew up as a Necromancer in a Paladin's world. With little education and few opportunities, Dante's future looks grim. When he experiences a terrifying run-in with the Paladin law keepers, his life is suddenly filled with a sense of purpose.

Angela, new to the Paladin peacekeeping force, has a very difficult week after her near-deadly encounter with a young Necromancer man. Her paladin abilities have been fading ever since. The encounter forces her to question her beliefs, and the beliefs of her zealous mentor. The answers lead her down a path darker than any Paladin has gone down before, but one that may lead towards the light.

It would be helpful here to point out that my submission for this thesis is significantly shorter than the entire manuscript for *Elegy For The Living* and many of the book's themes and narrative beats should be appreciated with that context. The character Angela shows up briefly in my submission as an ancillary character who does little more than initiate a story beat. In the full manuscript, Angela is the second protagonist. She acts as Dante's foil, and provides another perspective on the conflict. Without Angela's counterbalancing perspective, the Paladins come off as simply horrible dictators rather than a group with complex religious beliefs that attempt to justify, if somewhat poorly, their actions as a collective. I wrote several of the pieces of the first part of this manuscript early on in the book's lifespan. As I wrote, many of the ideas in this book developed and grew beyond their initial iterations. I improved as an author and as a storyteller. The early parts of this book suffer from the flaws of a more inexperienced author. I have attempted to rectify those flaws as best as I can, but I have more revisions that I still want to implement.

These two tropes are often seen as opposing ends of a dichotomy in popular culture, with the devout, upright paladins on one end of the spectrum, and the profane, wicked necromancers on the other. The issue with this dichotomy is that it falls into a pattern of moral determinism. The paladins are *always* good, and the necromancers are *always* evil because, by popular definition; their respective practices demand devotion to either altruistic or selfish causes, respectively. This common interpretation ascribes moralistic values to certain practices in a way much akin to homophobia, islamaphobia, anti-semitism, and other forms of discrimination. Beliefs designed to alienate others often lean on such blanket associations to justify horrible atrocities. I wished to dissect the notion that “Necromancers are evil and Paladins are good” to make a point about the flaws in our preconceived notions about those that are different from ourselves.

On that note, I looked to literature about cultural divides for inspiration. Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, for example, explores the racial tension between African American and Caucasian families in the modern American south. The book investigates inter-cultural social dynamics through racial tension. In *Elegy For The Living*, I explore my own ideas on the matter of inter-cultural dynamics through a similar clash between the two cultures I adapt for my story, the Paladins and the Necromancers. The two cultures also borrow from modern real-world cultures somewhat. I based my version of the Necromancers’ beliefs at least partly on Mexican folk culture and the pseudo-saint *Santa’ Muerte* (Saint Death). The personification of death as a benevolent entity, and the acceptance of death as a part of life to be celebrated are less mainstream in American religious culture, whereas they are commonplace beliefs in Mexico. I attribute the reasons for this disparity to the overwhelming influence Protestant Christianity has had on American creed and culture. For that reason, the Paladins are *loosely* inspired by

Protestant Christians in their attitudes and organizational hierarchy, with some very notable differences.

Furthermore, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* utilizes supernatural elements to depict the spiritual connection between mankind, nature, and the dead. In *Elegy For The Living*, I place similar emphasis on the cultural differences between two peoples through their different manifestations of supernatural talents. I found it helpful to organize my thoughts into “research papers” on the topic when writing notes for the logic of my world. I considered including some of those “research papers” as pieces of world-building external to the plot, but I decided against it. Instead, I attempted to teach the reader about my world’s history and rules through displays of magic within the story. The length requirement of thesis submissions limited my opportunities to flesh out details however, leading to many of my favorite pieces of worldbuilding being left out.

One example of this is that the magic powers of my characters are perhaps less relevant to their character traits than I would like. In further revisions I would like to establish a deeper symbolic connection between characters’ stories and personalities, and their unique abilities. I thought of the magical powers as an opportunity to show the reader character development or foreshadowing in moments of action. Ideally when Dante uses his powers for the first time they should tell the reader that his powers serve as physical manifestations of his feelings. A metaphor made real if you will. Again, I don’t think I did a great job with Dante in this area.

