



## ***The Price***

An excerpt.

Written by Cúán Isamu Schofield

Malachi was tired, more tired than usual. His thighs burned from the saddle, his lips dry from the wind. Malachi was decidedly unhappy with his current circumstances. His journey up the King's Road had been plagued with bad weather, poor company, and the inescapable reek of horse shit.

Those, however, were the consequences Malachi faced, trotting slowly up from Newhaven in the rainy season. This wasn't helped by his inability to find a sensible map, which left Malachi little choice but to follow face first into the wrong end of a wagon train. Usually, he would have avoided such a terrible fate, striking off alone on his steed, had he any clue which direction he was supposed to be heading in.

That particular predicament is what led Malachi to be stuck behind a churlish conglomerate of heavily accented northerners, two days from his last respite—a decidedly shocking Newhaven brothel that had left his purse light and his back itchy.

The lead man had spent most of the day screaming insults at his wife, something Malachi almost respected; sometimes he wished he had a wife or really anyone unimportant to shriek at. It seemed relaxing. Though as the day had worn, Malachi had grown increasingly impatient as they repeated the same silly things in funny accents. Couldn't they hurry up and kill each other? It would certainly have helped the pulsing ache behind his eyes, his head.

Malachi's good mood had vanished rather quickly upon his awakening this morning. The optimism that had been taken upon him by circumstance flushed from his brain. It took a certain toll on a man, piddling up a muddy "road," which, as with anything at this time of the year, had been rendered impassable by the end-of-season downpour.

The sun did not rise this time of year; the clouds merely changed shape briefly. It made Malachi feel quite bad for the people born in this horrid place; no wonder they were all thick as rocks. He wondered

if they were more closely related to fish than men, as they seemed totally unbothered by the veritable stream that was constantly flowing into his boots.

None of this was helped by the shockingly bad whiskey Malachi had been sipping since dawn. His head pounded with each uncertain plod of his horse. More water than man anyway at this point. He clung to the pristine decanter like a peasant to his flock; it at the very least warmed his head.

Other than the occasional sips he took, Malachi had spent most of the ride, eyes squinting against the torrential rain—a rain which drove near constantly into his eyes, then down his neck, down his back, and usually pooled somewhere down his trousers he preferred not to think about.

Malachi really didn't like the cold; he wasn't built for it. His knees locked, his teeth chattered; it was all very unflattering. He wasn't a particularly vain creature, but even this, his current humiliation, certainly weighed on him.

If there had been any other choice, he would have turned his foul steed about and galloped back to whence he came. Unfortunately, due to extenuating circumstances that was... Difficult.

Upon reflection, Malachi should maybe have thought first before bedding his commander's wife. She hadn't even been a particularly impressive specimen. Not that he was picky in that sort of way; regardless, it seemed almost a grand jest that of every sin he had ever committed, this was the one that had ruined things for him. Not murder, nor plunder, but bedding some hag with a silly name and an oversized mole on her cheek, a mole that had fascinated him for most of their brief encounter. Malachi had found himself strangely taken by the thing, finding it difficult to even meet her eyes in lieu of the massive circular red thing that bobbed with every word and swelled quite viscerally when she smiled. Under normal circumstances, he would

have considered his actions more carefully, but he had been transfixed, bored, and agreeably drunk. Thusly, his career with his latest in a long line of employers had ended.

Being discovered in that shocking frilly bed, had definitely been a low moment. Especially considering the bed was that of a man Malachi had fought for, bled with, and generally respected. Most men would have considered it a serious betrayal. Malachi wasn't most men, frankly it ranked low on his long list of historical misdeeds. Commander Inglebottom was, at the best of times, a transient cunt of a man—something one best regarded from a comfortable distance.

Inglebottom had been someone Malachi had known for what amounted to an eternity for a merc. It wasn't a particularly long-lived profession. Loyalty didn't exactly flow from your comrades when your only common interest was a hefty coin purse. Malachi didn't have many friends left, not that he had started with a particularly large lot in the first place. The smart ones had retired to pleasant, aimless peasantry or working in murky taprooms or tossing bedpans. The idiots like him were either already dead or on their way to it tout suite.

Sometimes Malachi wished he had a more useful set of skills other than cleaving with sword and bashing with shield. Usually at that point of the dream, he awoke from pleasant thoughts of galloping maidens and glorious charges, with the quite visceral realization that he was almost 35 summers, had about half a hand, most of a bollock, and the bedside manner of an ugly wood elf.

Nonetheless, that was who he was. A man with very little to show for, largely incapable of making anything resembling reasonable considerations. If he was honest with himself, Malachi was capable of three things: drinking, smoking, and fighting. Everything else remained a most clever mystery to him.

His destination, Willowdale, was supposed to have been a few days' ride from New Haven. Malachi had even gone so far as to query a local



for directions. It was unfortunate that the man he'd queried had been the only other customer at the New Haven pleasure house. Three tankards of ale and a rather succulent beef stew must have left Malachi an easy mark. As it had become clear, the man who'd offered the information had either been a practical joker or a blithering idiot. Willowdale was not a day's ride on easy roads from New Haven; it was a week on cruel, ball-busting paths that seemed to be clawed into the side of a less than cooperative mountains. Paths that bob and weaved through gut loosening valleys sheer drops and unhappiest part of the Sunless Sea.

Malachi did not agree with water; he was not built for it.

The remnants of civilized society had quickly faded the further Malachi ventured from New Haven. Even the King's Road, the only artery connecting the Wildlands to the south, had become decidedly unkempt. The usually prim stones were replaced quickly by a sucking soup of muck that left any movement painful and slow.

It was too cold and barren in these parts for anyone of any sense, Malachi thought, and as he trotted aimlessly, the only sound the screeching of ungreased wheels, he cursed the gods or really anyone around who could listen. Mile after mile of desolate landscape—rocky grey cliffs covered in yellowed lichen as far as the eye could see. Clouds swirling at the cliff's edge, the wind howling between boulders.

He offered a silent prayer to whatever wagon gods there were... No cracked axles or shattered spokes—anything he could do to hold onto the, albeit slim, hope that this endless ride would at some point end. Then he could be off this bastard horse for good.

