



FADE, MY DYING FLAME

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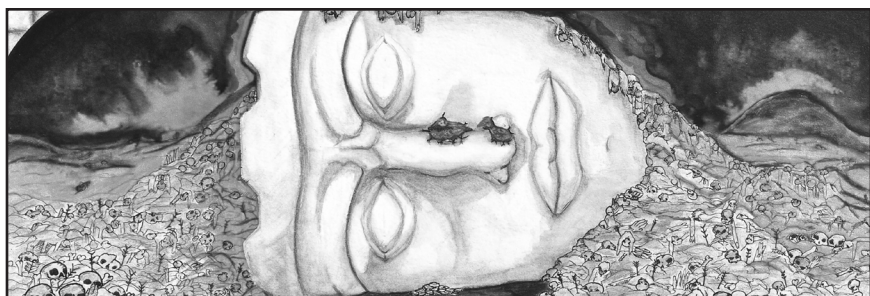
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Part I

Epigraph

*In the light of our dying flame,
Will I find your fading warmth within?
Without my voice,
Will I have to shout?
Without my eyes,
Will I have to search?
Without my skin,
Will I recognize your touch?
Can I rise before my feet fall,
Or will our dying flame be overcome?
Within the light,
I hope to feel you again,
In my heart, free, so—
Fade, my dying flame.*

—Sacerileus



Chapter I
The Farmland

*On heavenly breezes, the muses sing,
For the roses bloom upon tragedy's wings.
They sing aloud to bring about our hero's rise,
To walk forevermore from man's demise,
From wrought tombs to our sanctity in the skies.
Now go, Hero, go, for the wind blows.*

My light fades away. Shadows crawl over my mind. My thoughts turn to those of darkness—I have failed you. My scream melts away in the crackling of a pyre's flames. A wave of twilight washes over my memories and drowns them all away. The blackness takes complete totality over me. My body is pulled beneath the waters of a black abyss to lie forevermore, until the wind blows over my restless soul—it whispers to me.

Metal boots shuffle through the dirt of a barren path, kicking up the remnants of dust and ash alike. The earth, cracked and parched, is devoid of any vegetation or traces of greenery; the once-majestic trees stand as skeletal remains, their withered branches reaching out toward an indifferent sky. Incessant footsteps herald the journey of a lone wanderer through this desolate landscape, which stretches out endlessly before them. It is a simple knight who walks this anguished path. His armor is tarnished, unpolished,

and his tabard has turned to mere rags. His only possession is a sword slung across his shoulder in a battered sheath. Above him, the air hangs heavy with a sense of abandonment, carrying the faint echoes of a forgotten past. Not even the gentle whisper of the wind can be heard, as if nature itself has retreated from this forsaken realm. With no signs of life, no vibrant hues, nor soothing melodies to break the haunting silence, he is accompanied only by the dust smudged across his steel—the last memory of generations past. Our lost wanderer, burdened by the weight of loneliness, traverses aimlessly through the vast expanse of the unknown, forever chasing an elusive destination that lies just beyond the edge of the world.

With his hand resting upon the burned-out husk of a dead tree, the visor of the Knight's helm scanned the barren terrain for any signs of guidance or solace, but he found none. The sun, an indifferent observer, cast its long shadows only toward a veil of fog on the horizon ahead. The Knight moved his gauntlet to his chest and rubbed the faded depiction of a sunflower; its meager color was barely able to pierce through the dirt and grime of his tunic. While every step, heavy with uncertainty, carried the Knight farther into the endless stretch of nothingness, he remained steadfast, continuing onward into the overcast horizon, until, upon reaching the cusp of an arduous hill, the fog, weighing heavy with the hot air of the earth, lifted to reveal a small town that had been concealed just beyond its cover. The town was surrounded by farmland—farmland without purpose, an untamed wild given leave of its masters to run itself barren. The ground was a bleak canvas, marred by the scars of erosion and neglect. The Knight took his time walking to the town, maintaining a steady stroll into this new

awaiting emptiness.

The old road the Knight walked had almost vanished back into the land around. Any sliver of agriculture that once budded on the farmland now gave its ashes to the wind. It blew under the blanketed sky and carpeted the earth with infertile soil. The road cut right through the town's heart into the center and met an intersecting road, where the two fastened together in the shape of a cross. The surrounding buildings mirrored the landscape—old, dirty, and worn away. The ruined state of the buildings, with fallen walls and crumbling roofs, shattered steps and sunken floors, left their original purposes unknown. Debris from the buildings poured into the road, sweating out their suffering and decay whilst being bound mercilessly to the beams of the crossroads. At the far end of the drag, a massive cathedral loomed over the distant fringes of the town. The Knight walked until he reached the town's square where the two roads intersected.

In the center of the town's square, at the binding of these crossroads, rested a lonely well. A bucket hung motionless above the well, mirroring the stillness of the water below, silently observing the gradual decay of the town that had once brought it purpose. The Knight approached the well. Some murky water still rested within the bucket's shoddy wooden construct. The Knight ran his ironclad finger across the algal surface. A drop slipped between the wooden cracks of its container and fell deep into the earth.

Nobody was here.

Shadows stabbed at the well's foundation, their pointed tips spreading like dancing flames within the square around. They drew the Knight's gaze up from the earthen abyss to the sight of

the grand cathedral. The Knight's visor, looking first upon the steps of the cathedral's sprawling staircase, proceeded up its sharp arches and jagged towers. The faces of statues crammed in the cathedral's cracks passed by until, finally, the Knight's vision and the innumerable tower peaks had reached the clouds.

The wind stirred, gently caressing the trapped statues and causing the Knight's tunic to flutter. It carried with it a symphony of voices, their whispers weaving a melody into the Knight's helm:

*The clouds, a desolate gray, bud,
As does the flow of blood,
From the thorn-ridden stems
That sprout, by the fruit of a weeping angel's tears,
An' out of the bounty of their outstretched palms,
Into towering spears.*

*These stones of beautiful sorrow
Entomb the cherubs who sing for a gleeful morrow.*

The breeze drifted away, and the town fell back into silence, leaving the Knight only with a cold touch lingering upon his armor.

A familiar sound comes back to me. A familiar tinge of pain pierces through me. My heart aches, but my mind is lost to the origin of these emotions. Only the familiarity of these voices and the weight of their burden upon my shoulders remain.

The Knight stared at the building. His gaze lingered upon a large, circular stained glass window above its front doors, the vivid colors of the window depicting a sunflower. The Knight stepped away from the well, approaching the cathedral. He placed his boot on the bottom step of the staircase and looked up at the window once more before proceeding to the front doors. Sculpted

between the cracks and crevices of the sharp arches and jagged walls were disciples that prayed above the cathedral's doors. The statues, from the tympanum, watched the Knight's approach. Carved from a sturdy oak, the doors, with elaborate tendrils of fire intertwining and curling across their surface, were marred by jagged gashes. The once-intricate depictions of fire were ruthlessly defaced, leaving behind splintered edges and fragmented trails of destruction. Deep gouges had been etched into the door's surface, revealing an axe's scribbles:

I see black mounds rise—the end is nigh

Though disfigured, the hacked flames continued to emanate a mesmerizing dance of captivating beauty. The Knight, putting his hands up to the doors, attempted to push them open, but they only rattled and remained closed. He looked up to the statues that danced above, their prayerful expressions seemingly shifting to ones of mockery.