The two characters that I think really have meaning behind their powers are Henry and Hans. Henry’s ability to replicate the effects of drugs ravaging one’s body relates to his backstory and history. The power manifests as an expression of his trauma. Using Henry as a guide in future drafts, I would like to connect Dante’s powers to his family history and Angela’s to her belief. Dante’s control of his powers will improve with his acceptance of his cultural identity as

he comes to appreciate his heritage. Angela's powers will return as she regains her faith in herself and her self-confidence. Hans's powers are slightly different and play on the concept of a "zealot" as one who derives strength from their faith. The absolute faith Hans places in his god and his self-perception as an avenging angel grant him superior strength and the ability to light his sword ablaze with holy fire. He is certain of his place in the world and so his powers never waver.

I implemented the Necromancer ability to communicate with the dead with the express purpose of giving them a more community-focused identity. In the world of my story, Necromancers speak with the dead because they see the dead as simply an extension of their family, leading to large clans with members both living and dead. The community-focused Necromancers contrast with the individuality-obsessed Paladins. I wished to explore the idea that the Paladins would adhere to an inherently paradoxical belief: they are each a single mortal piece of a perfect deity. They would try to emulate their god by striving to be perfect beings themselves. The resultant contradiction is an entire society conforming to the same expectations and patterns of behavior, hence forming a uniform collective. Therefore, I wanted the Paladin powers to manifest in a more subtle, less spectacular manner to further distance them from the Necromancers. The Paladins were all meant to have the same power as Hans, with faith translating into physical prowess, so as to enforce the idea that they all want to be the same. However, I don't think their powers show up enough in the book to communicate this idea sufficiently. That said, I believe the actual conflict between the two cultures and faiths, Necromancers and Paladins, does come through in the book.

The theme of interfaith communication and tolerance comes from my experiences and thoughts as an Orthodox Jew in a pluralistic world. I am familiar with the conflicts between

ethno-religious groups. Oftentimes, superficial differences are argued under the guise of “fundamental beliefs,” when, in reality, the two groups have similar ideals. Growing up in an insular society often predisposes individuals to xenophobia. *Elegy For The Living* explores the breakdown of that xenophobia and the process of opening up lines of communication. I made sure that each culture in the book is given the time of day. I wanted to ensure that the reader knows that neither group in the two-sided conflict of the book is wrong solely because of their religious beliefs. Such an understanding is the foundation for interfaith tolerance. Many of my ideas on this topic were influenced by Tomi Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone* (Henry Holt & Co., 2018), winner of the William C. Morris Debut YA Award, and S. A. Chakraborty’s *City of Brass* (HarperCollins, 2017), a finalist for the World Fantasy Award: Best Novel award. These two Young Adult books each present complex depictions of oppression, interfaith conflict, and racism -- all topics I wanted to explore in *Elegy For The Living* -- within vibrant fantasy worlds.

With these two examples in mind, I’m part of a literary tradition of YA novels that attempts to tackle the same hot-button topics as great authors of literary merit. The YA authors of today aren’t as concerned with Voldemort as much as they are with Slytherin. “How do we reconcile with the groups we have been taught to hate?” is a question college students, teenagers, and children must answer as well. Our world is one where political, religious, and ideological conflict are facts of life, inextricably linked to one another. The Fantasy novels of this generation present representations of the many different cultures we face daily as both friends and foes. The lines between “Hero” and “Villain” are blurred. There are no simple answers. The geo-political reality in a world plagued by incessant ideological conflict has spawned a cohort of authors writing stories of crossing cultural boundaries and escaping from the oppression of others’ misconceptions. Modern authors fight the same battles against oppression as Fugard and Orwell.

Ignorance hasn't gone away, but the forces that fight against ignorance have grown larger and more diverse. The genres of Fantasy and Speculative Fiction lend themselves to translating messages of escaping oppression into more digestible forms. Allegories for slavery, racism, and intolerance pervade fantasy stories like *Harry Potter* as an attempt to tackle difficult issues in a way more easily absorbed without the strains of real-world constraints.

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