Every bit of him wanted to turn around, to shove this whole damned expedition so far up Commander Inglebottom's arse that he would be tasting it for decades. Alas, the commander and his frilly sheets were

leagues away at this point. Malachi was just bitter-bitter about many things, but one thing in particular these days: the peace.

Like a bad smell, it had returned to the kingdom; generals packed up, soldiers became farmers, and much to Malachi's indubitable chagrin, the proliferation of employment had promptly vanished.

The end to the War of Chairs had been abrupt and inconvenient to both Malachi's purse strings and his mood.

Financially, he was ruined. Even though the kingdom rejoiced, it was giving Malachi chills and fevers and bad dreams of cock-sucking leeches.

That's what brought him to this place: god's asshole.

Money.

The small villages that dotted the 100 leagues of coast of the Sharai Peninsula often hired sell swords like him. The winter months left the King's Road mostly impassable to any but the most determined fools. The King's army had little interest in getting their tassels muddy, so the valiant scab suckers left the defending to whichever sword-swinging silver grubber was stupid enough to take the King's Mark.

One of the gods must have been looking down on him, thankfully, as the wagons trundled off the road onto some distant back-country track, leaving Malachi free to finally move faster than a trot. His eyes were weary, and the shooting pains in his back were probably concerning, but Malachi couldn't bring himself to care. The road rounded slightly as the sky began to darken.

Malachi caught the first glimpse of hope in the billowing plumes of smoke that crested the hill. It was probably a town; whether or not it was the one Malachi had been searching for was a question for the morrow.

After a considerable quantity of huffing and puffing from Wreck, his ignoble steed, Malachi reached the zenith of the hill, staring down into the valley below.

Surrounded by rocky hills, Willowdale could be best described as a godless dung heap. The valley itself was surrounded with jagged boulders that stuck heavenward, mossy heaps of earth, and the occasional fenced-off pasture. Dying, yellowed moor grass stretched before him in waves; it reminded Malachi of how piss pooled on shag carpet. It would have been serene if it wasn't so bloody cold.

The only interesting feature of the place was the twisting path down to the valley's mouth and the single rocky beach.

Beyond it, the endless thrashing of the Sunless Sea. The white peaks crashed leagues away from him, but even from where he sat, Malachi could hear the faint booming as the water met rock. It was hard for him to even fathom how one could cross that swirling angry mass of water, but that was a question for another day. It would appear there was no sign of Elvish raiders from where he sat. No work today then; part of him was disappointed.

Willowdale was vulnerable to thieves, roving bands of mercenaries, and anyone with eyes. Describing it as a village was at best generous. Ten wooden buildings clustered around a steepled church, all shoddily constructed, and it was to be his home for the next season.

Life was cruel.

Wreck, his horse, was less than impressed by the whole affair, having taken one look at the state of the road it simply refused to continue forward. Not for the first time, Malachi wondered why he hadn't had the horrible creature butchered when he'd had the chance.

Wreck's refusal to move was typical of the horrible creature. It had little interest in doing any of the things a horse was supposed to do.

Malachi didn't get along with horses. He tried to spend as little time with them as possible. The company of the long-faced nitwits was poor; the smell shocking; the feeding, the brushing—far too much work for such ungrateful shitting machines.

Malachi had bought the wretched creature off an equally unsightly gentleman in Amberlyn for two coppers at first Malachi had wondered at such a good deal. Now he cursed that fuckers family tree.

Malachi stumbled through the boot-sucking mud towards the distant shadow of what looked like a tavern, finding himself eventually at its entrance, covered in mud, a decidedly unhappy horse trailing behind him sullenly. Malachi considered leaving the bastard thing untied, with the distant hope that he would exit the tavern and find someone had liberated him of the burden. But that was a pipe dream and a colossal waste of two coppers.

As it turned out, the Caged Boar Tavern and Lodgings provided both "food" and shelter at the unfortunate cost of having to spend hours in close proximity to the town's inhabitants.

Malachi didn't like talkers. After thirty-five years, he didn't like many things, especially humans—the types who sit and strike up a conversation. There was a special place under his left boot for those who talked plenty but said little of consequence.

The interior of the smoky shithole was certainly preferable to the rain—not by much, especially considering the never-ending racket that seemed to constantly erupting from a table of rusty chainmail-covered men in the corner.

Malachi took a particularly dim view of the type who took these jobs. They were either cowards or cunts—sell swords who sat around on the king's silver, commanding shit-for-brains sharecroppers to do their bidding. Malachi had yet to meet anyone who carried the King's Mark who wasn't a complete moron.

Compared to the places Malachi was used to, the Boar was a despicable den of sorrow. A smattering of sharecroppers, sellswords, and servants regularly scattered themselves about the drafty taproom, drinking away the misery of a crop gone sour. These were the locals—farmers mostly. Each sunken eye a story, every busted nail a saga.

As the local adage went: where the northerlies blow, nothing effing grows. Such a sour-lipped mutter was complained from the stone cliffs of the Sunstone to the whispering banks of the Amberlyn.

The world was madness, even with “peace.” The war would begin again, as it always did. There was a certainty to it: where there is greed, there is men; where there is men, there is war. Malachi just had to survive long enough to see it.

Perhaps it would be his last war. The scars on his body didn’t heal like they used to. His knees didn’t bend like they used to; he wasn’t who he used to be. Malachi was slowly but surely becoming like so many men he used to know old, fat and lazy, men who had lost their edge. Dead men. Perhaps that was his best-case scenario: old age, a small farm, pigs, substandard mead, a gaggle of giggling children. Maybe it would be nice--

An ear-splitting clanging interrupted his thought. The church bells sounding the alarm. Raiders. Chairs screeched on the stone, tankards tumbled to the ground, locals ran for the exit, friends shouting for friends’ family screaming for family.

And for the first time in a long time Malachi felt..

Calm. Free. He was ready to fight. Maybe even ready to die.