Those faces, those eyes, seem as if they were carved to strike me down. These lifeless statues laugh at the living—scowl at the living. I can hear their model's mouths, "You stand upon our graves, and still you wallow at your own sorrows." Oh, the aimless days I've wandered to avoid these faces and their eyes. Those eyes...the tears they would shed if they were alive now.

The Knight turned back around and surveyed the town. His gaze drifted over to the barren land upon the town's outskirts. From here, the tilled dirt seeped out from amongst the dilapidated buildings, resembling the flow of blood from a wound across the land. The farmland, tormented from the constant tease of thirst, until all the land that bled from the town had finally dried up and

died, left only its dust behind. The Knight turned to his left and saw within this sea of death a lost fisherman floating—a lone silhouette in the barren plains. The blackened shadow raised a long object above his head and swung it into the dirt. Again, the figure raised it above his head like an executioner and swung it back down into the dead earth with a thud.

The Knight walked out to the figure while his gauntlets twitched, his fingers flexed, and his knuckles practiced their grip. His armor clinked together with every step, and his boots kicked the loose layers of tilled dirt into the air, but the figure paid him no notice. As the Knight approached, the silhouette lost its cover in the shadows. It was a farmer, one who continued to till his field with an undying duty, even as the Knight finally came to his side. The Farmer was frail, frail as if he had never tasted food before or even smelled its fragrance. Goose bumps crawling across the Farmer's skin had embedded themselves into his bones, becoming integral to the leathery texture of his skin, which tightly wrapped and stretched itself all the way around his skinny, fragile skeleton.

Only one or two crops, shriveled and discolored just like their caretaker, sprouted up from where the Farmer stood, serving as the sole glimpse of life in the desolate land that surrounded him, while he, the Farmer, was discarded, thrown away, and mocked by the very earth he tended. The Knight stared down at the man, whose hunched back resembled a scarecrow forced to carry the collapsed cross it was bound to.

What has happened to you that has left you trapped here?

He extended a hand outward, but the Farmer spoke, cutting off his movement.

“If the food comes back, maybe then so will them people...I

don't know; one can try that though."

The Farmer raised his tool, swinging back down with a thud.

"It's a shame, but I forgotten how—"

Thud.

"My Pa, he knew, but he passed-a-while I was still just a young'un—just a boy. That young king there was suppose to be the one, so I hear, the one to save 'em all, but you already heard that now I know—'bout that poor king."

Bells rang out in the town, disturbing the silent land. The Knight shot his head toward the direction of the disturbance. The Farmer never looked up at the Knight or at the town; his gaze was set, unwavering, on his precious abused crops. His hoe was raised over his head, his arms shaking from its unbalanced weight.

"Curious thing that—"

Thud.

"There, well I haven't heard them bells toll in quite some time, yeah-a-while now. I remember 'em now, when I would hear 'em at every morning's dawn...before...to hail the rise of our Mother they would, that ringing o'er there, another peaceful day with 'er...

"Now, I'm not so sure what they are there for, really, something to do with our, our being a collective, some sins we done, I'm sure. Oh well...the days gone by now anyhow—"

Thud.

The Farmer's hoe hit the dry dirt, scraping it back and spreading its remains over the poor crops. It was a plight by a means out of his own control. The Farmer futilely fought against his cruel fate; he sowed a dead seed into the dead dirt only to reap a dead crop.

"When that evil came with eyes red...it came 'er' on wings

spread to blot out the sun. That clang, now that there ringing called it. It snatched Pa 'ways; it took us all 'ways. It brought this rot here. Then it took 'ways the flames. It came there from them big walls; it came with all 'er names etched upon its wings. That evil..."

The Knight looked back to the Farmer. The Farmer raised his arm and grasped on to the Knight's shoulder. The Knight grabbed the Farmer's wrist but did not remove his hand.

"I know you ain't gunna say much now; I know 'bout that there vow you've taken for yerself, I do, but don't forget us now, beyond my reckoning I know..."

"Surely, but I just know that for all them family's sakes, don't forget 'em...us is the same as you now, yah know? Anyhow, go see to them bells; I'm sure you the ones they calling to now."

The Farmer's head hung low; his eyes were staring at nothing. Feeling the cold that seeped from the Farmer's skin, the Knight moved the Farmer's hand off his shoulder and let go of him.

You poor soul, what compels you to stay? Will you not move on from this place? Can I not help this man?

Remaining for a moment longer, the Knight watched the Farmer resume his futile task before turning toward the calling of the bells. The bells played a captivating song over the wind, demanding an audience with their performance. The Knight left the Farmer behind and went to investigate the ringing. He made his way back to the well, with the sound of the hoe scraping the earth following in the silence of the bells.

The Knight, standing before the weathered stone walls of the ancient well, grasped the handle of the bucket and freed it from its bonds. The water inside teetered on the brink, threatening to spill

over the bucket's brim. He turned around and tread cautiously back out toward the Farmer, each step dancing delicately through the ebbing flows of tilled dirt. He was trying to preserve his balance against the treacherous terrain and not swing the bucket around. After his steady and methodical pace, the Knight finally returned to the Farmer's side. He moved a hand close to the Farmer and gently touched him while holding the bucket out before him. A smirk creased across the Farmer's lips after his gaze met the vessel. The water had all but vanished entirely from it, leaving behind only a thin layer on the bucket's bottom. Following in the Knight's wake, a trail of tear-shaped imprints adorned the dirt, a testament to the sacrifice of liquid essence. The Knight slowly lowered the bucket while letting go of the Farmer.

"I appreciate that, yah know; give what's left there to these plants here, would yah?"

The Knight made no movements.

"Go on now; they need that now more than I do. They'll appreciate it too I'm sure."

The Knight tipped the bucket upside down and let the small stream of water splash onto the shriveled plants below.

"Thank yah; now I know...I know that that building on yonder looks like the one for yah to seek when you continue on...'fraid that the most help I can offer on yah there sadly, but go on now; them bells are still ringing. Truly though, I do greatly appreciate that gesture there."

The Knight departed and retraced his steps back to the town's center. He cast the bucket aside, watching as the wood clattered off the stone wall and listening as it rolled away.

What cruel jest of fate is this? Still, my feeble hands seem useless.

The Knight turned toward the source of the ringing. At the bottom of the cathedral's opulent staircase, the Knight's view of the sky had been eclipsed, his gaze becoming lost amongst the many soaring towers. The clang of the bell sounded out again from within its hidden steeple. The Knight's eyes fell upon the sunflower composed of stained glass that dominated the cathedral's front before he climbed up the building's steps. In the door's tympanum, the statues, this time, hid from the Knight's gaze—their dedication to prayer now showing the everlasting weight of worship upon their bodies. Their backs were contorted into broken positions, their shoulders were perpetually hunched forward in torment, and their heads were agonizingly slumped downward. The faces, once carved with expressions seen as mockery, were now clearly ones of fear. The Knight put his gauntlets up against the wooden doors. He pushed, and the two doors creaked open.

Sprinkles of dust fell onto the Knight's helmet and before him. A dismal light peered through murky stained glass revealing the dust that slept in the open air. The ceiling of the building rose high into ribbed vaults. Rows of gray wooden pews stretched out far in front of him. Each drab pew was accompanied by a slender column positioned between the array of stained glass windows, many of which were destroyed, that lined both sides of the building. One of the surviving windows depicted an urn placed upon a golden bridge, whose stone was carved with runic marks of intertwined lines coiling like tangled roots or stacked upon one another like jagged mountain peaks. On the cathedral's floor, in the heart of the nave, an intricate pattern was laid upon the cold tile; it was a

circle, etched with meticulous precision. As ethereal beams filtered through the stained glass, the sunflower window cast an eerie glow upon the circle's elaborate contours, breathing life into its wicked design. The luminous display transformed the circle into a smoldering pit, an inferno ablaze upon the floor it consumed.

At the back of the building was an altar, a simple block of stone raised above the pews. On either side of the altar sat two large braziers, each overflowing with ash. Upon the raised stone slab was the statue of a woman. She wore a simple gown with a diaphanous nature that caressed the slender figure supporting it, in the same way the vaults in the ceiling flowed down the pillars into the nave. The statue's arms were outstretched to the sky, and her gaze followed the motion of her hands. The Knight walked in farther toward the altar.

The warmth of my mother's touch cradles my soul, a blanket of lamb's wool wrapping around my fetal body, safeguarding me from the black totality that consumes the world, but still, my body feels cold, so cold.

The two braziers beside the altar ignited as he came down the nave. The flames produced more shadow than they did light. The shadows closed in on the Knight, pushing him toward the altar and absorbing the sunlight from the windows. The Knight drew his sword and held it at his side as he approached the front of the altar. An urn appeared on the altar's flat stone surface at the feet of the statue. The urn's ceramic surface was disrupted with ripples that flowed like waves. They encircled all the way around it, flowing from top to bottom, removing any flat, smooth surface. The light from the braziers illuminated only the altar and the urn upon it; the rest of the cathedral fell into darkness, entrapping the Knight alone

with the altar. The Knight stared at the urn. A surge of air billowed forth, welcomed by the cathedral's open doors. The howling wind fiercely stirred the flames beside the altar, their caressing light radiating and bathing the statue's legs and body in a breathtaking glow. With each gust, the wind grew mightier within the cathedral, carrying with it a familiar ethereal chorus of countless whispers that echoed through the sacred space:

*For holy are thou,
It cares not.
For righteous are thou,
It cares not.
For pious are thou,
It cares not.*

*When the world is asunder
It will crawl back under
The arms of its keeper.*

The fire in the brazier's pits flashed high with the wind's last gust, illuminating the statue's face and arms. The urn vanished from the altar's surface. The Knight fell to one knee. He held his sword out in front of him and drove its tip into the floor. The Knight rested his head on the ruby-colored pommel of his sword's hilt. Bathed in the full light of the flames, the statue's eyes were staring at the kneeling Knight. A voice crept from the statue's stone lips:

*Evil grows upon the scar of man's fall—
With my children gone, my soul dims to all.
Forgive me for the strength I cannot lend;
I know your path has been without an end.*

*For e'er a burdened soul, a journey cursed,
To heal an earth whose dirt forever thirsts.
On the breeze, our voices will be with you;
Alone is the soul on the verge of rue.*

*Please, fulfill your vow, one to silence wed!
For thy prophecy's gift is a heart's dread—
To sacrifice one's voice, so life ascends.
Continue on, and help us face the end.*

*A companion awaits, to help guide you.
On your search it knows a path to stay true.
My gift, a friend reborn anew—now go,
In the light of our fire's grace, face your woe!*

In an instant, the flames died. The light returned to the room through the murky stained glass, slowly, as the shadow's cast receded. No cinders sat in the braziers, just the cold ash from before, while the dust still floated in the air undisturbed. The Knight rose from the floor and sheathed his sword. His gaze was transfixed on the altar's surface, until a horse's neigh sounded from outside the building. He looked around the cathedral, a remnant now of a forgotten age, once again asleep under a blanket of dust, before turning to leave the building. He stopped before a pew and ran his fingers across the top of it. He felt the dust, rubbed it together between his fingers, and stared at the gap it left on the pew's surface. The Knight continued on and walked outside. At the bottom of the steps, a horse was patiently waiting.

The Knight descended the steps to the Horse. Its eyes were staring up at him, ushering him down. Unlike their surroundings, the Horse wasn't feeble and worn out. Its chestnut coat wasn't straggly and covered in dirt; the fur was burnished by the muscles

underneath, painting the Horse's coat with a beautiful fluidity of shadow and light. The Knight reached up and put his hand to its mane. The Horse's skin radiated a warmth unlike any, except that given off by an afternoon sun. A familiarity grabbed at the Knight with an inviting comfort that pulled him in. The Horse looked at him the entire time. It made no movements, except to keep its stare. A saddle was already strapped to its back; the leather was torn and ripped as if it had just been scavenged out of the graveyard of a battlefield. The Knight grabbed the rugged saddle and tugged on its straps, the Horse giving him no resistance. He put his foot into a stirrup and mounted the steed. It immediately started off on its own. The Knight had to grab ahold of the reins to steady himself. The Horse took the Knight down the only road untouched so far by the new travelers. It led them out of the town and away from the barren farmlands.

The Knight turned back to look for the Farmer, whose tool was now silent in the wind. The starved man no longer stood above his crops. He had collapsed into his spoils, the fruitless endeavor over.

To forever lie, until your body turns to dust, amongst your broken tools—amongst your failed labor—never to rise again from the soil's bed. My mind bursts now with the cries of those forsaken; powerless I am to drown away these thoughts. I remember now how I myself once lay fallen, hapless upon my own bed, as your ceaseless tears fell beside me, your cries echoing in my cold chamber. The whispers of the past and done, "a start to redemption, your path on this cold earth." A path of dust and death, of bygone memories that haunt the hidden reaches of my mind. I wonder if there is any hope left, to even bother on this journey after all that has been done, after all that my eyes have

already seen firsthand? It matters not, I suppose; for on this path, I seem forced to go.

Our Knight turns his head back forward, letting the Horse carry him away. Soon the town and the farmland recedes behind the mysterious fog and fades away. The old stone path before them stretches endlessly into the landscape. Behold, as he now treads the path of righteousness, guided faithfully by his loyal steed. Each stride brings him closer to our very presence, as he embarks upon a formidable journey toward a forsaken palace that holds his destiny hostage. Yet, in a moment of divine intervention, the eternal veil of clouds above begins to disperse, yielding to the radiant sun's resplendent gaze. Illuminated by this celestial light, a new horizon unfolds, laying bare a new path before our newfound companions as they wander on into the stark expanse ahead.

The wind blows.

Chapter II



The Forest

*Our wind blows cold,
In remembrance of those,
Whose bodies lie forever cold.
Our wind sings aloud,
In guidance of the one,
Whose soul stays forever endowed.*

The roads the Knight traveled down, once proper and worthy of a wanderer, have crumbled to either patches of broken cobblestone or scattered dirt as the land continues to wear a dismal hue, a gift bestowed by the weeds that once thrived between the path's crevices but have long since withered away. Now, the surrounding fields, suffering a similar fate, were nothing more than a wilted horror to keep the cold, whistling wind company. On the distant horizon, as the companions rode toward their destination, snow-covered peaks tore into the sky. These towering behemoths lacerated the celestial flesh, unleashing a fury of clouds that seeped out and bled across the heavens. With relentless invasion, this mountain range emerged as the sole sight to accompany the emptiness of the world.

*As I tread down this desolate path, the weight of my own
lostness bears down upon my weary soul. The emptiness*

surrounding me mirrors the void within, amplifying the feeling of being adrift in an unforgiving world. I have lost my path. I feel but a mere drifter, letting life do what it will with me, unable to find any motivation to fight for my own destiny. Am I quitting? Or has my fate already been sealed, and I quit long ago? A small tendril holds on to my desire to fight back; every so often, it finds its way back to the surface, and a small fire creeps back to life, but it is rare and fleeting, and it never seems to last. I have fallen off my path—willingly one might say; willingly or accidentally it matters not, for it was my actions that brought me to this place, where the light of my destiny is snuffed and cannot shine. Here, my steed walks the path for us, the only path now for either of us.