*Malachi Kon Dragr Si Nom Di A.*

(I am Malachi - Death my ever companion - I am Ready)

## The Price.

Malachi is a man of few words and fewer morals. The arrival of a sudden peace in the southlands sends him jobless searching for a few coppers and a decent pint. But when he finds himself unexpectedly hired to protect an errant princess, he finds himself diving into a world of politics, murder and general horridness. Will he rise to the occasion and save the kingdom.

The Sharai peninsula

Is a series of Island chains in the **Sunless Sea**.

Home to many species -

-Humans

-Halflings

-The Whitefish

-The Dragr (Tieflings)

-The Elves

-The Frostwhisperers

-Nymphs

-----And a whole cadre of minor species.

Set in the fantasy equivalent of the pre-Napoleonic era.

The world of Sharai is dark, gritty, and grounded. Filled with murder, war, and politics.

The main island of Sunspear is home to the Human Imperium. One of the main powers in the region. They are fractured internally by what they describe as (The Question) should humans work with the other species or subjugate them.

Each species has its own history conflicts and goals.

-The Whitefish are an Elvish cult that raid coastal villages to take slaves for service and trade. The Whitefish are generally believed to be too extreme for even the elves. They sacrifice children to the gods and row around on boats plundering and sacrificing like nobody's business.

-The Halfling kingdom occupies the Lilyhaven range of mountains. Halfling weavers can create beautiful clothes and the best armour in the kingdom. The halflings are great at many things, fighting is not one of them. They pay mercenaries fees to protect their convoys, territories, and kingdoms. They have political issues with the Wood Nymphs who don't appreciate them cutting down all their scared forests.

-The Wood Nymphs of the south are a mostly peaceful species who take their life from the forest around them, they are mostly uninterested in the world around them believing themselves to be a higher species beyond the conflicts of mere mortals. They fight a proxy war between the halflings at the edges of their territory.

-The Dragr are a species believed to be descended from Wyverns or dragons nobody quite knows. They lived in a chain of volcanic islands isolated until an elvish incursion in the year 1080.

Formally a peaceful race of deeply spiritual and religious humanoid lizards. The elvish empire stormed their undefended islands and enslaved or killed most of the Dragr.

The elves trained and brutalized the Dragr people leveraging their families and homes against them to keep them loyal.

This led to the bloodiest war in Sharai's history.

The Elves invaded the human homeland supplementing their limited manpower with Dragr berserkers. Which led Sharai into its darkest times.

The elves were eventually beaten back on the night of a thousand blades.

When Dragr forces betrayed their elvish slavers and fled from the battle of Jayvu Valley.

Since the first Elven war the Plague swept through the lands. This has left most of the kingdoms isolated and focused on internal strife.

All the while the Elves have been preparing to make right the great humiliation.







# He Is Razor

An excerpt

Written By: Cúán Schofield

My world isn't green; it's shades of gunmetal. My home isn't built from wood—it isn't even above ground. It's 35 feet beneath what used to be the West Coast, constructed from riveted steel, recycled aluminum, and carbo-plastics.

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*The result of 7,000 nuclear-tipped ICBMs hitting the mesosphere.*

//

My world is the Shatterdome, dug into the side of what was Mount Washington. Eight hundred thousand TNC grunts, pilots, and fighters living on the edge. On the frontlines, at the tip of the spear. The staging point for our war—the war to end all wars. The launching point for fighters, drones, and missiles against the enemy.

SGT. Morrow tells us that there are still a few cities left: San Diego, Austin, Saskatoon. I haven't seen any of them. I've only known the Dome. Apparently, they aren't really cities anymore. They're fortresses—bunkers where we develop the weapons we'll use to win.

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*Bound by Duty, Driven by Strength: A coalition of the willing.*

—General Artur H. MacNeil

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Scholars and scientists once believed that World War III would be our end. But here we are, bathed in nuclear hellfire, unbothered.

Cockroaches, rats, tardigrades—they all have nothing on us. You try killing one cockroach; you step on it. Trying to get rats out of a Hab? Poison. Try eliminating ten billion humans from Earth. Nuke us? We just move underground. Kill all the arable land? We grow it hydroponically. Poison the wells? We'll drink our own piss.

//

No more grass, no blue skies, no friendly dogs, no farmhouses.

I cling to my fragile grasp on reality, anchored only by the sparing moments of peace caught between the last moment my eyes close at night and the first moment they open in the morning.

I dream of a better world.

//

I lay there for what felt like hours. Eyes fixed on the ceiling, too tired to get up, too awake to sleep. I was waiting. Waiting for him.

Sleep claimed me.

//

It was strange seeing them so close. I watched little blue-feathered creatures flitting between bushels of hay. I stood in a house—not my home: real wood, windows, banisters. A dusty kitchen with white-painted cupboards, an old-fashioned basin. The frost box was vintage, rounded at the edges, not built-in. To my left, a sparse living room. It was mostly bare of furniture, but there was so much exposed wood. Flammable. Dangerous. Wasteful.

//

It was a recurring dream. Not the fun kind; Med section had some elaborate name and diagnosis for it. I was used to them. Once they scared me, but now I understood them for what they were—my addled mind's strange way of coping. Coping with the madness, the uncertainty of my reality.

Every night my father and mother suited up for war. They put on armor, spun up turbines, and left to fight, to kill, to save our future. Sometimes it was for missions, sometimes for training or maintenance. Yet I remained—powerless, alone.

When I was young, I used to sit in front of the door, counting the seconds, hoping, praying that it would open again.

The only place I wasn't paralyzed by fear was in those heavy-eyed moments, when the world turned soft, and I glimpsed the other side.

It wasn't real, I knew it. But that didn't stop me from wanting to believe.

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*“Duty. Loyalty. Victory. Coalition Strong”*

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I don't think SGT. Morrow knew what to do with me. There aren't many dreamers anymore—people who scrawl drawings on the backs of their MedTac workbooks. I wasn't big, I wasn't strong, I wasn't brave, and I wasn't even smart. SGT. Morrow didn't know where I belonged. The tests didn't know where I belonged. I didn't know where I belonged.

//

I lived in a cycle. The gong of third shift blared through the Dome's PA. It was my signal, my notice that the emitters had shifted to the day cycle.

Four hours of mandatory service education, two hours of apprentice work, two hours of PT, one hour for chow. That was all I had to look forward to.

I gave up on sleep, rolling out of my allocated space—a tiny curtained-off section of our assigned quarters. It was sparse: half a folding cot, a one-by-one cabinet for personal items, and a mirror. All standard-issue gear, built to last long past my first, and probably last, deployments. That was the way in the Shatterdome.

//

Father flew at dawn, mother at noon. The unit was empty. I stared at the ceiling, willing it to reassure me. But it had nothing stimulating to offer. I should have been studying—studying for MedTac. I didn't. Instead, I cuddled up to the vidscreen, replaying his favorite films.

//

I was back in the dream. In my dreams, he never left.

I saw him, I saw her. I could breathe. It was so close to reality sometimes that I could almost delude myself.

//

The way he smiled on Fridays, cuddled up on the floor in scratchy blankets, staring up at his old glitchy vidscreen, watching shows from when he was young. He always put on this stupid vid about a sheepdog on a farm.

I've never been to a farm.

He was due back. Maybe I'd tell him about it—about my dream. He'd understand.

The dream shifted, faint murmurs drawing my attention to a staircase. Eerie whispers surrounded me. They drew me up from my bed, up from my unit, up a series of stairs, up and up and up forever.

Time moved strangely here, like walking through deep snow. Suddenly, I was far, far away from Unit 237.

The farmhouse was cold. Its well-worn door hung open. I moved towards it. White varnish, tiny blue birds painted at the seams, propped open by a pair of boots—standard-issue boots. Boots I'd spent most of my life either in or admiring. The military lace was as prominent as the mirror shine.

They didn't fit in this picture. The recycled pleather, the off-spec fabric dye job—they didn't match the nice pastels or the heart and soul of the upside.

This house felt peaceful, far from polished boots, uniforms, lifts, PDUs, rotations, and Vipers.

Maybe it was all the green, or the agricultural mirage, or maybe just the décor. But it didn't fit.

Curiosity got the better of me as I stepped through the door. On closer examination, there was no assignment number on it. It was a thing to behold—carved carefully into its planks were little images of horses mid-gallop, hooves extended, manes whipping in the breeze.

I stepped outside. Bright—so very bright. Even the light was different. It was a close approximation to the Dome's rec section, but something about it was wrong. It didn't flicker when the cyclers cooled. The whole thing felt foreign, so far from the sickly magenta of the Hab's aging diodes.

My bare feet brushed against well-worn planks. I was shaded from the sun on the edge of the porch, covered by a tin roof propped on whitewashed supports. I walked to the edge, hopping to the ground.

I lay there for a moment before turning over to stare up at the sky. Just me, the grass, the wind, and all that sky. I took it all in, focusing on each sensation: the wind against my skin, the moisture on my back, and the birdsong in the air.

*Clunk.*

Something strange breached the moment. It began with a faint whine, climbing in pitch with a constant squeak. The recyclers. My dad told me stories about them. About the Before.

It felt so real—all of it. Even as I looked back at the house. I could reach out and touch it. The old-fashioned ranch house pulled straight from a vid, a monument to the Before.

It was perfect, too perfect—there's no lie greater than perfection.

I heard them before I saw them—the voices, familiar. They were so close. Walking came easily to me, as though the wind itself was ushering me forward, and I broke into a run.

The thumping in my ears was deafening as I pushed on, feet pounding.

I heard them again.

It yanked me forward. I tried to break its grip, but the memory had me.

I was young again, sitting on achy knees, staring at the gray door. Waiting for it to open.

//

I saw them.

He stood there, one hand running through his hair absently, the other on his hip. He was relaxed, caught in a moment of calm. Leaned back against a bench, watching the festivities, a tired grin plastered across his face.

She was there too, her hair short, the bags under her eyes smaller. A crooked smile on her face, brown eyes sparkling with laughter.

He was in civvies and a brown plaid shirt. She wore a faded gray sweater and sweats. The two of them sat in rickety chairs, hand in hand, staring out into the blue.



A little speaker sat between them, the jangly guitar he loved so dearly playing softly—a distant reminder of happy Saturdays, reconstituted pancakes, and whatever fruit substitute was off-ration.

“Not a bad view, huh?” his voice tinged with laughter.

“Pretty flat,” she replied.

“Everyone’s a critic.”

//

He’s not gone. He’s coming back. They’ll all be coming back.

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*“One Will, One Future, One Coalition.”*

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I know it. I know it more than I know my own name.

//

Unit 237 was our rank-assigned quarters. It had two induction burners and a tiny attached head. Space was at a premium underground. When you have to dig out living space quickly, you sacrifice comfort for speed. Quarters was basically a rectangle with a tiny door to the bathroom and a little kitchen nook. Home wasn’t much in the Shatterdome—four walls, four districts, three hangars.

The clattering of the door marked her arrival. I looked over, and there she was—my mother, medium height, close-cropped brown hair, serious green eyes with dark circles beneath them. Her olive-green jumpsuit was stained with oil, her hair matted from hours in helmet-based containment. Part of me wanted to jump up and meet her, but I restrained myself. I was older now, mature, ready for the next step in my life.

She scrubbed at her eyes.

I knew what came next. Part of me had always known.

She approached without even stopping to take off her boots, sinking down on the ancient futon next to me, ruffling my hair.

“Your father—” her voice broke.

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*“We, the Unyielding Shield, Stand Tall Beyond Reason.”*

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I’m numb.

//

He came home in a box. Not a big box. There wasn’t much left of him. Nobody talked about the where, the when, or the why. It didn’t seem to matter much. It wouldn’t bring him back. It wouldn’t bring any of them back.

There wasn’t much point in burying my father.

We were already underground.

//

I dreamed about farmhouses, dogs, and hellfire.

I heard him scream. I heard the flesh rend from his body.

I heard it all.

//

Not even my dreams are safe anymore.

//

Mother didn’t even talk about him anymore.

//

Unit 287. The room that surrounds me is new. We have been downsized. It’s policy. We don’t need the space, not anymore.

//

They gave us a flag. I didn't know what to do with it at first. Now I cling to it in the dark.