Ahead, the path descended down into a deep depression of the land. When the Knight reached the cusp of the hill, his eyes scanned the valley below. A vast forest was laid out in the hidden vale; its trees were but mere husks that spanned throughout the entire valley. The Horse began descending the hill toward the beginnings of the dead forest. The road led directly into the forest's heart with no allowance for avoidance. The Knight hung his head while the Horse trotted down the path; its horseshoes led a rhythmic march as they headed toward the dark forest.

The single gust of a breeze blew down the road.

The Knight lifted his head back up. Ahead, three cloaked figures were walking in his direction. He tightened his grip on the Horse's reins and slowed their pace. He slid the tips of his boots to the stirrup's edge and straightened his back. The group, hidden underneath their moth-bitten cloaks, walked slowly, hunched over and shaking with every step. The Knight rode up beside them and stopped. The leader, who used a cane to lean on, looked up at the

Knight. From behind the scarce strands of hair left to float about in a hapless manner, a destitute face, sunken by heavy wrinkles, was revealed. Feminine features were hidden underneath the sullen brow, but they could barely crawl their way to the surface. The two others beside her hid their almost assuredly similar features beneath their long, oversized hoods. The dilapidation of the group nearly camouflaged them into the landscape around.

The leader raised a hand toward the Knight; however, gravity and malnutrition prevented her from raising it high. The long, brittle fingernails on her hand would have snapped off if they were lifted any higher. The Knight stared down at her. The return of the whistling wind broke the silence between them. Lowering her hand back onto her cane, the Leader spoke.

“We did not move to invade...No, we did not move to invade; we moved to get away. A simple truth I am afraid no one believed.”

The woman’s voice was not as weary as her appearance; the sound of it overpowered the wind, and now, only she could be heard.

“But now...now we must return to face a fate, a fate forced upon us. To a long cloud of darkness that rolls over our country’s hillsides.”

The Leader began to shake her head.

“We did not ask to inherit this...No, we did not ask.”

Her eyes lowered to the lifeless stone they all stood upon.

“To inherit this...”

The Leader looked back up to the Knight and began to slowly nod her head.

“It is a fate forced upon us, yes, but now, now we must return to face it. Blame matters not anymore.”

The woman turned and waved her arm toward the forest.

“These trees, Knight, wished us to find you. So, we have brought them with us, for they asked us to. We are guiding them as we guided the last of man. We leave now, to go back to our country and bring them too, but they have a tale they wish to first share with you. Do not fear, for we have passed through them, and so can you. But carry on, please, through the trees and past where my people lie—up to the grand seat of man. This world is gone, but the Beyond does not have to be.”

The woman looked forward again to the road.

“Ride on, traveler, for a long—yes, I pity to say it—a long misfortune awaits you ahead.”

The group continued on their way. While the woman’s voice had silenced the wind, the nip of its chill could still be felt. Its cold touch hit the Knight as it blew by and crept into his armor. The Knight’s gauntlets had begun to rattle as he held on to the Horse’s reins. He watched the trio go until the Horse started on again. The Knight heard one more thing said from beside him as if the Leader had never left.

“Do not befall the same fate of your predecessor.”

Broken branches filled in the cracks between the road’s stones. The forest, once a comforting distance away, overtook and consumed the path before the Knight with great haste. The few lonely trees, with their skinny trunks and frail bark, which started sporadically at first, soon began to grow deep on the road in front of them. With the illusion of distance, the trees could spring upon unwatchful eyes—as their branches now blotted out the sky. The Horse rode on relentlessly against the ever-growing density of the trees as the

path was now completely engulfed by their imposing presence, allowing only the faintest glimmer of light to filter through their canopies.

The tree trunks were no longer gaunt and their bark no longer frail; the branches overhead were no longer brittle but now full of countless needles. Deeper and deeper, the duo continued on. No animals could be heard abounding in the forest: No squirrels ran across the treetops, and no birds sang out to one another. Not even a whisper of wind rustled through the branches, amplifying the tense hush that permeated the entire forest. It was as if nature itself had taken a solemn pause, enveloping the entire forest in an ethereal stillness, where not even the softest murmur dared to break the silence. The forest was without a trace of life, nothing except the trees' newfound vitality, until suddenly the Knight came across bloodstains splattered across the trail. They were scarce at first, but soon the mess quickly covered most of the path. The bark of the trees, with the brush of a fiend, had been painted the color of death. The needles on the branches of the trees rustled together as a breeze finally came down the path and passed over the Knight:

The silence, underneath still branches, dread.

The hard dirt suffocates the roots till dead.

The birds will chirp forevermore in death.

Their song, a eulogy, a final breath.

A longful past, within the cold, now fled.

The Horse's pace slowed as the already-dim light illuminating the path faded away, and the companions were fully enveloped in complete darkness. The Horse came to a halt. Silence descended upon the scene as the wind whispered away. The unmistakable scent of fresh blood wafted through the air, invading the nostrils of

both the Knight and his loyal steed.

A jaw snapped to the Knight's left.

The sound cut right through the trees with a fast intensity and faded away. Then the jaw snapped again, this time somewhere to the Knight's right. With an even-more-grueling crack, the smashing teeth echoed against every tree.

A howl soared overhead across the hidden sky.

The Knight's head swiveled all about in the darkness as more teeth smashed together. From all directions, the grotesque noises of a predatory nature ricocheted about the forest; drool flinging from unseen mouths, heavy breathing, and panting—the Knight could hear it all. As the Horse reared back to take off into the darkness, the noises suddenly stopped, and the wind awoke with sound. It whispered inside the Knight's helmet with a voice encumbered by the strain of all the fallen tears it has ever wept:

Oh, Knight, come see our anguish; hear our plea.

The forest's darkness started to recede. The shadows crawled back from whence they came, and the Knight could see the road again. To the Knight's left, a path that cut right through the wild thicket of trees appeared. The path descended down a slight slope and into a hollow where the walls of the earth rose up on either side. For an instant, a howl, sung from the choir of a hundred voices, harmonized in the air with the familiar sound of a laden cry—and then disappeared as quickly as it had come. The silence that followed weighed heavy in the air. The Knight got off the Horse; it snorted at him and watched him go. He took his sheath off his shoulder and held it in his left hand. Underneath one of these sullied trees on the path to the hollow, strewn out and tossed

aside, was the corpse of a wolf. Its head was severed from its neck, and its fur had formed into stiff peaks caked with dried blood. The Knight, for a brief moment, stared at the corpse.

*What evil is this that hides in the shadows of nature's death?
As I continue down this path into the unknown, it leaves me to
question whether we shall ever be graced by the light again.*

The Knight walked down the newfound path deep into the wild. The trees peered over the hollow. Their roots wove into its earthen walls and burst through its sides. More blood was scattered off to the hollow's edges with patches of matted fur left behind. A smell of revulsion overtook the scent of forest pines and lingered upon the trees. The silence held, until a light, a slender sliver of gold, descended from the heavens and burst upon the forest floor. The light spread over the grass, illuminating the thousands of roots underneath the soil. A cry awakened in the air, playing for a theater where self-destruction manifested itself. As the light, a mere shimmering frailty, glided through the trees, it revealed a den of wolves. The wolves remained shrouded as blackened silhouettes, evading the light that sought to expose them. The jaws of the wolves snapped and popped. Their hateful bites, with the ripping and tearing flesh, consumed the den with the sounds of agony. A mournful grunt from their feast accompanied every bite. Blood splattered onto the trees nearby and hardened to the bark as if it were their own sap.

Scattered amongst the deceptively large alcove were many fallen ruins, whose walls, crumbled by time, continued to linger here as a stain upon the forest floor. While the den was being unveiled before him, the path behind the Knight disappeared back into the darkness. In the den's center, sprawled across the patches

of grass, an enormous beast lay. It was a female wolf, the mother of the pack around, ten times the size of her kin. Her fur was imbued with the light of daybreak, a lantern in the dark, the glow from the beast's fur keeping the den illuminated. Her children, however, wore coats to imitate the darkness of the moonless night sky they feasted beneath.

The grunts belonged to the Mother Wolf. The wolves turned to her with an unquenchable hunger, and she provided; with eyes of red, the pack ripped right past her nipples and feasted from her underbelly. The Mother Wolf's lips were parted, singing out a sorrowful howl. Her voice, a choir of a hundred howls, sang for the forest. She lifted her eyes up from the crushed grass and looked at the Knight. Her words, carrying the otherworldly howl over the air, resonated beside him:

Bring yourself here; do not fear our self-ruin.

The Knight walked up and stood before her, his eyes locked to hers. She spoke to him with a tenderness unbeknownst to her kin:

*As is hunger's course, my children feed now.
Though my body bleeds and my eyes cry,
Brief are my throes.
Our souls will soon ebb back
Into the endless sea
Beyond misery.
I am, or was, the keeper of these woods,
Our era a thousand years long now ended.*

*I remember how the horizon
Would shine
Above our sinful shadows.
The sun was a radiant rose.*

*Amongst the heavenly stars we sang,
With stricken grief and blessed relief.
The duet of our voices' gale,
Oh, how it would make jealous the nightingales.
Our hymns would weave
To make the world breathe.*

*Fallen are we now,
The last lover bereaved.*

The Mother Wolf let out a pained grunt as her children continued to eat from her. Her voice trailed off, becoming more appropriate to one dying. She stared at the Knight. The gloss of her eyes reflected the sorrow in her irises.

*The world has changed since you were last here.
Know this, Knight,
For your Mother does not—
Blinded by the loss of her children—
It is you we give this information.*

*Corruption has taken us—e'er to mourn,
For upon the fell fate of man 'twas borne.
However, within the Beyond 'tis bred—
The Evil that we dread.
A Blasphemer—an evil leech upon
Our spirits within the Beyond.
Upon its own flesh it feasts,
The insatiable hunger of the beast.
Consumed, Evil eats its own eyes—
Blinded! It shall bring the world's demise.*

*Only a sacred weapon, a golden spear;
Pulled from the blood of our peers,
Can pierce the fell Evil that will yearn
For our blessed Beyond to e'er burn.*

*You must destroy the Evil that hereby manifests.
Look upon my children to see the possessed.
Look upon them, then look upon this plane,
For they are one 'n' the same vein.*

*A martyr's golden spear, my Knight,
A sacrifice we will make to give you might.
In the black palace, you will find this foe.
In the black palace, you must strike this blow.*

The Mother Wolf had stopped talking. Her eyes began to water, letting a stream of tears slip from their grasp. The Mother Wolf began to sing. The song drowned away the noises of her flesh being consumed. Soft and low she hummed on, letting her voice harmonize one last time:

*Under our Mother's light,
On our knees in the somber night,
We cry out our grievances,
To cast out howls of anguish,
O' woe,
Our songs adorn the breeze,
To whisper tragedies,
To all the trees.*

*Under our Mother's light,
In the reflection of her might,
A blade's shimmering sheen,
The silver glint, so bittersweet.*

*Oh, how we've fallen so,
Begotten by the prophecies of old.*

*O' Humble Knight,
With this world dead and gone,
Crumbling to dust, soon to be ashes spread,
Your path you must continue on,*

*To face your destiny ahead,
Go, rekindle her flame from damnation...*

The Mother Wolf stared at the Knight through her teary eyes. The Knight put his gauntlet on the bridge of the Wolf's nose to provide a comforting touch, and the wolf's eyes fell shut.

Go—you are to be our salvation.

She let out a sigh with one last exhale. The wolves feeding from their mother turned at her last breath. Their red eyes stared at the Knight, reflecting off his armor. Saliva hung from the edges of their mouths.

That poor mother, I am powerless to stop this. I am utterly powerless, caught in an unstoppable current and swept away down this path with no control. It seems with every step I take, more bad things keep happening, as I sit idle, and now, now...

A piercing light came down from the sky. It stabbed through the Mother Wolf's body and vanished. Her fur began fading to black and, with it, so too did the light of the den. The wolves returned to their feast, but a few held their gazes on the Knight. They made their way toward him, breathing hard. He clenched his fists before brandishing his sword. Its steel shone off the last fiery light of the Mother Wolf's fur and reflected inside the sanguine eyes of the black wolves. The Knight charged, swinging without hesitation at the wolves in front of him. More wolves came from the shadows around, closing in on the Knight's sides. He began to retreat, until his back touched against a hard stone wall. He watched the wolves begin to circle him and slammed a metal hand into the stone. He dragged himself along the stone, scraping his

pauldrons and tugging his tunic, until he reached the ruined wall's edge. The Knight slashed at the air in front of the wolves' faces as he continued feeling his way around the edges of the wall. The wolves held back. The entrance to the hollow reappeared in the distant shadows. The Knight stepped over some fallen stone; his boot crumbled its sides, and he almost lost his footing.

The wolves lurched forward at the Knight.

The Knight pushed himself off the wall, slashing at the wolves. The wolves weaved back and forth—dancing behind him and darting between the trees. Their red eyes were a flurry of cardinals smeared across the black forest. The Knight ran, but before he could reach the hollow's entrance, the wolves circled in and surrounded him. The darkness began to completely overtake the Knight. A drop of sweat beaded on the pommel of his sword's hilt. The den finally fell into absolute darkness with only the glowing eyes of the encroaching wolves visible. The branches of the trees hidden in the dark began to rustle together. Soon, with the ferocity of a hurricane wind, the leaves and bark of the ancient branches came crashing together with a thunderous voice:

*Consumed, this darkness that surrounds, a plight,
To nature's death, we cry for our fell light,
A hopeless prayer, a last breath, a fight!
This fallen forest pleads to save our knight!*

The trees fell silent. The Knight stood completely still in a black abyss that consumed, with an absolute totality, everything around it. Unable to see even his own feet, the Knight remained patiently still.

Another soul I could not help, another death I had to witness.

Now I linger in this abyss, which mirrors my own thoughts of darkness. While I cannot even remember my own name, all I have to grasp is my reflection; I see a silhouette haunted by the echoes of the past that remind me of a time when I could make a difference, but now, I am but a silent witness to the relentless march of destruction—and those memories are just mere echoes.

A flicker of light appeared. As its aura grew, the Knight could make out a little red fox, its fur the same color as Mother Wolf's. The Knight began walking toward the warm glow of light. Underneath the Knight's armor, his skin was trying to crawl away from the darkness; the lingering presence of the void grasped at his limbs and crept in between his armor. The darkness whispered around him the sorrow of the forest, the trees' cries of anguish for their now-forgotten souls. The Knight's steps hurried; however, they took him no closer to the animal. The void entrapped him, but in an instant the Fox was right before him. It stared right at him with its tail wagging. The Fox approached the Knight and rubbed its whiskers against his shins. Its eyes, piercing through the shadows of the Knight's visor, stared directly into his before it darted away, its fur serving as a bright beacon. The Fox stopped and turned to look back at the Knight, who had remained still.