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*"The TNC wants you. Our future relies on your sacrifice."*

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I wanted to scream, to cry, to rage, but I was just numb. No sadness, no happiness. Hollowed out by the universe.

//

I miss him. I miss my dreams. Mother was gone, off on another mission. Anything to get away from this place. To get away from me. I understood. I didn't before, but now I do. Dreams have passed; nightmares are all that remain.

She flies to escape them, suppressing the bad thoughts with percussive .50-caliber therapy.

//

I'm in the dream again.

I watch them, frozen. I know it isn't real. Every part of me knows it isn't. But still, us humans—we just want to believe, to believe that the cruelties of life have a purpose.

To be back in his arms again. To hear him. Just one chance to say goodbye. I break into a run. They're so close—a wish I've repeated a thousand times.

But it isn't a wish; it's a nightmare.

"MOM!— Come back."

I draw closer, and closer, and closer. But no matter how hard my legs pump, I can't outrun it.

The world starts to fragment, the green grass shifting, the birdsong twisting, the world turning upside down.

"Dad, please—" my voice breaks for them.

But they can't hear me.

//

I looked at her and saw it—the sparkle in her eyes gone.

“Mom?” I braced myself.

She examined me for a second. I tried to meet her eyes, but she looked away.

“How'd the examination go?”

I winced.

“Not great,” I said.

I watched her stare off into the distance for some time, lost.

“I told you to study harder,” she said.

I didn't know what to say.

//

I didn't understand before. The ranting and raving. The duty and the purpose. But now I see it— I see it so clearly.

They took everything from me.

//

I have no more need for dreams – I've made my choice – I've known what my future would be since I was five years old. I will be the whisper in the night, the slash in the dawn, the harbinger in this kingdom of dreams and nightmares— I will make them suffer as I have suffered – on the plunging tip of Hell's razor.

I will kill them.

I will kill them all.

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“Our Path is Iron, Our Purpose is Blood—Long live the Terra Nova!”



# Dark Affinity

An excerpt

Written by: Cuán Schofield

The clang of a locker closing woke me from a particularly interesting doom scroll. It was 8 AM on a Monday and I was not doing well. I felt the rush of wind as Kulwinder Kaur sped passed me, off to do whatever Honor Roll kids did. I wouldn't know. I stick in my lane, average, fly under the radar, it's easier that way.

I check my phone 8:45, time flies when you're on 3 hours sleep. I reach into my locker, sifting through papers, coke cans and all the detritus I have accumulated since the start of this year's governmentally mandated prison, school. Don't get it twisted I'm not anti-education, though some days I wonder if being illiterate might make the world a much nicer place. A veritable immunization against the internet. Something I could probably use these days.

I finally reach the bottom of my locker and make a startling discovery. My maths textbook had not been secretly hiding behind my glorious stack of empty Redbull cans or buried beneath my gym shorts. Not good... I hadn't seen the thing since Friday, well that wasn't strictly true I had seen it somewhere between first and second period.

I was a bit hazy on the whole timeline, somewhere between Miss Margulies's bone chillingly uninteresting sociology class and Mr. Bromsmith's soul crushing chemistry class. I must have walked out of Miss Margulies's assault on the prefrontal cortex so fast. I left the book behind or just blocked out dropping the horrible thing down the stairs.

Once again for the record I must state I have no problem with math as a subject. I have enjoyed many a strange YouTube video made by some frizzy haired german about linear algebra, my issue is more personal. Mr. Martin a man with white hair, rimless glasses and a penchant for being the worst human on planet earth. He was my problem...

"What did you lose this time?"

It would appear my neighbour had arrived. Levering myself to my feet I turned towards the voice. Ryan Choi, my intrepid best friend stood examining the pile of papers and binders that had accumulated at the foot of my locker. He was my height(average), black hair, brown eyes, clad in a purple graphic tee and jeans. Ryan was the only guy I knew who had less of a clue what was going on than I did. That right there is probably the reason why he's my only friend. We make a slightly bizarre duo. Two socially awkward misfits who struggle to interface with the world outside of a computer screen.



We met in 8<sup>th</sup> grade drama class; I didn't make friends easily maybe it was my eclectic interests or social ineptitude. We were the only two idiots too awkward to find a partner so the teacher put us together. Thanks Miss.Jean (my goat.)

Turned out he was also a massive nerd, so we got along just fine. Me and Ryan had a rare affliction in these parts, Roosevelt high our prison, was famed for having both a state winning football team and a hockey squad to boot. They're we're some pretty clear divisions between sporty kids and the rest of us. Well, I'm oversimplifying it's not like there weren't smart kids, oh they're we're, they we're just too smart for me. I got along with a few of them but well I was about as far from a genius as you can get. Too dumb for the smart kids, not sporty enough for the sporty kids. Me and Ryan occupied the no man's land of social life at Roosevelt high and honestly, I couldn't have been happier.

"Rough night huh."

I shrug. It could definitely have been better.

"You wouldn't believe."

He laughs, a sympathetic smile on his face. Ryan turns to his locker flicking through the combination with a sigh.

"Well, it could be worse."

I laugh "How?"

Ryan shakes his head.

"At least you can grind the last part of the season, I've been fuckin uber grounded by my mother."

Ryan and his mother are perpetually at war, she wants him to be studying 15 hours a day and well as one can imagine he has other priorities.

"Fuck dude that really blows..."

Ryan shrugs a slightly stricken look crossing his face.

"It is what it is man, I know we had those big plans for tonight but it's looking like it might be doomed."

Me and Ryan had been planning one last hurrah to finish out the ranked season, which conveniently had fallen on the week of my birthday. A date I could leverage like no other into being left alone for a night with nothing but me a can of heart

palpitating energy drink and my computer. My mother normally wouldn't have stood for that but well, even she couldn't deny my birthday wish especially when it was definitely the cheapest option.

"Don't worry about its man."

I try to catch Ryan's eye, but he's clearly pretty cut up about missing this.

"It's out of your hands I get it."