"What? Oh, so, you don't remember me, do yah? Well why would you I guess.

"Well it doesn't matter right now; come on. Follow me. This forest is done with yah."

The Fox started off again, and the Knight followed his command. The song of the trees returned, shaking the air and growing ever louder. The Fox's fur had begun to shine brighter and brighter, until the light and the trees' sound overtook the Knight.

He stopped and closed his eyes. The Knight could still hear the Fox's voice through all the noise.

“Keep an eye out for me! I'll find you again, old friend. I got my own stories to tell yah!

“Keep running!”

Upon opening his eyes, the Knight was back on the hollow's path. The snarls of the wolves, their paws bounding through the dry leaves, became loud behind him. The Knight started to run again, letting his sword swing wildly by his side. He glanced back, but no wolves could be seen—only heard. The end of the hollow appeared. The Horse was on the road in front of him waiting where he left it. The Knight ran and grabbed onto the saddle's horn. The Horse's hooves were restless, scraping the dirt back and forth. The Knight looked into the Horse's eyes. It stared back at him, wide and unblinking. The Horse reared its head back and snorted a burst of mist forth. The Knight hopped on. The Horse immediately galloped off, its long strides carrying them fast and far.

The bloodthirsty sounds of the wolves on a frenzied hunt relentlessly echoed throughout the woods around them. The already-monumental trees started to rise taller, blocking out any hope of benevolent sunshine staving off the hungry predators. The cold wind blew hard down the path, carrying with it more snarls and howls. The Knight tucked his body down, letting the wind roll over him. The red eyes of the wolves started to fly once more between the tree trunks. However, as the Horse galloped, the red eyes faded, becoming mere stars in the distant darkness of the forest. The Knight relaxed in the saddle, and the companions slowed to watch the trees behind them; nothing was attempting to pursue them any longer. As the companions rested on the path,

a ghostly howl echoed from the woods behind them. The vitality within the woods began to recede, and as the cold wind blew through the dead trees, dancing through their gnarled boughs, one last time, the forest's era had ended and returned to a hollow landscape. The Knight flicked the Horse's reins, and off they went down the path.

The wind blows.

Chapter III



The Triumphal Way I

*Look upon their stones of pride,
Look upon the fallen walls
Of mankind.
Look upon the alone and dead,
Look upon their blood spilt
On the path ahead.
Look upon what you seek,
Look upon her heavenly peaks.*

The Knight urged the Horse into a determined gallop, pressing onward in search of the forest's elusive end. Eventually, the companions burst through the tree line and out into the sunlight, emerging onto yet another weathered cobblestone road. The forest behind them cut through the landscape in a straight line, disappearing into the distance on either side; the tree branches, motionless and still, mirrored the lifelessness of a painting.

Under the somber light bestowed by the gray sky, the Knight, relaxed upon his Horse, looked over the land before them. The companions were high above a plain of an immense breadth; the fields of the vast expanse, having been consumed by insatiable aridity, were another barren waste of sand and withered dirt. In the center of this forlorn desolation rose the stone constructs of men. A massive city overtook and consumed the entirety of the horizon. It had been built upon a lone mesa in the plains. The

endless spread of buildings toppled over the mesa's sides and over the entire plain to shadow even the mighty mountains behind. Seated upon the mesa's plateau was a shrouded building composed of endless pinnacles and spires of monumental height. To stop the insolent spread of this lifeless stone, massive walls, buried deep into the earth, entrapped the city, while, by the city's gates, immense blackened mounds had risen up to the wall's ramparts and engrossed a large portion of the city's front.

A road of great capacity, precisely surveyed, shot from the city gates straight through the land ahead of it. A gloss over the road's surface caught the light; it shimmered even in the dismal weather. The Horse made its way down the hill toward the road, trotting over the sand and dirt that buried the way. The Knight twisted the Horse's reins in his palms as it descended the hill. He bent forward in the saddle and patted the Horse's mane when they reached the road. This road, unlike the others traveled by the companions thus far, had maintained its meticulous craftsmanship. Its surface was smooth and lain with a flatness that made each step of the Horse's hooves ring out into the air. The Horse carried the Knight on at a steady pace toward the city gates. A cold breeze was steadily blowing from the immense piles that rested against the walls. The Knight kept his back straight and his gaze set to the shadowed mounds that now, with a rugged and broken surface, appeared as if they were rubble from the walls.

Where is all this to lead? It is trying for me to recall how I know these lands, but familiarity washes over me. So why can I not see my destination?

Sporadically, on either side of the road, the sand formed high dunes. The gust of wind that came from the city gates rolled off

the dunes into the fields nearby. It lifted the sand off a dune to the Knight's right. Behind the cover of the falling sand, carved from weathered stone, the sculpted face of a man appeared. He wore a crown of lifeless rock, forever trapped upon his fallen brow. The statue, once immense in size, now lay on its side, broken down and shattered by the weight of time. The Knight looked into the old king's eyes; they looked off somewhere distant, somewhere into the sky beyond their barrow grave.

*A memory of him crosses the mind. Of forgotten pasts,
abandoned and buried, of a heavy brow evermore to be carried.
A memory of those longful eyes, left all alone on this dead earth
where his ruins are to tarry.*

Flurries from the displaced sand rose above the statue's head, and a hazy silhouette appeared behind the sand's haze. Upon four legs, it stood atop the fallen king's crown. From either side of its body, two large wings extended wide against the sky. The arced wings, against the sun's golden rays, donned a pitch-black color, blotting out the sky behind.

The creature, with a curve deep and prideful in its back, lifted its head high to the sky. It let free a roar, causing gentle waves to ebb and flow through the texture of its thick neck. The companions stopped. The mysterious creature remained still on top of the collapsed statue. The Knight reached for his sheath and held it by his side.

The steady breeze caused the sand to fall back over the statue, letting the king return back to his eternal slumber in the barrow. The creature faded back behind a new cloud of sand that veiled the air around. The Knight's gaze stayed fixed upon the crest of the dune, until the flurry of sand settled and the empty sky contrasted

once again with the dead landscape.

Soon, the rhythmic sound of the Horse's hooves took over as it continued on, and the Knight slouched back into the saddle, swinging his sheath back around his shoulder. With every other step, the companions passed by more large dunes of sand.

The Knight closed in upon the city. The clouds had broken and scattered far, clearing a way for copious amounts of cool light to come through. The dark mounds that splayed forth from the city walls came into view as rays of light shined down upon them. The illusion of innocent debris, the fallen rubble of unmaintained walls, quickly faded. The piles of collapsed rubble morphed into the site of a gruesome graveyard. Bodies piled high along the walls, one after the other, had collapsed upon each other trying to crawl their way to the top. The sprawling bodies gave rise to a mountainous heap of rot. Arrows had pierced into every nook of the massacred bodies; en masse, they lay against the walls—slaughtered. Every single one of them had their arms outstretched, pleading for help from their own killers atop the walls, pleading to the arrows that rained down upon them to miss their arteries, pleading to anything that might spare them.