Part of me is disappointed our yearly marathon on my birthday had been a bit of a tradition, 4pm till 1 am pure uninterrupted vegetative grind, but well I can already tell he feels terrible about it, no point in rubbing it in.

Ryan reaches into his locker.

"I'll make it up to you man don't worry."

I laugh "Don't worry about its man."

He turns suddenly deadly serious

"No really, I will I swear. It's not right ditching you like this."

I'm almost taken aback by his visceral reaction, clearly theirs's more going on here than meets the eye. That usually meant one thing. His dad had made a stunning unwanted reappearance. Mr. Choi was both an alcoholic and an asshole and honestly, totally independent unconnected flaws. I'd met him a few times and he'd blown my lowest expectations away. In a weird kind of horrible way, it made me feel much better about my own fathers disappearing act. Then again maybe I was reading too much into this. We fell into silence it was kind of hard to follow his raw very honest promise. I didn't do well with that kind of emotional shit. Too complicated.

"You know that right."

Unsure of how to answer this quandary I bent down and started shoving papers and binders back into my locker, class time was probably approaching, and I was still down one whole textbook and Mr. Martin would hopefully just murder me. Put me out of my misery.

"Yea man"

Those don't feel like the right words, but I say them anyway, I wish I could reassure him somehow, but I just don't know how.

Ryan kicks his locker closed with a sigh

“I’ll see you after class man.”

I nod and watch him walk away.

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I check my phone 8:55, late, again. Woah boy this is going to be fun. Most teachers understand that classes start at 9. It may say on all the official documentation 8:55 but nobody and I mean nobody follows that. With the sole exception of the largest blowhard since Moby Dick. Mr. Martin’s math class is nestled into the far corner of the main building. Just about the farthest you can possibly get from my locker without leaving the building. Sometimes life is cruel, I am way too tired to deal with this today. Part of me weighs the pros and cons of just skipping the class. My mom doesn’t usually get back until late anyway so I can easily intercept the absence phone call, delete the email. It would be stupidly easy to do. I just feel bad she works so hard makes me feel like a real asshole if I’m not at least trying my hardest at school considering. Also, it feels like something my dad would do and I’m personally trying to grow beyond that family heritage.

This unfortunately means I will be forced to face the sociopathic, power tripper, a man who looks unironically a bit like Heinrich Himmler.

Really grade A prime teaching material. There’s a running tale of people he’s made cry. Hopefully I will join Cindy Lou and Brian Coheia on that Mount Rushmore.

I take the stairs two at a time, trying to get to the second-floor fighting gravity and the slightly stale oatmeal my mother conjured up for breakfast. Reaching the top of the stairs I turn out into the main hallway, picking up speed. I pull out my phone 8:59 and BANG walk headfirst into something.

Stumbling I reach out a hand to steady myself, losing grip on my binder, which crashes the floor. I look up and can’t help but feel the dull throbbing sound of god chuckling at me from some floaty little bullshit cloud.

It would appear that the famous adage how could things possibly get worse was having a go at me. I had just run face first into the veritable tip of the social pyramid. Nina Lawson was every bit the Roosevelt high’s queen bee. Her parents definitely worked for some big tech company; she drove around in her families G wagon like that was totally normal. Had a sweet 16 party at a nightclub like I swear she could have been something made up by a middle-aged screen writer It

was so cliched. The look plastered across her artfully made-up face was clearly not happy to see me. Oh boy.

Nina's brow furrowed as she examined me critically, one hand rubbing absently at her shoulder. She was dressed in what could only be described as stylish Oompa Loompa core. Turquoise tank top, and what looked like circus pants and a purse that could have passed for smash burger at a distance. It was certainly a look, that I couldn't deny, it was incredible how people with so much money could be so badly dressed. Not that my jeans plus graphic tee combo was anything to write home about but at least I could blend into a crowd.

I considered my options, Nina was surrounded by her loyalist of subjects Maggie Jean and Jessa Lee Ann, two equally contoured henchwomen. The worst combination of an alarming number of first names and a for you page that probably rivalled the Somme to someone like me.

There they stood. In front of little old me. Shoulder to shoulder crop to tank top. Looking at me like I was about as interesting as gum on the bottom of a last year's shoe.

It was amazing how small someone wearing jimmy Cho's could make me feel.

With all that in mind I do the first thing that comes to mind not the best thing simply the first thing.

I make a break for it. Head fake, swivel the hips and stride, stride, stride. I can see the light of day beyond them, Mr. Martin's classroom within touching distance when an iron grip sinks into my biceps. Dragging my unwilling body back in totally the wrong direction. I try to pull away, but I can't even wriggle. I look back expecting to see Nina's 9 ft tall boyfriend or maybe a passing free soloist who'd taken it upon himself to see that justice be wrought upon my guilty conscious. But it's just Nina, just Nina. My eyes dart back and forth from her manicured grip to her frankly puny biceps wondering how in gods name she can hold my significantly larger form back.

"Aren't you going to apologize."

Nina's voice is emotionless bored almost. Me being me I find myself confronted by such a strange situation. I default to my natural reaction. The nervous laughter spills out, it's not a haha that's so funny belly laugh, I'm not a psycho. It's a nervous thing that I do. When bad things happen, I just laugh, I can't say why or how I was miss-programed but I am. And boy is it inconvenient. See people don't generally appreciate you laughing after having just spilled their drink or dinged they're car door. It just comes dribbling out of my mouth, I can't stop myself. Maggie and

Jessa's stare at me with a strange combination of confused, bemused and pity. Nina's glacial gaze remains fixed on me. My voice cracks

"Sorry."

The pink gelled vice grips she calls fingers release. The rush of blood to my arms is sudden and slightly painful. Nina eyes narrow as she continues her unbroken examination of me. I just stand there awkwardly unsure of what to do.

"Uh."

Thankfully the second bells ring saves me, Nina's attention shifts. I don't think twice spinning off into the seething wave of students. I beeline towards Mr. Martin's class. I want to look back, but I fight against every fiber of my being and stare straight ahead. I can feel her gaze hot on my back as I walk. One foot in front of the other, keep moving, blend in. Act normal. Reaching the end of the hallway I robotically push open the Classroom door crossing the threshold.