Their expressions, contorted in agony, were forever sealed upon their faces by their hollow eyes and gaping jaws. The bodies, covered only by their own ragged cloaks and tattered robes, were exposed to all the world's elements. The Knight's eyes, embarking on a solemn pilgrimage, traced along the expanse of bodies, numbering in the hundreds to possibly thousands, before eventually returning to the gates, leaving behind the corpses' silent testaments of their slaughter.

The Horse pushed forward to the gates. It clambered over the

newfound cobblestone of discarded bodies. The sound of heavy hooves breaking bones filled the air. The Knight looked down at the souls he rode over. No crows or vultures picked at the carrion, and no maggots crawled through their crevices. The black holes of their sunken eye sockets paid no notice to the Knight's journey—they only stared at the bleak walls before them.

What has happened here? Who were these souls, and what led to the merciless slaughter of these helpless people? I fear that, if these bodies were still able to breathe, their dilapidated states would not be improved upon—perhaps they were not even worsened by their gruesome death. They all seem to share a similar feature of destitution branded onto their souls—a brand unimaginable except by those who all partook in the same experiences before their untimely ends.

When the Horse had finally tread over all the bodies that blocked the road, it stopped before the city gates. The mahogany wood of the gates, varnished with the blood of those that lay around, glistened with a deep cherry color in the light. Above the gates, etched into the archway, the head of a lion was intricately carved. Gracefully flowing down its neck and shoulders, the lion's mane appeared to come alive with an illusion of movement. Its eyes, poised to watch over all who passed through the gateway, now seemed burdened by the weight of the countless generations it had silently witnessed pass beneath its weathered and stained surface. The set of double doors were left open and askew. The Knight tapped the Horse's side with the stirrups to ride on farther in past the doors. The formidable width of the city walls created a long corridor beyond which, on the other side, loomed a large grate, a portcullis, that had come down and barred the path

forward.

In the silence of the walls, the Knight dismounted the Horse. The Horse nudged its nose into the Knight's shoulder. The Knight turned around and ran his gauntlet through its mane. He patted the Horse's cheek. The Horse let out a familiar snort and turned away, the grunt echoing under the archway. The Knight walked back out through the cherry gates. He turned to his right and stared at the mound of bodies. The bodies of the slain, brittle and feeble, made a ladder—and their limbs, shriveled and frail, created rungs for the Knight to climb upon. The Knight stepped into the mass of bodies, his heavy boots sinking into the cracks between them and pushing down into the pile. The sharp snapping of the dead resounded in the air. The Knight slipped forward on the uneven ground, his body falling forward, in with the others. His gauntlet caught on a bare skull, picked clean now of any skin; it cracked and shattered as the Knight lifted himself back up. He grasped on to whatever limb he could use to pull himself up. The ends of his armor stuck into the dead's clothes, dragging their limp corpses behind him. He tugged on his armor to free himself from their snares. The Knight scaled their limbs and pulled on their bodies until, finally, he reached the wall's ramparts. A harrowing wind began to blow over the mountainous mass, whistling through the hollow bodies:

*Tears erode sunken eyes,
Empty corpses sow empty cries,
Everything fallen dies.*

The Knight turned and looked back over the graveyard he had just desecrated.

I know why my eyes must linger upon these vacant faces for

a while longer. The haunting hollows where vibrant eyes once resided, now reduced to skeletal voids, exuding with their darkness an eerie emptiness. These sleeping souls deserved better than my callous indifference, but did I have another choice? And to whom can we plead our grievances now? I have little choice but to continue onward.

On top of the walls, the Knight looked over the city limits. The city spanned before him, over the entire world. The walls stretched out farther than the horizon and into an unknown land beyond. Looming over the city's gates was a tall guard turret, dotted with narrow arrow slits up and down its stone. Gargoyles leered from the tower's pinnacle, their twisted forms frozen in macabre grimaces. Dead vines, blackened by the sun, crawled over the tower's base and ramparts, resembling an unknown language crying out foreign curses. The shadow cast by the tower fell over the corpses that lay in piles underneath it.

The Knight walked over to the guard tower. It had a single wooden door leading into it. A runic mark of black graffiti was scribbled on the door. The Knight pushed it open and walked inside. He looked around. The light from a lone window to the left illuminated the thick clouds of dust in the air. The room was clean and orderly; it was nearly empty except for a spiral staircase that led up. Dust-laden torch sconces hung limply on the walls, their flames having long since been extinguished. There was a door directly across from the Knight. He began walking toward it, pushing through a tapestry of cobwebs that stretched like gossamer curtains from wall to wall. The floorboards above creaked, and a sprinkle of dirt fell, resting upon his shoulders.

The Knight stopped. Sharp fingernails began scratching across

the walls around him as if a swarm of rats descended from above, until suddenly, they stopped.

The pause of movement brought upon an absolute silence.

The Knight dashed for the rickety door in front of him. The door burst open, shattering off its hinges, as a flailing body of smooth and pale skin, almost transparent, with the red, blue, and green of its innards visible, came crashing through. The creature plowed into the Knight, knocking them both to the ground. As the two were locked together on the floor, the creature's face snarled and bit at the Knight. The flesh of its cheeks was stretched and worn away from an uncontrollable urge to gnaw. Its cheeks, pulled back like curtains, revealed the orange-and-black teeth of the creature. Its thick tongue, swollen and depraved of water, lapped over its rotten teeth, while its inflamed gums, bleeding from its constantly slamming teeth, allowed the blood to leak down the grooves of their roots and drip from the cracks that remained in place of its lips. The Knight's hard chain mail palm slammed into its snapping chin.

The Knight looked into the creature's eyes. The whites of its eyes were sunken as far back into their sockets as they could go, while its pitch-black irises strained forward, pulsing from large to small every millisecond. A yellow tint crept in around the corners of its eyes, seeping in from underneath its eyelids. The creature's eyes bounced around fiendishly as it snarled and snapped.

The Knight punched the ghoulish creature in the face once more and threw him off. He got to his feet and grabbed his sword's sheath off the ground. He drew out the blade as another ghoul came through the broken doorway. The Knight's cold steel blade shone down through an arc as the new ghoul charged him. A

starved and scrawny figure, its yellow bones, blue veins, and pink muscles radiated through its pale skin in a grotesque rainbow of color, pulsating as the creature's atrophied muscles contracted back and forth. It flailed its limbs wildly toward the Knight as his blade embedded right into the center of its skull. He tried to kick the ghoul's body off, but the blade was stuck in its head.

The ghoul on the floor launched itself onto the Knight's back. The Knight stumbled and turned as his sword came free from the other's skull. The Knight pinned the creature on his back to the wall next to the door's shattered hinges. A swift left elbow square to the face stunned it. Another ghoul came swinging through the lone window as yet another fell through the ceiling's rotted boards. He stepped back from the pinned fiend, turned, and swung his sword clean through its neck. The Knight bounded through the open doorway and made a run for it. The ramparts ahead went over the gates and onto the other wall. Wooden planks had been placed as floorboards over parts of the stone that had fallen away. The Knight ran across the ramparts, but the rotten wood beneath his heavy metal boots gave way. He went crashing through them. He plunged into the darkness below, crashing into a puddle of muck on a hard stone floor.

Sunlight, shining through the broken floorboards, illuminated only where the Knight lay. The Knight got up to look at where he was, but a dark void concealed the area beyond the light's reach. The sunlight was eclipsed briefly by two shadows as the ghouls fell in after him. The creatures rose to their feet, the meager light from the hole encircling them. A cloud drifted over the sun and plunged the room into darkness. The Knight poised his sword in front of him, its blade's tip pointed into the dark. Saliva, with a pop,

dripped into a puddle, and snarls echoed in the room.