The class is frozen as I step through the door. Mr. Martin stands at the board, marker in hand still as a statue eyes fixed on me. The rest of the students sit stock still like prey animals, doing everything in their power to not attract attention. I put my head down and push forward one foot in front of the other. I make my way to my desk sinking down in my seat, which feels like a gunshot in the absolute silence of the classroom.

"See me after class, Dante"

Mr. Martin's tone is cold.

Just like that with 5 words the sword hangs over my head. Waiting for god to throw me a bone here. As if my day couldn't get any worse.

I stand in front of Mr. Martin's desk watching the survivors scurry for the door. I debated just making a run for it, I concluded that it was probably unwise. Chances are he was just going to offer some cutting words or maybe if I was lucky an emotional slap on the wrist. Mr. Martin was after all still a teacher, unarmed (hopefully). However, if I made a break for it, chances were he could probably make my life hellish. Best not to risk it. Anyways some minor grovelling never hurt nobody. I attempt my very best apologetic brow beaten stance as I approach. Mr. Martin doesn't bother acknowledging my presence or my frankly awe inspiring performance.

He sits slouched slightly sallow face peering down over his rimless glasses. I know what he's trying to do. Intimidate me, most people myself included are incapable of silence, its unnerving who likes sitting waiting for someone to speak, its nerve

wracking, vulnerable. It's all mind games, waiting for me to crack, show signs of weakness and boy is it working. My palms are sweaty my arms are heavy, knees weak. You know the deal. Mr. Martin looks up with a flourish of his pen. Finally acknowledging the fact that I've been standing here looking like an idiot for what feels like 5 hours. His greying eyebrows shift as he examines me. Face morphing into visceral disappointment thin lips pursed, eyes narrowed. His words come out lazily as though even taking the time out of his day to utter them is a waste.

"I thought I had made myself clear Mr. Dunleavy"

He's baiting me, it's a simple question with a simple answer. A rhetorical one. An unsophisticated trap. One I'm about to dive headfirst into. I think it's an ego thing or than again maybe it's something I get from dear old dad. But for some reason some part of my brain, where normally in situations like this should be on high alert. You know screaming god no don't do that, no that is such a bad idea, just let it go. Is missing.

"No, you we're crystal clear on that front."

Mr. Martin's smile widens, cheeks stretching, teeth baring.

"Well than why is it that you appear in my class, for the second time, late?"

I can feel the pulsing beat of my heart, I squeeze my hands trying desperately to stop the shaking.

"It was a mistake won't happen again."

Mr. Martin's smile morphs from excitement to something more sinister almost gleeful.

"I'll make sure of it."

...

# WORLD BUILDING

## The Story

What if magic was real? And all the old wife's tales we've been told aren't actually stories. The world of Dark Affinity explores the intersection between the modern world and the magical one not through a wardrobe or a train station but an existential battle between humans and Elves that once ruled Earth.

A battle which has raged for centuries - one which we humans have not been winning. A world where a boy of low birth and questionable ability discovers that being a hero is more happenstance than anything else.

## The World

The world is very much the same as our normal earth. The only major difference a battle has been fought on a battlefield mostly invisible to human society.

The council of 5 had for the past 200 years prevented conflict between humans and mages and kept the world safe from magical breaches. Creatures busting into the world trying to feed on humans. The council is a group of 4 main representative's one for each affinity.

## Characters

**Dante:** appears to be a powerless nobody, son of his lackey of a father. He shows absolutely no affinity something that shouldn't even be possible. He is also entire unfamiliar with the world, which means he doesn't understand the lines he spends most of his time crossing.



## **The twins**

**Cassia Covarruvias** Daughter of **Alexander Covarruvias** the High mage. Leader of the council of Magi.

**Cassia** the youngest by 2 minutes is a conniving, calculating, creature. Forever trapped in her brother's shadow, she takes out her anger and deep-seated insecurity on the world around her. Using her position of power over others in the only way she feels legitimized in some way.

She isn't an evil person, just someone pretending to be something they're not.

**Caden Covarruvias** Son of Alexander Covarruvias the High mage. Is every bit his father's son. Every bit of the bro culture, toxic male energy fused into a creature who refuses to acknowledge moral nuance. There are the good guys and there are the bad guys, and he will bring them to justice by force or die trying. He's every bit the prodigy, the favorite child, he takes what he wants because he thinks he deserves it. Caden is both evil and entitled truly the worst of both worlds.

Caden is the Heir to be.

Cassia hates everything that Dante represents.

**Emmelina** Summer is the daughter of two upper class mages, not especially powerful, but who have leveraged their limited power in the human world for great riches. She is every bit the social climber, desperate for power, no matter the cost. The pinnacle of that goal being, Caden Covarruvias.

Emmelina wants power no matter the cost.

**Avrel Nightguard** Daughter of **Eris Nightguard** the bringer of chaos. Daughter to the ultimate evil a human who supports are arch enemy. Avrel is nothing like her mother but struggles under the weight of being hated for something she didn't do. She is quiet, reserved, tactless and fearless. An outcast in the magi academy because who wants to associate with the daughter of the person who betrayed the human race to the elves. Raised mostly by her mother and ostracized heavily by the entire community she's a bit slim on table manners.

Avrel (shunned outcast) is the extremely powerful daughter of evil. Abandoned by the former big bad.

**Glynydark Goldbeam**, he insists people call him Glyn, he's the last born of 7, his family may be powerful but he is unlikely to inherit any of it. And Glyn doesn't really mind, he's more interested in writing songs and smoking weed and human movies. He has no qualms

about station and power he's a "viber" through and through. He and Dante become fast friends.

Glyn(overlooked) is just trying to get by.

### **Aeric Ravenheart,**

Aeric (out of his depth) is trying to become a knight of the realm. Obsessed with war battle and glory. He comes from a family of great academics who ply their trade and are powerful in their own right. Aeric struggles in academia he's deeply insecure about not being "smart enough" to take over from his mother.

## The Council

All democratically elected, they form the core government of the mages. They decide and enforce the laws of the land upon the mages. Territorially disputes, standing army, criminal prosecution and most importantly keeping the council's actions out of the public eye. Are their main purposes/duties.

It hasn't always been like this, before the original council was formed. There used to individual fiefdoms. Ruled by strength and might, where mages would fight each other for power, wealth. It brought bloodshed chaos and imbalance to not just the world of the mages but to the humans.

The council formed to protect and separate humans from mages, to prevent abuse, power struggles and let all peoples live in peace.

That is until the hegemony emerged, a group of angry mages who'd found themselves removed from power by the council, forced to hedge out on their own, began meeting in secret growing followers. They believed It was they're right as superior beings to control the humans, after all they have all the power, why should they limit themselves to let these powerless creatures make their own decisions.

## Magic System

The magic system focuses mostly on the four main elements. Which when mages reach the age of majority, they are able to harness. A mage will only have affinity for one element. Only the elves have mastery of multiple elements.

Fire  
Water  
Air  
Earth  
(lesser elements) extremely rare  
Light  
Darkness  
Weather  
Electricity  
Metallurgy

## The Mages

There are the main affinities the base level of Elementalist power.

Magic isn't some esoteric force in this world. You cannot create something out of nothing. The main source of each element must exist first than it can be channeled.

Ex a fire affinity needs an open flame to be able to use his or her power. (The quantity of which scales linearly. So, like if you carry around a lighter you would have the kinetic equivalent of however much fluid is in it.

An earth affinity needs to be connected to the literal earth to use their power. Like no shoes, direct connection. Foot on dirt, using earth in a paved city is exceedingly difficult because of the interference generated by standing on other things like concrete.

A water affinity needs access to some form of water. Still water is less powerful than say a river or the ocean.

The only real exception to the rule is Air affinity which are exceedingly rare. These Elementalist are able to access power pretty much anywhere without any need for a spark.

However, it kind of naturally balances itself because air elementals have basically no way to fight fire elementals as their powers literally just add fuel to the fire.

So consequently, the most theoretically powerful affinity is countered by the most common one.

Well yes, an air affinity could just pull all the air from the room it doesn't change the fact that then they're just getting into a fist fight. Where neither party can breathe.

I think that's where this whole thing gets interesting because it's not really magic in the traditional sense it's more like fighting styles that will be the forefront.

Elementalist power combined with martial arts.

Fire affinity can conjure up fireballs, flamethrowers, they fight like kind of artillery mages.

Water affinity can water walk, being able to control the surface tension of water allows them to basically move at high speeds across the ground, also being able to shape and throw water at an opponent.

Earth affinity can control and shape the earth around them; however it's only really powered if they touch it, they can basically build themselves big golem suits kind of like tanks.

Air is the deadliest but hardest to pull off, they can fly however it takes up all your concentration and you can't do it for very long. They can also do stuff like wind blades, being able to fight with more blades than you can hold. Overall, very badass. But also easily countered.

Now affinities are like the base level every mage has.

The talents are where it gets more complicated.

Talents are like a subset of the skill tree.

Some earth affinities can affect metal.

Water affinities are split between fresh and salt water.

Fire can either be long range artillery or have the ability to torch. To immerse yourself in flames for a brief period to fight hand to hand.

## Dante – Our intrepid protagonist.

Who is Dante. Dante is a kid from the projects with a chip on his shoulder and a slight addiction to video games. He lives with his mother an overworked ICU nurse. Dante's father left sometime between the ages of 5-7 he isn't entirely sure on the specifics of that, he has not seen him since. Dante enjoys eating an unhealthy quantity of hot pockets, is morally opposed to zucchini, and has watched every episode of Seinfeld 15 times. Dante has a tight social circle of between 1 and 2 depending on if you count his mother. This fact however does not bother him in slightest as he prefers to keep his own company comfortably. In a perfect world Dante would be left to his own devices with a freezer full of cholesterol and a supply of energy drinks. He has no interest in heroics, doing the right thing or really anything that involves too much physical or mental strain.

## Rules

There are two laws in the Dark Affinities universe

Nothing cannot become something.

And

All things that live must die.

Magic is not some mystical force, it does not solve problems it's merely a useful tool.

Magic is not subtle or easily controllable it is a natural element.

It is not intelligent nor mouldable.

If you need something burned, dead or healed it doesn't come from nowhere. To heal someone something has to die etc.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

The different races have separate talents.

Humans are able to blade weave and torch much better than the average elf.

Elves are generally more capable water and earth affinities naturally.

They are also the only race that regularly practices the 5<sup>th</sup> forbidden element of life.

The sacrifice of one living thing used to create and empower their warriors with power.

It's an evil art with little real understanding in human circles. It allows an elemental to create power a

fire affinity juiced up by life force is able to create real all-consuming firestorms. Though channeling all that power isn't sustainable and will rubber band back into the user usually causing them to lose their mind.

It allows an army to overpower an opponent if one has actually zero morality and isn't run by a psycho.

## World/ the elves

There is a war happening. That none of you have ever conceived of. A battle between darkness and the light, the last bastion of our species and you, yes you the normal human would never know.

For the last 200 years we have been at war, a war for our survival as a species and each day our enemies grow closer to the sanctum.

But we humanities legion stand shoulder to shoulder at the gates of hell daring our enemies to take one more step, for they may win, but the price will be bloody.

The dark elves have until the rise of Queen Hera been peaceful members of the magical community. But when Hera seized the court in deadly coup eliminating every member who didn't pledge allegiance to her on the spot. Things began to take a turn for the worse.

The world of magic exists surrounding our normal human world.

Various species/creatures occupy different areas of the world mostly living in peace with humans and each other.

Hera after seizing power decides enough is enough, the elves have lived in humble exile for too long, they will return and seize the power back that they held for thousands of years before the humans, and they will thrive long after they've died.

(side note)

I think elves have a slightly higher life expectancy, but nothing is immortal in my world.

There is a magical united nation.'

Though I doubt they will even be mentioned until like book 3

Elves

Humans – with affinities/without

Dwarves

Orcs/goblins

Queen Hera wants to bring glory to the elves like they once had, before they been forced out of their lands by the ever-encroaching reach of human society.