The beasts charged, their bare feet splashing through the floor's muck. The sunlight briefly flashed back through the hole. The forms of the ghouls briefly materialized before the Knight. The Knight, listening to the creatures' feral onslaughts, swung his blade into the shadows. The sunlight returned in its full graces, unhindered now by any cloud's presence, to illuminate the battlefield; it gleamed off the Knight's sword as he swung and lit his blade with the fervorous color of a fire's intensity. He slashed right through the ghoul on the right's neck and carried the slash into the other's torso. He kicked the right ghoul onto the floor and finished the left with a pierce into its gut. The Knight walked over to the fiend on its back and stuck his sword between its pectorals. It squirmed while the Knight used his boot to hold it down and tug his sword out. He stared at their corpses as he used his tunic to wipe the blood off his dripping blade.

Here lies a body composed of nothing more than feral and rabid emotions. I wonder whether a tormented soul is trapped, unable to speak, forced to bear witness to its cruel fate from behind its own eyes. I hope such a fate eludes them and peace has graced their existence before their bodies have been transformed into these mere animalistic creatures.

With the ghouls vanquished, the Knight turned to look at his surroundings. The inside of the wall seemingly stretched on forever back into the darkness. The form of a tiny doorway was discernible in the light to the Knight's right. He made his way toward it.

The Knight opened the door and found that he stood right on the other side of the wall beside the portcullis. An old wheel was against the wall with chains wrapped around it that went into a

hole in the stone. The Knight grabbed the handle of the wheel and began cranking. It was rickety and rocked back and forth as the Knight cranked. The portcullis slowly rose at each turn of the wheel. The portcullis reached about halfway up, allowing the Horse to wander in after the Knight. The wheel strained against the weight of the portcullis and snapped back, crashing into the wall. The metal gate fell and slammed into the earth, shaking the stones of the road out of place like a wave rolled underneath them.

The Knight looked up at the archway above the gates and saw it was decorated with engravings. It consisted of many winged guardians in flight, circling around a monumental tree. One winged guardian at the very forefront wielded a golden spear. The guardian's body was entwined with the body of a dragon. The guardian had the spear, above the archway's keystone, poised to strike down the dragon. The spear's shaft was emboldened with the singed markings of runic lines, either stacked vertically upon one another or intertwined and branching off, and flaked with gold leaf; the few remnants on the carved marble shimmered with a blinding effect.

What is this? I recognize these grand beasts imbued with ferocious powers of destruction. But what is this? A battle? A challenge to these earthen gods? A feeling of reverence flutters through me, one held for those ancient creatures and the powers they possessed. Where are they now?

The Knight turned his back to the gates. He grabbed the Horse's reins and led them down the road. The Knight walked slowly. It was quiet, no wind blew, and no people could be heard. Before the beginnings of the city's marble maze was a large forum that the companions approached. The road went right through

the forum's center and under the watchful gaze of two identical equestrian soldiers that posed on either side of the road. Each statue was placed upon its own podium that lifted it high above the earth. The equestrians wore the armor of gilded knights decorated by patterned filigree, and mohawk plumes soared atop their winged helms. Each rider had a long sword drawn and pointed skyward; together they formed an arch over the road. An inscription flowed across the base of each podium; it read:

The Triumphal Way

The Knight climbed back atop his Horse and rode on underneath the shadow of the swords. The equestrians' faces stared off into the distant sky, paying no heed to the Knight's passing. The Knight gazed over the city before him. It was a mass of buildings, their ancient forms intertwined into a panorama of a cascading sea of stone, each one toppling over the next, leaving no space for nature's presence. Within the emptiness of the city, within the absence of its builders, the buildings seemed to exhale. Their breath seeped from every alleyway, doorway, and window, any nook and cranny that allowed for open space. The draft crept through the abandoned streets, a soundless specter amplifying the haunting silence that enveloped the lifeless metropolis. The city, akin to the corpses that lined its walls, dwelled now in an eternal slumber, forced to continue an existence without purpose. The Knight and the Horse pressed forward, continuing down the road that led them deeper into the heart of the stone labyrinth.

A mark of black was dashed across the road. It started as a few sporadic markings, as if a painter let his brush drag behind him, but the black soon spread out and oozed a substance the

viscosity of ink across the grounds ahead. As the Knight ventured onward, it soon began to flow without reason, passing over the curb and onto the buildings, splattering onto these surfaces with frantic inspiration. His eyes followed the black ink, until the trail diminished and ended before the foot of another statue, sitting off to the side of the road. It was the naked body of a man, which had been devastated above the collarbone; the head, which lay in the gutter of the curb beside the statue's feet, wore a knight's helm. Water, running down the street's gutter, passed through the cracks of the helmet; its occupant's face was lost in the waste of the city and to the erosion of time. The Knight watched the water passing over the helmet and looked back to the headless body that held no inscription, while the Horse continued on, leaving the statue behind.

A cool breath, long past, caresses over this cold masonry, devoid and empty with their builders lost. "When you fail, no one will pity you. They will only hate you for cursing them to a life of death—a failed martyr. The world will cry, but not for you, not for your person, only for the fact they are to die because of you." These words blow upon the breeze into my hollow mind. They bring back memories I have chosen to forgo.

As the road led on, a greater berth grew between buildings, until eventually the area opened into a vast courtyard. The expansive space was encompassed entirely by opulent structures, which had been scarce and sporadic so far in the city. In the courtyard's center, carved from marble and rising high into the sky, was an arch of massive stature. As the marble structure loomed, its surface dulled and softened to a weary blur; its shadow imposed itself over

the entire area, moving like a sundial throughout the day. Adorning the majestic pillars that rose high from cracked foundations, once-tender chisel work unfurled in the form of delicate roses and thorny stems, rising up the pillars like vines on lattice. The filigree of the roses' veins had become mere husks, clinging to petals now chipped and faded. High above, the figure of a goddess crowned each pillar, her hands resting upon her pregnant belly. A rose in full bloom covered her head, veiling her face in petals, while the flower's ovary, opening like hollow eyes, stared at the horizon as shadows descended upon them. Decorating the arch's entablature, a bull and a cow rested at opposite ends, while between them, a centerpiece gem, shaped like a candle's flame, sat dulled and clouded, its inner color silenced.

The road went right underneath the arch, forcing travelers to bask in it. The Horse began to slowly trot toward it. A breeze, without its chill, snuck into the Knight's helmet:

*The columns of rose, a pair adorned—
A floral flare, a budding flower adored.
Our Mother's beauty to be caressed,
Her belly cradled, her fertile bounty blessed;
For nature's jewel—life's crowned flame,
The kingdom to be her glory and acclaim.*

The Knight grasped the Horse's reins and yanked them back. The Horse stopped and stepped back a couple paces. Ahead of them, underneath and through the archway's shadow, stood a lion with its head hung. From the light reflected off the road, the Knight noticed a small puddle by the Lion's paws. A drop of water fell from the Lion's cheek and splashed into the puddle. The Lion turned its head up toward the Knight, staring into his eyes. Black

ink was tattooed down the bridge of the Lion's nose. The markings loosely formed the shape of a sword, while runic symbols, of intertwining or stacked lines, cascaded down either side of the abstract blade. The Lion shook its head and flung tears off its soaked cheeks. As it wept, its lips did not quiver. Its prideful stance did not waver.

The wind started in the city once more, blowing by the Knight, under the archway, and rustling through the Lion's mane.

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